

Lynch Lawrence L.

Dangerous Ground: or, The Rival Detectives



Lawrence Lynch

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Содержание

PROLOGUE	5
I	6
II	8
III	10
CHAPTER I.	12
CHAPTER II.	15
CHAPTER III.	18
CHAPTER IV.	21
CHAPTER V.	24
CHAPTER VI.	27
CHAPTER VII.	29
CHAPTER VIII.	32
CHAPTER IX.	35
CHAPTER X.	38
CHAPTER XI.	41
CHAPTER XII.	44
CHAPTER XIII.	47
CHAPTER XIV.	51
CHAPTER XV.	54
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	57

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PROLOGUE

Time: The month of May. The year, 1859; when the West was new, and the life of the Pioneer difficult and dangerous.

Scene: A tiny belt of timber, not far from the spot where not long before, the Marais des Cygnes massacre awoke the people of south-eastern Kansas, and kindled among them the flames of civil war.

I

It is a night of storm and darkness. Huge trees are bending their might, and branches, strong or slender, are swaying and snapping under a fierce blast from the northward.

Night has closed in, but the ghostly light of a reluctant camp fire reveals a small group of men gathered about its blaze; and back of them, more in the shelter of the timber, a few wagons, – prairie schooners of the staunchest type – from which, now and then, the anxious countenance of a woman, or the eager, curious face of a child, peers out.

There has been rain, and fierce lightning, and loud-rolling thunder; but the clouds are breaking away, the rain has ceased: only the strong gusts of wind remain to make more restless the wakeful travellers, and rob the weary, nervous ones of their much needed sleep.

“Where’s Pearson?” queries a tall, strong man, who speaks as one having authority. “I have not seen him since the storm began.”

“Pearson?” says another, who is crouching over the flickering fire in the effort to light a stubby pipe. “By ginger! I haven’t thought of the fellow; why, he took his blanket and went up yonder,” indicating the direction by a jerk of the short pipe over a brawny shoulder – “before the storm, you know; said he was going to take a doze up there; he took a fancy to the place when we crossed here before.”

“But he has been down since?”

“Hain’t seen him. Good Lord, you don’t suppose the fellow’s been sleepin’ through all this?”

Parks, the captain of the party, stirs uneasily, and turns his face towards the wagons.

“There’s been some fearful lightnin’, sir,” breaks in another of the group. “‘Tain’t likely a man would sleep through all this, but – ”

He stops to stare after Parks, who, with a swift impulsive movement of the right hand, has turned upon his heel, and is moving toward the wagons.

“Mrs. Krutzer,” he calls, halting beside the one most remote from the camp fire.

“What is wanted?” answers a shrill, feminine voice.

“Is the little one with you?”

“Yes.” This time there is a ring of impatience in the voice.

“Have you seen Pearson since the storm?”

“My gracious! No.”

“How is Krutzer?”

“No better; the storm has doubled him up like a snake. Do you want him?”

“Not if he can’t walk.”

“Well he can’t; not a step.”

“Then good-night, Mrs. Krutzer.” And Parks returns to the men at the fire.

“There’s something wrong,” he says, with quiet gravity.

“Pearson has not been near the child since the storm. Get your lanterns, boys; we will go up the hill.”

It is only a slight elevation, with a pyramid of rocks, one or two wide-spreading trees; and a fringe of lesser growth at the summit.

A moment the lanterns flash about, while the men converse in low tones. Then one of them exclaims:

“Here he is! Pearson; Heavens, man, wake up!”

But the still form outstretched upon the water-soaked blanket, and doubly sheltered by the great rocks and bending branches, moves not in response to his call.

They crowd about him, and Walter Parks bends closer and lets the full light of the lantern he carries, fall upon the still face.

“Good God!”

He sinks upon one knee beside the prostrate form; he touches the face, the hands; looks closer yet, and says in a husky voice, as he puts the lantern down:

“He’s *dead*, boys!”

They cluster about that silent, central figure. One by one they touch it; curiously, reverently, tenderly or timidly, according as their various natures are.

Then a chorus of exclamations, low, fierce, excited.

“How was it?”

“Was he killed?”

“The storm – ”

“More likely, Injuns.”

“No, Bob, it wasn’t Indians,” says Parks mournfully, “for here’s his scalp.”

And he tenderly lays a brown hand upon the abundant locks of his dead comrade, sweeping them back from the forehead with a caressing movement.

Then suddenly, with a sharp exclamation that is almost a shriek, the hand drops to his side; he recoils, he bounds to his feet; then, turning his face to the rocks, he lets the darkness hide the look of unutterable horror that for a moment overspread it, changing at length to an expression of sternness and fixed resolve.

Meantime the others press closer about the dead man, and one of them, taking the place Parks has just vacated, bends down to peer into the still, set face.

“Boys, look!” he cries eagerly; “look here!” and he points to a tiny seared spot just above the left temple. “That’s a burn, and here, just above it, the hair is singed away. It’s lightning, boys.”

Again they peer into the dead face, and utter fresh exclamