Bonner Geraldine

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Содержание

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FOREWORD

The following story of what has been known as "The Black Eagle Mystery" has been compiled from documents contributed by two persons thoroughly conversant with the subject. These are Molly Morgenthau Babbitts and John Reddy, whose position of inside observers and active participants makes it possible for them to give to the public a consecutive and detailed narrative of this most unusual case.

CHAPTER I
MOLLY TELLS THE STORY

"Hello!" said Babbitts from the sheets of the morning paper.

I'll call him Babbitts to you because that's the name you'll remember him by – that is if you know about the Hesketh Mystery. I generally call him "Soapy," the name the reporters gave him, and "Himself," which comes natural to me, my mother being Irish. Maybe you'll remember that too? And he calls me "Morningdew" – cute, isn't it? It's American for my last name Morgenthau – I was Molly Morgenthau before I was married.

In case you *don't* know about the Hesketh Mystery I'll have to give a few facts to locate us. I was the telephone girl in Longwood, New Jersey, met Babbitts there when he was a reporter for the *Dispatch*– he is yet – and the switchboard lost one of its brightest ornaments. It was town for us, an apartment on West Ninety-fifth Street, near the Subway, five rooms on a corner, furnished like a Belasco play. If you read the Hesketh Mystery you know how I came by that furniture, and if you didn't you'll have to stay in ignorance, for I'm too anxious to get on to stop and tell you. Every day at ten Isabella Dabney, a light-colored coon, comes in to do the heavy work and I order her round, throwing a bluff that I'm used to it and hoping Isabella isn't on.

We've been married over two years and we're still – Oh, what's the use! But we *do* get on like a house on fire. I guess in this vast metropolis there's not a woman got anything on me when it comes to happiness. It certainly *is* wonderful how you bloom out and the mean part of you fades away when someone thinks you're the perfect article, handsewn, silk-lined, made in America.

And so having taken this little run round the lot, I'll come back to Babbitts with his head in the morning paper saying "Hello!"

It was a clear, crisp morning in January – sixteenth of the month – and we were at breakfast. Himself had just got in from Cleveland, where he'd been sent to write up the Cheney graft prosecution. It took some minutes to say "How d'ye do" – he'd been away two whole days – and after we'd concluded the ceremonies I lit into the kitchen to get his breakfast while he sat down at his end of the table and dived into the papers. His egg was before him and I was setting the coffeepot down at my end when he gave that "Hello," loud and startled, with the accent on the "lo."

"What's up now?" said I, looking over the layout before me to see if I'd forgotten anything.

"Hollings Harland's committed suicide," came out of the paper.

"Lord, has he!" said I. "Isn't that awful?" I took up the cream pitcher. "Well, what do you make of that – the cream's frozen."

"Last night at half-past six. Threw himself out of his office window on the eighteenth story."

"Eighteenth story! – that's some fall. I've got to take this cream out with a spoon." I spooned up some, all white spikes and edges, wondering if it would chill his coffee which he likes piping hot. "Darling, do you mind waiting a little while I warm up the cream?"

"Darn the cream! What rotten luck that I was away. I suppose they put Eddie Saunders on it, sounds like his flat-footed style. Listen to this: 'The body struck the pavement with a violent impact.' That's the way he describes the fall of a man from the top of a skyscraper. Gee, why wasn't I here?"

"But, dearie," I said, passing him his cup, "Saunders would have done it if you *had* been here. You don't do suicides."

"I do this one. Hollings Harland, one of the big corporation lawyers of New York."

"Oh," I said, "he's an important person."

"Rather. A top liner in his profession."

"Why did he commit suicide?"

"Caught in the Copper Pool, they think here."

With the cup at his lips he went on reading over its edge.

"Does it taste all right?" I asked and he grunted something that would have been "A 1" if it hadn't dropped into the coffee and been drowned.

My mind at rest about him I could give it to the morning sensation.

"What's the Copper Pool?" I asked.

"A badly named weapon to jack up prices and gouge the

public, young woman. Just like a corner in hats. Suppose you could buy up all the spring hats, you could pretty near name your own figure on them, couldn't you?"

"They do that now without a corner," I said sadly.

"Well, they can't in copper. The Pool means that a bunch of financiers have put up millions to corner the copper market and skyrocket the price."

"Oh, he lost all his money in it and got desperate and jumped out."

"Um – from the hall window in the Black Eagle Building."

That made it come nearer, the way things do when someone you know is on the ground.

"Why that's where Iola Barry works – in Miss Whitehall's office on the seventeenth floor."

Babbitts' eyes shifted from the paper to his loving spouse:

"That's so. I'd forgotten it. Just one story below. I wonder if Iola was there."

"I guess not, she goes home at six. It's a good thing she wasn't. She's a hysterical, timid little rat. Being round when a thing like that happened would have broke her up more than a spell of sickness."

Iola Barry was a chum of mine. Four years ago, before I was transferred to New Jersey, we'd been girls together in the same exchange, and though I didn't see much of her when I was Central in Longwood, since I'd come back we'd met up and renewed the old friendship. Having the fatality happen so close to her fanned

my interest considerable and I reached across and picked up one of the papers.

The first thing my eye lit on was a picture of Hollings Harland – a fine looking, smooth-shaven man.

When I saw the two long columns about him I realized what an important person he was and why Babbitts was so mad he'd missed the detail. Besides his own picture there was one of his house – an elegant residence on Riverside Drive, full of pictures and statuary, and a library he'd taken years to collect. Then there was all about him and his life. He was forty-six years of age and though small in stature, a fine physical specimen, never showing, no matter how hard he worked, a sign of nerves or weariness. In his boyhood he'd come from a town up state, and risen from the bottom to the top, "cleaving his way up," the paper had it, "by his brilliant mind, indomitable will and tireless energy." Three years before, his wife had died and since then he'd retired from society, devoting himself entirely to business.

Toward the end of the article came a lot of stuff about the Copper Pool, and the names of the other men in it – he seemed to be in it too. There was only one of these I'd ever heard of – Johnston Barker – which didn't prove that I knew much, as everybody had heard of him. He was one of the big figures of finance, millionaire, magnate, plutocrat, the kind that one paper calls, "A malefactor of great wealth," and its rival, "One of our most distinguished and public-spirited citizens." That places him better than a font of type. He was in the Copper Pool up to his

neck – the head of it as far as I could make out.

I had just got through with that part – it wasn't interesting – and was reading what had happened before the suicide when Babbitts spoke:

"Harland seems to have had a scene in his office with Johnston Barker in the afternoon."

I looked up from my sheet and said:

"I've just been reading about it here. It tells how Barker came to see him and they had some kind of row."

"Read it," said Babbitts. "I want to get the whole thing before I go downtown."

I read out:

> "According to Della Franks and John Jerome, Harland's stenographer and head clerk, Johnston Barker called on Harland at half-past five that afternoon. The lawyer's offices are a suite of three rooms, one opening from the other. The last of these rooms was used as a private office and into this Harland conducted his visitor, closing the door. Miss Franks was in the middle room working at her typewriter, Mr. Jerome at his desk near-by. While so occupied they say they heard the men in the private office begin talking loudly. The sound of the typewriter drowned the words but both Miss Franks and Mr. Jerome agree that the voices were those of people in angry dispute. Presently they dropped and shortly after Mr. Harland came out. Miss Franks says the time was a few minutes after six, as she had just consulted a wrist watch she wore. Both clerks admitting that they were curious,

looked at Mr. Harland and agree in describing him as pale, though otherwise giving no sign of anger or disturbance. He stopped at Jerome's desk and said quietly: 'I'll be back in a few minutes. Don't go till I come,' and left the office.

"Miss Franks and Mr. Jerome remained where they were. Miss Franks completed her work and then, having a dinner engagement with Mr. Jerome, sat on, waiting for Mr. Harland's return. In this way a half hour passed, the two clerks chatting together, impatient to be off. It was a quarter to seven and both were wondering what was delaying their employer when the desk telephone rang. Jerome answered it and heard from the janitor on the street level that Mr. Harland's body had been found on the sidewalk crushed to a shapeless mass. On hearing this, Miss Franks, uttering piercing cries, rose and rushed into the hall followed by Jerome. They rang frantically for the elevator which didn't come. There are only two cars in the building, and that afternoon the express had broken and was not running. Getting no answer to his summons Jerome dashed to the hall window and throwing it up looked down on to the street, which even from that height, he could see was black with people. Miss Franks, who when interviewed was still hysterical, stood by the elevators pressing the buttons. In their excitement both of them forgot Mr. Barker who when they left was still in the back office."

"Um," said Babbitts. "Is that all about Barker?"

I looked down the column.

"No – there's some more in another place. Here: 'Johnston

Barker, whose interview with Harland is supposed to have driven the desperate lawyer to suicide, was not found in his house last night. Repeated telephone calls throughout the evening only elicited the answer that Mr. Barker was not at home and it was not known where he was.' Then there's a lot about him and his connection with the Copper Pool. Do you want to hear it?"

"No, I know all that. Pretty grisly business. But I don't see why Barker's lying low. Why the devil doesn't he show up?"

"Perhaps he doesn't like the notoriety. Does it say in your paper too that they couldn't find him?"

"About the same. Looks to me as if there was a nigger in the woodpile somewhere."

"Maybe he never expected the man would kill himself and he's prostrated with horror at what he's responsible for."

Babbitts threw down his paper with a sarcastic grin:

"I guess it takes more than that to prostrate Johnston Barker. You don't rise from nothing to be one of the plutocrats of America and keep your conscience in cotton wool."

I turned the page of my paper and there, staring at me, was a picture of the man we were talking about.

"Here he is," I said, "on the inside page," and then read: "'Johnston Barker, whose interview with Hollings Harland is thought to have precipitated the suicide and who was not to be found last evening at his home or club.'"

Babbitts came round and looked over my shoulder:

"Did you ever see a harder, more forceful mug? Look at the

nose – like a beak. Men with noses like that always seem to me like birds of prey."

The picture did have that look. The face was thin, one of those narrow, lean ones with a few deep lines like folds in the skin. The nose was, as Babbitts said, a regular beak, like a curved scimitar, big and hooked. A sort of military-looking, white moustache hid the mouth, and the eyes behind glasses were keen and dark. I guess you'd have called it quite a handsome face, if it hadn't been for the grim, hard expression – like it belonged to some sort of fighter who wouldn't give you any mercy if you stood in his way.

"It takes a feller like that to make millions in these trust-busting days," said Babbitts.

"He looks as if he could corner copper and anything else that took his fancy," I answered.

"If he's really flown the coop there'll be the devil to pay in Wall Street." He gave my shoulder a pat. "Well, we'll see today and the sooner I get on the scene of action the sooner I'll know. Good-by, my Morningdew. – Kiss me and speed me on my perilous way."

After he'd gone I tidied up the place, had the morning powwow with Isabella, and then drifted into the parlor. The sun was slanting bright through the windows and as I stood looking out at the thin covering of ice, glittering here and there on the roofs – there'd been rain before the frost – I got the idea I ought to go down and see Iola. She was a frail, high-strung little body and what had happened last night in the Black Eagle Building would put a crimp in her nerves for days to come, especially as just now

she had worries of her own. Clara, her sister with whom she lived, had gone into the hair business – not selling it, brushing it on ladies' heads – and hadn't done well, so Iola was the main support of the two of them. Three years ago she'd left the telephone company to better herself, studying typing and stenography, and at first she'd had a hard time, getting into offices where the men were so fierce they scared her so she couldn't work, or so affectionate they scared her so she resigned her job. Then at last she landed a good place at Miss Whitehall's – Carol Whitehall, who had a real-estate scheme – villas and cottages out in New Jersey.

Now while you think of me in my blue serge suit and squirrel furs, with a red wing in my hat and a bunch of cherries pinned on my neckpiece, flashing under the city in the subway, I'll tell you about Carol Whitehall. She's important in this story – I guess you'd call her the heroine – for though the capital "I"s are thick in it, you've got to see that letter as nothing more than a hand holding a pen.

The first I heard of Miss Whitehall was nearly two years back from the Cressets, friends of mine who live on a farm out Longwood way where I was once Central. She and her mother – a widow lady – came there from somewhere in the Middle West and bought the Azalea Woods Farm, a fine rich stretch of land, back in the hills behind Azalea village. They were going to run it themselves, having, the gossip said, independent means and liking the simple life. The neighbors, high and low, soon got

acquainted with them and found them nice genteel ladies, the mother very quiet and dignified, but Miss Carol a live wire and as handsome as a picture.

They'd been in the place about a year when the railroad threw out a branch that crossed over the hills near their land. This increased its value immensely and folks were wondering if they'd sell out – they had several offers – when it was announced that they were going to start a villa site company to be called the Azalea Woods Estates. In the Autumn when I was down at the Cressets – Soapy and I go there for Sundays sometimes – the Cresset boys had been over in their new Ford car, and said what were once open fields were all laid out in roads with little spindly trees planted along the edges. There was a swell station, white with a corrugated red roof, and several houses up, some stucco like the station and others low and squatty in the bungalow style.

It was a big undertaking and there was a good deal of talk, no one supposing the Whitehalls had money enough to break out in such a roomy way, but when it came down to brass tacks, nobody had any real information about them. For all Longwood and Azalea knew they might have been cutting off coupons ever since they came.

As soon as the Azalea Woods Estates started they moved to town. Iola told me they had a nice little flat on the East Side and the offices were the swellest she'd ever been employed in. I'd never been in them, though I sometimes went to the Black Eagle Building and took Iola out to lunch. I didn't like to go up, having

no business there, and used to telephone her in the morning and make the date, then hang round the entrance hall till she came down.

Besides Miss Whitehall and Iola there was a managing clerk, Anthony Ford. I'd never seen him no more than I had Miss Whitehall, but I'd heard a lot about him. After Iola'd told me what a good-looker he was and how he'd come swinging in in the morning, always jolly and full of compliments, I got a hunch that she was getting too interested in him. She said she wasn't – did you ever know a girl who didn't? – and when I asked her point blank, ruffled up like a wet hen and snapped out:

"Molly Babbitts, ain't I been in business long enough to know I got to keep my heart locked up in the office safe?"

And I couldn't help answering:

"Well, don't give away the combination till you're good and sure it's the right man that's asking for it."

CHAPTER II
MOLLY TELLS THE STORY

The Black Eagle Building is part-way downtown – not one of the skyscrapers that crowd together on the tip of the Island's tongue and not one of the advance guard squeezing in among the mansions of the rich, darkening their windows and spoiling their chimney draughts – poor, suffering dears!

As I came up the subway stairs I could see it bulking up above the roofs, a long narrow shape, with its windows shining in the sun. It stood on a corner presenting a great slab of wall to the side street and its front to Broadway. There were two entrances, the main one – with an eagle in a niche over the door – on Broadway, and a smaller one on the side street. There is only one other very high building near there – the Massasoit – facing on Fifth Avenue, its back soaring above the small houses that look like a line of children's toys.

My way was along the side street, chilled by the shadow of the building, and as I passed the small entrance I stopped and looked up. The wall rose like a rampart, story over story, the windows as similar and even as cells in a honeycomb. Way up, the cornice cut the blue with its dark line. It was from that height the suicide had jumped. I thought of him there, standing on the window ledge, making ready to leap. Ugh! it was too horrible! I shuddered and

walked on, pressing my chin into my fur and putting the picture out of my mind.

When I turned the corner into Broadway it was brighter. The sun was shining on the outspread wings of the eagle in his niche and turning the icicles that hung from the window ledges into golden fringes. Near the entrance a man in a checked jumper and peaked cap was breaking away the bits of ice that stuck to the sidewalk with a long-handled thing like a spade. And all about were people, queer, mangy-looking men and some women, standing staring at the pavement and then craning their necks and squinting up through the sunlight at the top of the building.

I sized up the man in the jumper as a janitor, and for all he seemed so busy, you could see he was really hanging round for an excuse to talk. He'd pick at a tiny piece of ice and skate it over careful into the gutter when in ordinary times he'd have let it lie there, a menace to the public's bones. Every now and then one of the people standing round would ask him a question and he'd stop in his scraping and try to look weary while he was just bursting to go all over it again.

"Where did he fall?" asked a chap in a reach-me-down overcoat, fringy at the cuffs, "there?" and pointed into the middle of the street. The janitor gave him a scornful glance, let go his hoe and spat on his hand. He spoke with a brogue:

"No, not there. Nor there neither," he pointed some distance down Broadway. "But there," and that time he struck on the edge of the curb with his hoe.

A girl who was passing slowed up, her face all puckered with horror:

"Did he come down with a crash?"

The janitor drew himself up, raised his eyebrows and looked at her from under his eyelids like she was a worm:

"Is fallin' from the top of the buildin' like steppin' from a limousine on to a feather bed?" He turned wearily to his hoe and spoke to it as if it was the only thing in sight that had any sense. "Crash! What'll they be after askin' next?" Then he suddenly got quite excited, raised his voice and stuck out his chin at the girl. "Why, the glasses off his nose was nearly to the next corner. Didn't I meself find the mounts of them six feet from his body? And not a bit of glass left. There's where I got them – in the mud," he pointed out into the street and everyone looked fixedly at the place. "Crash – and the pore corpse no more than a sack of bones."

An old man with a white beard who'd been standing on the curb examining the street as if he expected to find a treasure there said:

"Struck on his head, eh?"

"He did," said the janitor in a loud voice. "An' if you'd listen to me you'd have known it without me tellin' yer."

The girl, who was sort of peeved at the way he answered her, spoke up:

"You never told it at all! You only spoke about the glasses."

The janitor gave her a look sort of enduring and patient as if,

she being a woman, he'd got to treat her gentle even if she *was* a fool.

"Say, young lady," says he, "I'm not goin' to bandy words with you. Have it any way you like. *I* was here, *I* seen it, I seen the corpse lyin' all bunched up, I seen the crowd, I seen the amberlanch, and I seen Mr. Harland's clerk come down and identify the body – but maybe I don't know. Take it or leave it – any way you choose."

The people snickered and looked at the girl, who got red and walked off muttering. The janitor went back to picking at a piece of ice as big as a half dollar, watching out for the next one to come along.

I hadn't phoned to Iola this time and it being an unusual occasion I decided to go up. There were men in the entrance hall talking together in groups and from every group I could hear the name of Harland coming in low tones. In the elevator when the other passengers had got out, the boy looked at me and said:

"Tough what happened here last night, ain't it?"

I agreed with him and as we shot up with the floors flashing between the iron grills, *he* had *his* little say about it. One of the things that seemed to trouble him most was that he hadn't been there, as the express elevator which he ran was broken early in the afternoon and he'd gone home before the event.

The corridor of the seventeenth floor was a bare, clean place, all shining stone, not a bit of wood about it but the doors. At one end was a window looking out on the Broadway side and

near it the stairs went down, concrete with a metal balustrade. I'd asked for Miss Whitehall's office and as I got out of the car the boy had said, "First door to your left, Azalea Woods Estates." There were two doors on each side, the upper halves ground glass with gold lettering. Those to the right had "The Hudson Electrical Company" on them and those to the left "Azalea Woods Estates" with under that "Anthony Ford, Manager."

As I walked toward the first of these I could see out of the window the great back of the Massasoit Building, tan color against the bright blue of the sky. Pausing before I rang the bell, I leaned against the window ledge and spied down. The street looked like a small, narrow gully, dotted with tiny black figures, and the houses that fronted on it, extending back to the Massasoit, no bigger than match boxes.

I pressed the bell and as I waited turned and looked down the corridor, stretching away in its shiny scoured cleanness between the shut doors of offices. Just beyond the elevator shafts there was a branch hall and along the polished floor I could see the white, glassy reflection of another window. That was on the side street, one of those I had looked up at, and as I was thinking that, the door opened slowly and Iola peered out, with her eyes big and scared and a sandwich in her hand.

"Good gracious, Molly!" she cried. "I'm so glad to see you. Come in."

I hesitated, almost whispering:

"Will Miss Whitehall mind?"

"She's not here. I had a phone this morning to say she was sick and wouldn't be down, and Mr. Ford's gone out to lunch." She took me by the hand and pulled me in, shutting the door. "Jerusalem, but it's good to see you. I'm that lonesome sitting here I'm ready to cry."

She didn't look very chipper. Usually she's a pretty girl, the slim, baby-eyed, delicate kind, with a dash of powder on the nose and a touch of red on the lips to help out. But today she looked sort of peaked and shriveled up, the way those frail little wisps of girls do at the least jar.

"Isn't it awful?" she said as soon as she'd got me in – "Just the floor above us!"

I didn't want her to talk about it, but she was like the janitor – only a gag would stop her. So I let her run on while I looked round and took in the place.

It was a fine, large room, two windows in the front and two more on the sides. The furniture was massive and rich-looking and the rugs on the floor as soft to your foot as the turf in the Park. On the walls were blue and white maps, criss-crossed with lines, and pictures of houses, in different styles. But the thing that got me was a little model of a cottage on a table by the window. It was the cutest thing you ever saw – all complete even to the blinds in the windows and the awning over the piazza. I was looking at it when Iola, having got away with the sandwich, said:

"Come on in to Mr. Ford's office while I finish my lunch. I got to get through with it before he comes back."

I followed her into the next room, nearly as large as the one we'd been in, with a wide window and in the center a big roll-top desk. On the edge of this stood a pasteboard box, with some crumpled wax paper in it and an orange. Iola sat down in the swivel chair and picking up the orange began to peel it.

"I hardly ever do this," she explained, "but I thought Miss Whitehall wouldn't mind today as I felt so mean I couldn't face going out to lunch. And then it was all right as she won't be down and I'll have it all cleared off before Mr. Ford comes back."

"Would he be mad?"

You ought to have seen the look she gave me.

"Mad – Tony Ford? It's easy seen you don't know him. She wouldn't say anything either. She's awful considerate. But she's so sort of grand and dignified you don't like to ask favors off her."

"Was she here when it happened last night?"

"I don't know, but I guess not. She generally leaves a little before six. Thanks be to goodness, she told me I could go home early yesterday. I was out of the building by half-past five." She broke the orange apart and held out a piece. "Have a quarter?" I shook my head and she went on. "We're all out of here soon after six. Tony Ford generally stays last and shuts up. Did you see all the papers this morning?"

"Most of them. Why?"

"I was wondering if any of them knew that Mr. Harland and Mr. Barker were both in here yesterday afternoon."

"It wasn't in any of the papers I saw."

"Well, they were – the two of them. And I didn't know but what the reporters, nosing round for anything the way they do, mightn't have heard it. Not that there was anything out of the ordinary about it. She knew them both. Mr. Harland's been in here a few times and Mr. Barker often."

"Why did *he* come?" I said, surprised, for Iola had never told me they'd the magnate for a customer.

"Business," she looked at me over the orange that she was sucking, her eyes sort of intent and curious. "Didn't I tell you that? He was going to buy a piece of land in the Azalea Woods Estates and build a house for his niece."

"Seems to me," I said, "that the press'll be interested to know about those two visits."

"Well, if any reporters come snooping round here Tony Ford told me to refer them to him or Miss Whitehall, and that's what I'm going to do."

"What time was Mr. Harland here?"

"A little after four. He and Miss Whitehall went into the private office and had a talk. And I'll bet a new hat that he hadn't no more idea of suicide then than you have now, sitting there before me. When he came out he was all smiles, just as natural and happy as if he was going home to a chicken dinner and a show afterward."

"All the papers think it was what Mr. Barker said that drove him to it."

"And they're right for a change – not that I'm saying anything

against the press with your husband in it. But it does make more mistakes than any printed matter *I* ever read, except the cooking receipts on the outside of patent foods. It was Barker that put the crimp in *him*."

"Then Barker came in afterward?"

"Yes, just before I left. And he and she went into the private office."

I turned in my chair and looked through the open doorway into the third room of the suite.

"Is that the private office?" I asked.

"Yes," says Iola with a giggle, "that's its society name, but Mr. Ford calls it the Surgery."

Before I could ask her why Mr. Ford called it that, the bell rang and she jumped up, squashing the orange peel and bits of paper back in the box.

"Here, you go and answer it," I said, "I'll hide this." She went into the front office and as I pushed the box out of sight on a shelf I could hear her talking to a man at the door. The conversation made me stand still listening.

The man's voice asked for Miss Whitehall, Iola answering that she wasn't there.

"Where is she?" said the man, gruff and abrupt it seemed to me.

"In her own home – she hasn't come down today at all."

"Is she coming later?"

"No, she's sick in bed."

There was a slight pause and then he said:

"Well, I got to see her. I've notes here that are overdue and the endorsee's dead."

"Endorsee?" came Iola's little pipe, full of troubled surprise, "who's he?"

"Hollings Harland who killed himself last night. What's her address?"

I could hear Iola giving it and the man muttering it over. Then there was a gruff "Good morning" and the door snapped shut.

Iola came back, her eyes big, her expression wondering.

"What do you suppose that means?" she said.

I didn't know exactly myself but – notes, endorsee dead! – it had a bad sound. As Iola reached down her lunch box and tied it up, talking uneasily about the man and what he'd wanted, I remembered the gossip in New Jersey when Miss Whitehall started her land scheme. There'd been rumors then that maybe she was backed, and if Hollings Harland had been behind it – My goodness! you couldn't tell what might happen. But I wasn't going to say anything discouraging to Iola, so to change the subject I moved to the door of the private office and looked in.

"Why does Mr. Ford call this the surgery?"

At the mention of the managing clerk Iola brightened up and said with a smirk:

"Because it's where Miss Whitehall chloroforms her clients with her beauty and performs the operation of separating them from their money. He's always saying cute things like that."

We stood in the doorway and looked in. It was a smaller room than the others, but furnished just as richly, with a mahogany center table, big leather-covered armchairs and photographs of foreign views on the walls. In one corner was an elegant, gold-embossed screen, that, when I spied behind it, I saw hid a washstand. It was the last room of the suite and had only one door that led into the office we'd been sitting in. In the outside wall was a window from which you could see way over the city – a wonderful view.

I walked to it and looked out. Over the roofs and chimneys I caught a glimpse of the Hudson, a silvery gleam, and the Hoboken hills beyond. Pressing my forehead against the glass I glimpsed down the sheer drop of the walls to the roof of a church – a flat, black oblong with a squatty dome at one end – squeezed as close as it could get against the lower stories. Back of that were old houses, dwellings that would soon be swept away, the yards behind them narrow strips with the separating fences as small as lines made by a pencil.

I was so interested that for a moment I forgot Iola, but she brought me back with a jerk.

"It was in the room above this that Mr. Harland was sitting with Mr. Barker, before it happened."

"You don't say," I answered. "Is it like this?"

"Exactly the same. I've seen it – one day when the boss was away and I went up with Della Franks. They were in there just as we are in here and then he went out this way – "

The door had been partly pushed to and she started to illustrate how he had left the room, brushing round its edge. Something caught her, there was a sound of ripping and she stopped, clapping her hand on her back:

"There go my pleats – Ding it!" she craned round over her shoulder trying to see the back of her skirt. "What's got me? Oh, the key. Well what do you make of that – caught me like a hook."

She drew her dress off the key, which fell out of the lock on to the floor.

"It's only ripped," I said consolingly. "I can pin it for you."

"Well, there's always something to be thankful for," she said, as I pinned her up. "But it's an unlucky day, I can feel *that*. That key's never before been on the inside of the door." She bent and picked it up. "I'd like to know what smart Aleck changed it."

"Probably the scrubwoman."

"I guess so," she grumbled, "put it on the wrong side where it waited patiently and then got its revenge on me. Such is life among the lowly."

That night Babbitts was late for dinner. I expected it but Isabella, who says she never lived out except in families where the husband comes home at six like a Christian, was getting restive about the chops, when he finally showed up, tired as a dog.

"My Lord!" he said, as I helped him off with his coat. "What a day!"

"Because of the suicide?"

"Outcome of the suicide and all the rest of it. The wildest

panic on the Street. The Copper Pool's gone smash. Let's have something to eat. I've had no lunch and I'm famished."

When we were at table and the edge off his hunger he told me more:

"It began this morning, and this afternoon when there was still no trace of Barker – Gee whizz! it was an avalanche."

"You mean he's *gone*? Disappeared?"

"That's the way it looks. They had their suspicions when they couldn't find him last night. And today – nobody knows a thing about him at his house or his office, can't account for it, don't understand. Then we turned up something that looked like a clincher. One of his motors, a limousine, and his chauffeur, fellow called Heney, have disappeared too."

"What do they say about that at the house?"

"Same thing – know nothing. Nobody was in the garage from six to half-past eight. When the other men who sleep there came back Heney and the limousine were gone."

"Did anyone see Barker at the Black Eagle Building?"

"No – that's the strongest proof that he's decamped. You'd suppose with such a scene as that going on he'd have shown up. But not a soul's been found who saw him there. If he wanted to slip out quietly he could easily have done it. Jerome and the Franks girl say they were so paralyzed they never gave him another thought and he could have passed behind them, as they stood in the corridor, and gone down by the side stairs. There's another flight round the corner on the branch hall. The street on

that side was deserted – the boys say every human being in the neighborhood was round on the Broadway front."

"But, but," I stammered, for I couldn't understand it all, "what's he done? What's the reason for his going?"

"Reason!" said Babbitts with a snort. "Believe me, there's reason enough. Somebody's welched on the Copper Pool and they think it's he and that he's disappeared with twenty million."

"Twenty million! How could he?"

"By selling out on the rest of the crowd. They think he's been selling copper to the Pool itself of which he was the head."

"Was that what he and Mr. Harland were supposed to be quarreling about yesterday afternoon?"

"Yes. The idea now is that Harland, who was one of the Copper crowd, suspected and accused him, that there was a fierce interview in the course of which the lawyer realized he was beaten and ruined."

"Good gracious!" I said. "What are they going to do with him?"

"If he doesn't show up, go after him. A group of ruined financiers doesn't kneel down and pray for their money to come back. And they've got a man looking after their interests who's a lightning striker. A friend of yours. Guess who?"

"Wilbur Whitney!" I crowed.

"The same," said Babbitts.

"Then," I cried, "they'll have him and the twenty millions served up on a salver before the week's out."

If you don't know the story of the Hesketh Mystery you don't know who Wilbur Whitney is, so I'll tell you here. He's one of the biggest lawyers in New York and one of the biggest men anywhere. You'd as soon suspect that an insignificant atom like me would know a man like him as that the palace ashman would know the Czar of Russia, but I do, well – I guess I'm not stretching things if I say we're friends. The Babbitts and the Whitneys don't exchange calls, but they think a lot of each other just the same. And it's my doing, little Molly's – yes, sir, the ex-telephone girl. In the Hesketh case I did a job for Mr. Whitney that brought us together, and ever since it's been kindnesses from the big house off Fifth Avenue, to the little flat on Ninety-fifth Street. He doesn't forget – the real eighteen-carat people never do – and he'll send me tickets for the opera one night and tip off Soapy to a bit of news so he'll get a scoop the week after. Oh, he's just *grand*!

And right in his office – Mr. Whitney's assistant this year – is one of our realest, truest, dearest pals, Jack Reddy. If this is your first acquaintance with me you don't know much about him and I'll have to give you a little sketch of him for he's got a lot to do with this story.

To look at he's just all right, brown with light-colored hair and gray eyes, over six feet and not an ounce of fat on him. It's not because he's my friend that I'm saying all this, everybody agrees on it. He's thirty years old now and not married. That's because of a tragedy in his life: the girl he loved was killed nearly three

years ago. It's a long story – I can't stop to tell it to you – but it broke him up something dreadful, though I and Babbitts and all of us know it was better that he shouldn't have married her. Ever since I've been hoping he'd meet up with his real affinity, someone who'd be the right woman for him. But he hasn't so far. Babbitts says the girl isn't born I'd think good enough – but I don't know. I guess in the ninety millions of people we've got scattered round this vast republic there's a lady that'll fill the bill.

Once I had a crush on him – Babbitts teases me about it now – but it all faded away when Himself came along with his curly blond hair and his dear, rosy, innocent face. But Jack Reddy's still a sort of hero to me. He showed up so fine in those old dark days and he's showed up fine ever since – don't drop off his pedestal and have to be boosted back. I've put several people on pedestals and seen them so unsteady it made me nervous, but he's riveted on.

He's got a country place out in New Jersey – Firehill – where he used to live. But since he's been with Mr. Whitney he stays in town, only going out there in summer. His apartment's down near Gramercy Park – an elegant place – where his two old servants, David and Joanna Gilsey, keep house for him and treat him like he was their only son. Babbitts and I go there often, and Gee, we do have some eats!

"Well," I said, wagging my head proud and confident at Babbitts, "if Wilbur Whitney and Jack Reddy are out to find that Barker man, they'll do it if he burrows through to China."

CHAPTER III
JACK TELLS THE STORY

The appalling suicide of Hollings Harland, followed by the non-appearance of Johnston Barker, precipitated one of the most spectacular smashes Wall Street had seen since the day of the Northern Pacific corner. It began slowly, but as the day advanced and no news of Barker was forthcoming it became a snowslide, for the rumor flew through the city that there had been a "welcher" in the pool and that the welcher was its head – Barker himself.

For years the man had loomed large in the public eye. He was between fifty and sixty, small, wiry, made of iron and steel with a nerve nothing could shake. Like so many of our big capitalists, he had begun life in the mining camps of the far Northwest, had never married, and had kept his doors shut on the world that tried to force his seclusion. Among his rivals he was famed for his daring, his ruthless courage and his almost uncanny foresight. He was a financial genius, the making of money, his life. But as one coup after another jostled the Street, the wiseacres wagged their heads and said "Some day!" It *looked* now as if the day had come. But that such a man had double-crossed his associates and cleaned them out of twenty millions seemed incredible.

It was especially hard to believe – for us I mean – as on

the morning of January 15 he had been in the Whitney offices conferring with the chief on business. His manner was as cool and non-committal as usual, his head full of plans that stretched out into the future. Nothing in his words or actions suggested the gambler concentrated on his last and most tremendous coup. Only as he left he made a remark, that afterward struck us as significant. It was in answer to a query of the chief's about the Copper Pool:

"There are developments ahead – maybe sensational. You'll see in a day or two."

It was the second day after the suicide and in the afternoon, having a job to see to on the upper West Side, I decided to drop in on Molly Babbitts and have a word with her. I always drop in on Molly when I happen to be round her diggings. Three years ago, after the calamity which pretty nearly put a quietus on me for all time, Molly and I clasped hands on a friendship pact that, God willing, will last till the grass is growing over both of us. She's the brightest, biggest-hearted, bravest little being that walks, and once did me a good turn. But I needn't speak of that – it's a page I don't like to turn back. It's enough to say that whatever Molly asks me is done and always will be as long as I've breath in my body.

As I swung up the long reach of Central Park West – she's a few blocks in from there on Ninety-fifth Street – my thoughts, circling round the Harland affair, brought up on Miss Whitehall, whose offices are just below those of the dead man. I wondered

if she'd been there and hoped she hadn't, a nasty business for a woman to see. I'd met her several times – before she started the Azalea Woods Estates scheme – at the house of a friend near Longwood and been a good deal impressed as any man would. She was one of the handsomest women I'd ever seen, dark and tall, twenty-five or – six years of age and a lady to her finger tips. I was just laying round in my head for an excuse to call on her when the villa site business loomed up and she and her mother whisked away to town. That was the last I saw of them, and my fell design of calling never came off – what was decent civility in the country, in the town looked like butting in. Bashful? Oh, probably. Maybe I'd have been bolder if she'd been less good-looking.

Molly was at home, and had to give me tea, and here were Soapy's cigars and there were Soapy's cigarettes. Blessed little jolly soul, she welcomes you as if you were Admiral Dewey returning from Manila Bay. Himself was at the Harland inquest and maybe he and the boys would be in, as the inquest was to be held at Harland's house on Riverside Drive. So as we chatted she made ready for them – on the chance. That's Molly too.

As she ran in and out of the kitchen she told me of a visit she'd paid the day before to Miss Whitehall's office and let drop a fact that gave me pause. While she was there a man had come with a note from some bank which, from her description, seemed to be protested. That was a surprise, but what was a greater was that Harland had been the endorsee. Out Longwood way there'd

been a good deal of speculation as to how the Whitehalls had financed so pretentious a scheme. Men I knew there were of the opinion there had been a silent partner. If it was Harland – who had a finger in many pies – the enterprise was doomed. I sat back puffing one of Babbitts' cigars and pondering. Why the devil *hadn't* I called? If it was true, I might have been of some help to them.

Before I had time to question her further, the hall door opened and Babbitts came in with a trail of three reporters at his heels. I knew them all – Freddy Jaspar, of the *Sentinel*, who three years ago had tried to fix the Hesketh murder on me and had taken twelve months to get over the agony of meeting me, Jones, of the *Clarion*, and Bill Yerrington, star reporter of a paper which, when it couldn't get its headlines big enough without crowding out the news, printed them in blood red.

They had come from the inquest and clamored for food and drink, crowding round the table and keeping Molly, for all her preparations, swinging like a pendulum between the kitchen and the dining-room. I was keen to hear what had happened, and as she whisked in with Jaspar's tea and Babbitts' coffee, a beer for Yerrington and the whiskey for Jones, they began on it.

There'd been a bunch of witnesses – the janitor, the elevator boy, Harland's stenographer who'd had hysterics, and Jerome, his head clerk, who'd identified the body and had revealed an odd fact not noticed at the time. The front hall window of the eighteenth story – the window Harland was supposed to have

jumped from – had been closed when Jerome ran into the hall.

"Jerome's positive he opened it," said Babbitts. "He said he remembered jerking it up and leaning out to look at the crowd on the street."

"How do they account for that?" I asked. "Harland couldn't have stood on the sill and shut it behind him."

Jaspar explained:

"No – It wasn't that window. He went to the floor below, the seventeenth. The janitor, going up there an hour afterward, found the hall window on the seventeenth floor wide open."

"That's an odd thing," I said – "going down one story."

"You can't apply the ordinary rules of behavior to men in Harland's state," said Jones. "They're way off the normal. I remember one of my first details was the suicide of a woman, who killed herself by swallowing a key when she had a gun handy. They get wild and act wild."

Yerrington, who was famous for injecting a sinister note into the most commonplace happenings, spoke up:

"The window's easily explained. What is queer is the length of time that elapsed between his leaving the office and his fall to the street. That Franks girl, when she wasn't whooping like a siren in a fog, said it was 6.05 when he went out. At twenty-five to seven the body fell – half an hour later." He looked at me with a dark glance. "What did he do during that time?"

"I'll tell you in two words," said Jaspar. "Stop and think for a moment. What was that man's mental state? He's ruined – he's

played a big game and lost. But life's been sweet to him – up till now it's given him everything he asked for. There's a struggle between the knowledge that death is the best way out and the desire to live."

"To express it in language more suited to our simple intellects," said Jones, "he's taken half an hour to make up his mind."

"Precisely."

"Where did he spend that half hour?" said Yerrington, in a deep, meaningful voice.

"Hi, you Yerrington," cried Babbitts, "this isn't a case for posing as Burns on the Trail. What's the matter with him spending it in the seventeenth floor hall?"

Molly, who was sitting at the head of the table in a mess of cups and steaming pots, colored the picture.

"Pacing up and down, trying to get up his nerve. Oh, I can see him perfectly!"

"Strange," said Yerrington, looking somberly at the droplight, "that no one saw him pacing there."

"A great deal stranger if they had," cut in Jones, "considering there was no one there to see. It was after six – the offices were empty."

They had the laugh on Yerrington who muttered balefully, dipping into his glass.

"It fits in with the character of Harland," I said, "the stuff in the papers, all you hear about him. He was an intellect first –

cool, resolute, hard as a stone. That kind of man doesn't act on impulse. As Mrs. Babbitts says, he probably paced up and down the empty corridor with his vision ranging over the situation, arguing it out with himself and deciding death was the best way. Then up with the window and out."

"Do you suppose Mr. Barker had any idea he was going to do it when he left?" Molly asked.

Babbitts laughed.

"Ask us an easier one, Molly."

Jaspar answered her, looking musingly at the smoke of his cigarette.

"I guess Barker wasn't bothering much about anybody just then. His own get-away was occupying *his* thoughts."

"You're confident he's lit out?" said Jones.

"What else? Why, if he wasn't lying low in that back room, didn't he come out when he heard Miss Franks' screams? Why hasn't he showed up since? Where is he? That idea they've got in his office that he may have had aphasia or been kidnapped is all tommyrot. They've got to say something and they say that. The time was ripe for his disappearance and things worked out right for him to make it then and there. If he didn't slip out while Miss Franks and Jerome were at the hall window, he did it after they'd gone down. It was nearly an hour before the police went up. He could have taken his time, quietly descended the side stairs and picked up his auto which was waiting in some place he'd designated."

"That's the dope," said Babbitts. "And it won't be many more 'sleeps,' as the Indians say, before that car is run to earth. You can't hide a man and a French limousine for long."

He was right. Johnston Barker's car was located the next day and the public knew that the head of the Copper Pool had disappeared by design and intention. His clerks and friends who had desperately suggested loss of memory, kidnapping, accident, were silenced. Their protesting voices died before evidence that was conclusive. Judge for yourself.

On the morning of January the eighteenth, Heney, the chauffeur, turned up in the Newark court, telling a story that bore the stamp of truth. At five o'clock on the day of the suicide he had received a phone message in the garage from Barker. This message instructed him to take the limousine that evening at 8.15 to the corner of Twenty-second Street and Ninth Avenue. There he was to wait for his employer, but not in any ordinary way. The directions were explicit and, in the light of subsequent events, illuminating. He was not to stop but to move about the locality, watching for Barker. When he saw him he was to run along the curb, slowing down sufficiently for the older man to enter the car.

From there he was to proceed to the Jersey Ferry, cross and continue on to Elizabeth. The objective point in Elizabeth was the railway depot, but instead of going straight to it, the car was to stop at the foot of the embankment on the Pennsylvania side, where Barker would alight. Further instructions were that Heney was to mention the matter to no one, and if asked on the following

day of Barker's whereabouts, deny all knowledge of it. Pay for his discretion was promised.

Heney said he was astonished, as he had been in Barker's employment two years and never piloted the magnate on any such mysterious enterprise. But he did what he was told, sure of his money and trusting in his boss. At the corner of the two streets he saw no one, looped the block, and on his return made out a figure moving toward him that slowed up as he came in sight. He ran closer and by the light of a lamp recognized Barker; and skirted the curb as he'd been ordered. With a nod and glance at him, Barker opened the car door and entered.

The run to Elizabeth was made without incident. Heney stopped the car at the Pennsylvania side of the culvert, above which the station lights shone. Barker alighted and with a short "Good night" mounted the steps to the depot.

On the way home, going at high speed, Heney, rounding a corner, ran into a wagon and found himself face to face with a pair of angry farmers. They haled him before a magistrate to whom he gave a false name, representing himself as a chauffeur joy-riding in a borrowed car. He told this lie hoping to be able to hush the matter up the next day.

When he read of his boss' disappearance in the papers he was uneasy, knowing discovery could not be long postponed. The number of the car – overlooked in the rush of bigger matters – was made public in the evening papers of the seventeenth. Then he knew the game was up, admitted his deception and the identity

of his employer.

Inquiries at the Elizabeth depot confirmed his story. The Jersey Central and Pennsylvania tracks run side by side through the station. At nine-thirty on the night of January fifteenth the ticket agent of the Pennsylvania Line remembered selling a Philadelphia ticket to a man answering the description of Barker. He did not see this man board the train, being busy at the time in his office. None of the train officials had any recollection of such a passenger, but as the coaches were full, the coming and going of people continuous, he might easily have been overlooked.

After this there was no more doubt as to Barker's flight. The papers announced it to an amazed public, shaken to its core by the downfall of one of its financial giants. The collapse of the Copper Pool was complete and Wall Street rocked in the last throes of panic. From the wreckage the voices of victims called down curses on the traitor, the man who had planned the ruin of his associates and got away with it.

They congregated in the Whitney office where the air was sulphurous with their fury. And from the Whitney office the Whitney detectives, Jerry O'Mally at their head, slipped away to Philadelphia, with their noses to the trail. With his picture on the front page of every paper in the country it would be hard for Barker to elude them, but he had three days' start, and, as O'Mally summed it up, "It has only taken seven to make the world."

CHAPTER IV
MOLLY TELLS THE STORY

The day after the Harland inquest I meant to go down and see Iola and find out if she'd heard anything from Miss Whitehall. But that day I got sidetracked some way or other and the next it rained.

Usually I don't mind rain, but this was the real wet, straight kind that would get in at you if you wore a diver's suit. As I stood at the parlor window, looking down at the street all pools and puddles, with the walls shining under a thin glaze of water, and the umbrellas like wet, black mushrooms, I got faint-hearted. I could just as well phone, and if anything had transpired (it was the business I was uneasy about) go down and help Iola through the fit of blind staggers she'd be bound to have.

So presently it was:

"Hello, Iola, I was coming down today but it's too moistuous."

Then Iola's voice, sort of groaning:

"Oh, Molly, is that you? I *do* wish it had been fine and you'd have come."

"Why – anything wrong?"

"Oh, yes, everything. Miss Whitehall isn't back yet, and Mr. Ford's hardly been in at all and has such a gloom on him you wouldn't know him, and I'm awful discouraged."

"Have you tried to see Miss Whitehall?"

"No, I can't seem to get up enough spunk."

"Why don't you phone her?"

"Well, I don't know, I'm sort of scared of what I'll hear. I thought I'd better sit around and wait, and then I thought I ought to find out, and between the two – Oh, dear, *what's the use*!"

That was just like Iola. The only way you can be sure she's got a mind at all is the trouble she has making it up. If it's true that men like the helpless kind she ought to have a string of lovers as long as the line at the box office when Caruso sings *Pagliacci*. I wonder *I* ever got married!

"Tell you what, girlie," I said, "you come up tonight and dine with me. Himself is going to be late and we two bandits will steal out after dinner and make a raid on Miss Whitehall's."

Even then she hung back. I had to coax and urge and it was only me promising I'd see her through and if necessary ask the questions, made her finally agree.

The rain held on all day and it was teeming when we started out. Miss Whitehall's flat was on the other side of town – the East Sixties – and we had to go round the Park, crowding on and off cars, fighting our way through packs of people, Iola clawing at my back and catching her umbrella in men's hats and women's hair till you'd think she did it on purpose. When we got to the street we turned east, walking from Madison Avenue over Park with its great huge apartment houses, and then on a ways – not far, but far enough to make you feel Miss Whitehall's home

wasn't as stylishly located as her office. Iola was that nervous I was afraid she'd forget the number, but we found it, on a corner over a drug store, where there were large, glassy bottles in the window and advertisements of ladies offering pills and candy with such glad, inviting smiles you'd know it was damaged stock.

The entrance was round on the side, and as we stood in the vestibule, dimly lit, with a line of letter boxes on each side, I couldn't help but whisper:

"You'd never think from her offices she'd live over a store."

And Iola answered, pushing the button under a letter box marked "Mrs. Serena Whitehall."

"It's a shock to me. I'd no more connect her with a push-button than I would you with a glass-topped entrance and a man in knee pants."

The door clicked and we went up the stairs, one feeble little electric bulb furnishing the light. There was a smell in the air like one of the tenants had had lamb stew for dinner and another was smoking the kind of cigar that tells you it's strong and hearty half a block off. The first-floor landing was hers – a card in a frame by the door told us so – and we pressed on the bell, hearing it give a loud, whirring ring inside.

The door was opened by a young girl, very neat in a black dress and white apron. She was sure we couldn't speak to Miss Whitehall, but perhaps Mrs. Whitehall would see us and she showed us up the tiny little hall into the dining-room. I'd never have believed a room furnished so plain could be so elegant.

There was a square of brown carpet on the floor and ecru linen curtains – no lace, just hemstitched – at the windows and on the side table some silver; yet it had a refined, classy look. Two doors opened from it, one into the hall hung with a blue portière and double ones that I guessed led into the parlor. We could hear voices coming from there, low and murmuring.

By this time Iola was that nervous she was licking her lips with her tongue like a baby that's had a sugar stick. I was just edging round to give her a dig and whisper, "Brace up," when the curtain into the hall was lifted and a lady came in.

As she was well along in years – near to fifty I'd say – I knew she was Mrs. Whitehall. She was very dignified and gentle, with black hair turning gray and lots of lines on her forehead and round her eyes, which were dark like her hair and had a sad, weary expression. I guessed she'd been handsome once, but she looked as if she'd had her troubles, and when I heard her voice, low and so quiet, there was something in it that made me feel she was having them still.

I'd promised to be spokesman and not seeing any reason to waste time I went straight to the point. Mrs. Whitehall stood listening, her hands clasped on the back of a chair, her eyes on the little fern plant in the center of the table.

"Perhaps it would be best," she said, in that soft, faded sort of voice, "if Miss Barry were to see my daughter. I hardly know what to say to her."

She turned and left the room by the hall door and Iola gasped

at me:

"Oh, Molly, it's true!"

"Don't cross your bridges till you come to them," I said, but all the same, I thought it looked bad.

"What'll I do if the business shuts down?"

"Shut up till you know if it does," I whispered back.

The double doors rolled back and Mrs. Whitehall stood between them. She looked at Iola.

"If you'll come in here, Miss Barry," she said, "my daughter will see you."

It was plain she didn't expect me, so I stood by the table without moving. As Mrs. Whitehall drew back and before Iola got to the doorway, there was a moment when I saw into the room. It looked real artistic, flowered cretonne curtains, wicker chairs with cushions and low bookcases around the walls, the whole lit up by the yellow glow of lamps. But I wasn't interested in the furniture – what caught my eye was a couch just opposite the open door, on which a woman was lying.

There was a lamp on a stand beside her and its light fell full over her. If I hadn't known Carol Whitehall was there I'd have guessed right off it was she from the likeness to her mother. She had just the same hair and deep, rich-looking eyes except in her the hair was black as night and the eyes were young. She had a newspaper in her hand and as the doors opened she'd looked up, intent and questioning, and I saw she was beautiful. She was like a picture, leaning forward with that inquiring expression, her

features clear in the flood of soft light. I got an impression of her then that I've never forgotten – of force and strength. It didn't come from anything especial in her face, but from something in her general makeup, something vivid and warm, like she was alive straight through.

They stayed in the room some time while I sat waiting. I'd sized up everything in sight, especially two little glass lamps on the sideboard that I thought would be a nice present for Babbitts to give me on my next birthday, when the doors slid back and Iola came in. She didn't say anything and seemed in a hurry to be off. Mrs. Whitehall showed us out, very polite but depressed, and when the door was shut on us and we stole down the stairs, I felt the worst had come. In the vestibule I looked at Iola and said: "Well?"

She was struggling with her umbrella, her face bent over it.

"Fired!" she answered in a husky voice.

The rain was coming down in torrents, and wanting to cuddle up comforting against her, I didn't raise my umbrella and we walked up the street, squeezed together, with the downpour spattering around us. Believe me, the water fell under Iola's umbrella pretty nearly as heavy as it did outside it. Miss Whitehall was broke. Mr. Harland *had* been her financial backer and now she was ruined and the business would close. The surprise and horror of the whole thing had prostrated her and as soon as she was better she'd wind up the Azalea Woods Estates and try and sublet her offices, on which she had still a six months'

lease.

"She was awful sweet," Iola sobbed. "She gave me a full month's salary and said she'd meant to keep me forever. Oh, Molly, why did it have to happen?"

I squeezed her and said:

"That's all right, dearie. We'll all hustle and get you another job. I got lots of money and what's mine's yours – the way it always is between good and true friends."

But Iola wouldn't be comforted.

"I can't take your money. I never took a cent yet. And I thought I was fixed for life. I thought even if the business didn't pan out big she'd marry Mr. Barker and get a place for me."

"Marry Mr. Barker!" I cried out astonished.

"Yes – that's what I thought was coming."

Believe *me*, I was surprised. She'd never dropped a hint of it.

"Why didn't you tell me that before?" I asked.

"Because Tony Ford told me not to. He said I wasn't to tell anybody – that Barker being such a big bug it would get in the papers and that might break it all up."

"But are you *sure*? Did he act like he was in love with her?"

We were passing one of those arc lights on Park Avenue, and the scornful look she cast at me, tears and all, was plain.

"Wouldn't you think a man was in love – even if he was a magnate – who'd buy a house and lot just for an excuse to *see* a lady?"

"Did you ever *hear* him making love to her?"

"No – but I didn't need to. I've been made love to enough myself to know the signs without hearing. First it was all business, and I believed it was only that. Then, one day when Mr. Ford was out, he came in and lingered round making conversation. You know the way they do it, and for all he was a magnate Mr. Barker was just the same as the errand boy. That's the way it is with men – they got no variety. He wanted to know about her home and the farm and before that. Oh, Indiana, a fine state, Indiana! It made me laugh to see him with his hook nose and gray hair handing out the same line of talk that Billy Dunn gave me when I was in the linen envelope place."

"Did *she* seem to care for him?"

"Not at first. She was very formal, just a bow and then right off about the bungalow. But *he* had the symptoms from the start – looking at her like he couldn't take his eyes off and not caring whether the bungalow was as small as a hencoop or as big as the Waldorf.

"They went along that way for a while then something happened – a fight, I guess when Tony Ford and I weren't there. Anyhow, after it she was so cold and distant you'd wonder he had the nerve to come. Then one afternoon he came in and asked her low – I heard him – if he could have a few words with her in the private office. She hesitated but I guess she couldn't see her way to refusing, so in they went and had a long powwow. Whatever it was they said to each other it smoothed out all the wrinkles. After that she was as different to him as summer is to winter.

In my own mind I thought they were engaged, for she'd brighten up when he came in and *smile*. I never saw her smile like that at anyone, and once when they thought I couldn't hear I heard him call her 'dear.' They'd go into the private office and talk. Gee! how they talked! And always low like they were afraid Tony Ford and I might overhear. And on the top of all *that* he disappears."

"Perhaps that's why she's been sick."

"Sure it is. It's bad enough to lose your own money, but wouldn't it make you sick to lose millions, let alone the man you're in love with, even if he has a nose you could hang an umbrella on?"

"Poor thing!" I said, for I could see now what the lady lying on the couch had been up against.

"We're all poor things," said Iola, beginning to get sorry for herself again. "Miss Whitehall, and the man that's dead, and Tony Ford who's lost his job, and me, poor unfortunate me, that I thought was on velvet for the rest of my days."

Babbitts didn't get home till late that night, but I was so full of what Iola had said that I waited up for him. When he did come, he hadn't but one kiss, when I pulled away from him and told him.

"Doesn't it seem to you, Soapy," I said, "that that story ought to go back to Mr. Whitney?"

He looked at me sideways with a sly, questioning glance.

"Why?" he asked.

"Why, if Barker's in love with her don't you think maybe he'll try and creep back or get in touch with her some way?"

He burst out laughing.

"Oh, Morningdew, there's a lot of nice things about you, but one of the nicest is that you never disappoint a fellow. I was wondering if you'd see it. Go back to Mr. Whitney? It'll go back the first thing tomorrow morning and you'll take it."

CHAPTER V
MOLLY TELLS THE STORY

The next morning Babbitts and I started out for the offices of Whitney & Whitney. They're far downtown, near Wall Street, way up in the top of a skyscraper where the air is good even in summer. I'd been in them before, and it was funny as we shot up in the elevator to think of those first visits, when I was so scared of Mr. Whitney – "the chief," as Jack Reddy calls him, and it's his name all right.

We were shown right into his office, like we'd come with a million-dollar lawsuit, and when he saw me he got up and held out his big, white hand.

"Well, well, Molly! How's the smartest girl in New York?" Then he looked from me to Babbitts with a twinkle in his eye. "She's looking fine, my boy. You've taken good care of her." And then back to me, "Treats you well, eh? If he *doesn't*– remember – Whitney & Whitney's services are yours to command."

That's the way he is, always glad to see you, always with his joke. But, there's another side to him – a sort of terrible, fierce quiet – I've seen it and – Gee whiz! If he ever got after me the way I once saw him get after a man he thought was guilty I'd crawl under the table and die right there on the carpet. He isn't a bit good-looking – a big, clumsy sort of man, stoop-shouldered,

and with a head of rough gray hair and eyes set deep under bushy brows. When he questions you those eyes look at you kind and pleasant – but, *forget it*! There's not a thing they don't see. *You* think your face is solid flesh and blood. It is to most – but to Mr. Whitney it's no more than a pane of glass.

His son George – he was there and Jack Reddy too – doesn't favor his father. He's an awful stylish chap, with blond hair sleeked down on his skull, and glasses set pert on the bridge of his nose. They say he's smart, but not as big as the old man, and he hasn't got the same genial, easy way. But he's always very cordial to us, and even if he wasn't his father's son and a close friend of Jack Reddy's, I guess I'd like him anyhow.

They were very interested in what I had to say, but with Mr. Whitney himself you never can guess what he thinks. He sits listening, slouched down in his armchair, with his shirt bosom crumpled, like an old bear ruminating – or hibernating is it? – in a hollow tree. When I was through he stretched out his hand, took a cigar from a box on the table and said:

"Just call up the Azalea Woods Estates, George, and find out how long Miss Whitehall expects to be there." Then as Mr. George left the room he turned to me and said, "Want to make some money?"

I have a lot of money – ten thousand dollars, the reward they gave me after the Hesketh Mystery was solved – so money doesn't cut much ice with me. But doing something for Mr. Whitney does, and I guessed right off he had a little job for Molly Babbitts.

"I want to do whatever Whitney & Whitney asks," I said. "That's a privilege and you don't get paid for privileges."

He burst out laughing and said:

"It's easily seen half of you's Irish, Molly. There is something you can do for me, and whether you want it or not, you'll be paid for your services just as O'Mally, my own detective, is. Here it is. That information you got from your little friend is valuable. As you were sharp enough to see, Barker may try to get in touch with Miss Whitehall. To my mind he'd be more inclined to try her office than her home where there's a mother and a servant to overhear and ask questions. What would you think about going on the switchboard again?"

My old work, the one thing I *could* do!

"Bully!" I cried out, forgetting my language in my excitement.

Mr. Whitney smiled:

"Then we're agreed. As soon as I can arrange matters I'll let you know, probably this afternoon. I don't now know just where we'll put you but I fancy in the Black Eagle's own central. And I don't need to say to both of you that you're to keep as silent as you did in the Hesketh case."

I smiled to myself at that. Mr. Whitney knew, no one better, that when it comes to keeping mum a deaf mute hasn't anything over me.

Just then Mr. George came back. He had got Tony Ford on the wire and heard from him that Miss Whitehall might be in her offices some time yet, as she was trying to sublet them.

Late that afternoon I had my instructions. The next morning I was to go to the Black Eagle Building and begin work as a hello girl. If questioned I was to answer that all I knew was Miss McCalmont, the old girl, had been transferred and I was temporarily installed in her place. It was my business to listen to every phone message that went into or out from the Azalea Woods Estates. I would be at liberty to give my full attention as almost every office had its own wire. Miss Whitehall had had hers but it had been disconnected since her failure, and she was only accessible through the building's central. The work was so easy it seemed a shame to take the money.

The first two days there was nothing doing and it was desperate dull. The telephone office was off the main hall to one side of the elevator, a bright little place on the street level. A good part of the time I sat at the desk looking out at the people passing like shadows across the ground glass of the windows. There were some calls for Miss Whitehall, all business. These, no matter what they were, I listened to but got nothing. Sometimes she answered, sometimes Tony Ford.

My desk was set so I could see out through the doorway into the hall, and the first morning I was there I saw her pass. She looked better than she had that night in her own apartment, but her face had a grave, worried expression which you couldn't be surprised at, seeing how things stood with her.

It was the second evening and I was thinking of getting ready to go – the building's exchange closed at half-past six – when a

tall fellow with a swagger in his walk and his shoulders held back like he thought a lot of his shape, stopped in the doorway and called out:

"Hello, Miss McCalmont. How goes the times?"

I looked up surprised and when he saw it wasn't Miss McCalmont he looked surprised too, raising his eyebrows and opening his eyes with an exaggerated expression like he did it to make you laugh. He was a fine-looking chap if size does it – over six feet and wide across the chest – but his face, broad and flat, with cheeks too large for his features, wasn't the kind I admire. Also I noticed that the good-natured look it had was contradicted by the gray, small eyes, sharp as a gimlet and hard as a nail. I supposed he was some clerk from one of the offices come to ask Miss McCalmont to dinner – they're always doing that – and answered careless, fingering at the plugs:

"Miss McCalmont's been transferred."

"You don't say," says he, leaning easy against the doorpost. "Since when is that?"

"Since I came," I answered.

He grinned, showing teeth as white as split almonds, and his eyes over the grin began to size me up, shrewd and curious. Taking him for some fresh guy that Miss McCalmont was jollying along – they do that too – I paid no attention to him, humming a tune and looking languid at my finger nails. He wasn't phazed a little bit, but making himself comfortable against the doorpost, said:

"Going to stay on here?"

"The central'll give you all the information you want," I answered and wheeling round in my chair looked at the clock. "Ten minutes past six. How slow the time goes when you're dull."

He burst out laughing and he *did* have a jolly, infectious kind of laugh.

"Say," he said, "you're a live one, aren't you?"

"I wouldn't be long, if I had to listen to all the guys that ain't got anything better to do than block up doorways and try to be fresh."

He laughed louder and lolled up against the woodwork.

"I like you fine," said he. "Are you a permanency or just a fleeting vision?"

"Talking of fleeting visions, ain't it about your dinner hour?"

"You act to me as if this was your first job," was his answer, sort of thoughtful.

Wouldn't it make you smile! It did me – a small quiet smile all to myself. He saw it, dropped his head to one side and said, as smooth and sweet as molasses:

"What do they call you, little one?"

It was all I could do to keep from laughing, but I crumpled up my forehead into a scowl and looked cross at him:

"What my name is you'll never know and what yours is you needn't tell me for I've guessed. I've met members of your tribe before – it's large and prominent – the ancient and honorable order of jackasses."

He made me a low bow.

"So flattered at this speedy recognition," he says, airy and smiling. "You may know the tribe, but not the individual. Permit me to introduce myself – Anthony Ford."

I gave a start and turned it into a stretch. So *this* was the wonderful Tony Ford – a slick customer all right.

"That don't convey anything to my mind," I answered. "A rose by any other name still has its thorns."

"For more data – I'm the managing clerk of the Azalea Woods Estates, see seventeenth floor, first door to your left."

"Ain't I heard you were closed up there?"

"We are. This may be the last time you'll ever see me, so look well at me. Er – what did you say your name was?"

"One of the unemployed!" I said, falling back in my chair and rolling my eyes up at the ceiling. "Hangs round my switchboard and hasn't the price of a dinner in his jeans."

"I was too hasty," said he; "this isn't your first job."

"If your place is shut what are you doing here – not at this present moment, the actions of fools are an old story to me – but in the building?"

"Closing up the business. Did you think I was nosing round for an unlocked door or an open safe? Does this fresh, innocent countenance look like the mug of a burglar?" He grinned and thrusting a hand into his pocket rattled the loose silver there. "Hear that? Has a sound like a dinner, hasn't it?"

That made me mad – the vain fool thinking he could flirt with

me as he had with Iola. I slanted a side look at him and his broad shining face with the eyes that didn't match it gave me a feeling like I longed to slap it good and hard. Gee, I'd have loved to feel my hand come *whang*up against one of those fat cheeks! But it's the curse of being a perfect lady that you can't hit when you feel like it – except with your tongue.

"I ain't known many burglars," I answered, "but now that I look at you it *does* come over me that you've a family resemblance to those few I've met. Seeing which I'll decline the honor of your invitation. Safety first."

That riled him. He flushed up and a surly look passed over his face making it ugly. Then he shrugged up his shoulders and leaned off the doorpost, giving a hitch to the front of his coat.

"I generally like a dash of tabasco in mine," says he, "but when it comes to the whole bottle spilled in the dish, it's too hot. Just make a note of that against our next meeting. I don't like being disappointed twice. Good evening."

And off he went, swaggering down the hall.

On the way home I wondered what Soapy'd say when I told him, but when he came in Tony Ford went straight out of my head for at last there was exciting news – Barker had been located in Philadelphia.

Two people had seen him there, one a man who knew him well, and saw him the night before in a taxi, the other an Italian who kept a newsstand. That same evening between eight and nine Barker had stopped at the stand and bought several New York

papers. The Italian, who was quick-witted, recognized him from his pictures in the papers, and reported to the police.

"He's evidently only going out after dark," said Babbitts. "But a man can't hide for long whose picture's spread broadcast over the country."

"And who's got a face like the American Eagle after it's grown a white mustache," I answered.

That was Thursday night. Friday morning I toddled down to my job, feeling there wasn't much in it and that when I came home I'd hear Barker was landed and it would be domestic life again for little Molly.

The day went by quiet and uneventful as the others had been. I read a novel and sewed at a tray cloth, and now and then jacked in for a call. It was getting on for evening and I was thinking about home and dinner when – Bang! came two calls, one right after the other, that made me feel I was earning my money.

The first was at a quarter to five. Our central came sharp and clear:

"Hello, Gramercy 3503 – Long Distance – Philadelphia's calling you."

Philadelphia! Can you see me stiffening up, with my hand ready to raise the cam?

"All right – Gramercy 3503."

I could hear the girls in our central, the wait of hum and broken sounds – how well I knew it! – and then a distant voice, brisk and business-like, "Hello, Philadelphia – Waiting." Then a pause

and presently the whispering jar of the wires, "Here's your party. Gramercy 3503, all right for Philadelphia."

Running over those miles and miles the voice – a man's – came clear as a bell.

"I want to speak to the Azalea Woods Estates."

I made the connection, softly lifted the cam, and listened in.

"Is this the office of the Azalea Woods Estates?"

A woman's voice answered, as close as if she was in the next room:

"Yes – who is it?"

"Is Mr. Anthony Ford there?"

"No, Mr. Ford has left my employment. I am Miss Whitehall, my business is closed."

There was a pause. My heart which had hit up a lively gait began to ease down. Only Tony Ford – Pshaw!

"Are you there?" said the woman.

"Yes," came the answer. "Could you give me his address?"

"Certainly. Hold the wire for a moment."

After a wait of a minute or two she was back with the address which she gave him. He repeated it carefully, thanked her and hung up.

Talk of false alarms! I was so disappointed thinking I'd got something for Mr. Whitney, that I sat crumpled up in my chair sulking, and right in the middle of my sulks came the second call.

It was Long Distance again – Toronto.

"I wonder what Toronto wants with her," I thought as I jacked

in, and then, leaning my elbow on the desk listened, not much interested. Three sentences hadn't passed before I was as still as a graven image, all my life gone into my ears.

"Is that you, Carol?" I could just hear it, a fine little thread of sound as if it came from a ghost in the other world.

"Yes – who's speaking?"

"It's I – J. W. B."

Barker's initials! My heart gave a leap and then began to fox trot. If I had any doubts, her answer put an end to them. I could hear the gasp in her breath, the fright in her voice.

"You? What are you doing this for?"

"There's no danger. I'm careful. Did you get my letter?"

"Yes, this morning."

"Will you come?"

"Are you sure it's all right? Have you seen the papers here?"

"All of them. Don't be afraid. I'm taking no risks. Are you coming?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"I can leave tonight. There's a train at eight."

"Good. I'll meet you and explain everything. Do as I said in the letter. I'll be there."

"Very well – understand. Please ring off. Good-bye."

For a moment I sat thinking. She was going to Toronto to meet Barker by a train that left at eight, and it was now half-past five. There was no use trying to trace the call – I knew enough

for that – so I got Mr. Whitney's office and told him, careful, without names. He was awful pleased and handed me out some compliments that gave me the courage to ask for something I was crazy to get – the scoop for Babbitts. It would be a big story – Barker landed through the girl he was in love with. I knew they'd follow her and could Babbitts go along? I don't have to tell you that he agreed, making only one condition – if they were unsuccessful, *silence*. O'Mally, who was up from Philadelphia, would go. Babbitts could join him at the Grand Central Station.

I took a call for the *Dispatch*, found Babbitts and told him enough to send him home on the run – but not much; there's too many phones in those newspaper offices. It was nearly seven when I got there myself, dragged him into our room, and while I packed his grip gave him the last bulletins. He was up in the air. It would be the biggest story that had ever come his way.

I had to go down to the station with him, for neither he nor O'Mally knew her. I was desperate afraid she wouldn't come – get cold feet the way women do when they're eloping. But at a quarter of eight she showed up. She didn't look a bit nervous or rattled, and went about getting her ticket as quiet as if she was going for a week-end to Long Island. O'Mally – he was a fat, red-faced man, looking more like a commercial traveler than a sleuth – was right behind her as she bought it. Then as she walked to the track entrance with her suitcase in her hand, I saw them follow her, lounging along sort of neighborly and casual, till the three of them disappeared under the arch.

It was late before I went to sleep that night. I kept imagining them tracking her through the Toronto Depot, leaping into a taxi that followed close on hers, and going somewhere – but where I couldn't think – to meet Barker. For the first time I began to wonder if any harm could come to Babbitts. In detective stories when they shadowed people there were generally revolvers at the finish. But, after all, Johnston Barker wasn't flying for his life, or flying from jail. As far as I could get it, he was just flying away with the Copper Pool's money. Perhaps that wasn't desperate enough for revolvers.

When I finally did go to sleep I dreamed that all of us, the fat man, Babbitts, Carol Whitehall and I and Mr. Barker, were packed together in one taxi, which was rushing through the dark, lurching from side to side. As if we weren't enough, it was piled high with suitcases, on one of which I was sitting, squeezed up against Mr. Barker, who had a face like an eagle, and kept telling me to move so he could get his revolver.

I don't know what hour I awoke, but the light was coming in between the curtains and the radiators were beginning to snap with the morning heat when I opened my eyes. I came awake suddenly with that queer sensation you sometimes have that you're not alone.

And I wasn't. There sitting on a chair by the bedside, all hunched up in his overcoat, with his suitcase at his feet, was Himself, looking as cross as a bear.

I sat up with a yelp as if he'd been a burglar.

"*You* here?" I cried.

He looked at me, glum as an owl, and nodded.

"Yes. It's all right."

"Why – why – what's happened?"

"Nothing."

"You haven't been to Toronto and back in this time?"

"I've been to Rochester and back," he snapped. "She got out there, waited most of this infernal night and took the first return train."

"Came back?"

"Isn't that what I'm saying?" For Himself to speak that way to me showed he was riled something dreadful. "She got off at Rochester and stayed round in the depot – didn't see anyone, or speak to anyone, or send a phone, or a wire. She got a train back at three, we followed her and saw her go up the steps of her own apartment."

"Why – what do you make of it?"

He shrugged:

"Only one of two things. She either changed her mind or saw she was being shadowed."

CHAPTER VI
JACK TELLS THE STORY

This chapter in our composite story falls to me, not because I can write it better but because I was present at that strange interview which changed the whole face of the Harland case. Even now I can feel the tightening of the muscles, the horrified chill, as we learned, in one of the most unexpected and startling revelations ever made in a lawyer's office, the true significance of the supposed suicide.

It was the morning after the night ride of Babbitts and O'Mally, and I was late at the office. The matter had been arranged after I left the evening before and I knew nothing of it. As I entered the building I ran into Babbitts, who was going to the Whitney offices to report on his failure and in the hopes that some new lead might have cropped up. Drawing me to the side of the hall he told me of their expedition. I listened with the greatest interest and surprise. It struck me as amazing and rather horrible. Until I heard it I had not believed the story of the typewriter girl – that Barker was in love with Miss Whitehall – but in the face of such evidence I had nothing to say.

We were both so engrossed that neither noticed a woman holding a child by the hand and moving uncertainly about our vicinity. It wasn't till the story was over and we were walking

toward the elevator that I was conscious of her, looking this way and that, jostled by the men and evidently scared and bewildered. Judging her too timid to ask her way, and too unused to such surroundings – she looked poor and shabby – to consult the office directory on the wall, I stopped and asked her where she wanted to go.

She gave a start and said with a brogue as rich as butter:

"It's to L'yer Whitney's office I'm bound, but where is it I don't know and it's afeared I am to be demandin' the way with everyone runnin' by me like hares."

"I'm going there myself," I said, "I'll take you."

She bubbled out in relieved thanks and followed us into the elevator. As the car shot up I looked her over wondering what she could want with the chief. She was evidently a working woman, neatly dressed in a dark coat and small black hat under which her hair was drawn back smooth and tight. Her face was of the best Irish type, round, rosy and honest. One of her hands clasped the child's, his little fingers crumpled inside her rough, red ones. She addressed him as "Dannie," and when passengers crowded in and out, drew him up against her, with a curious, soft tenderness that seemed instinctive.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.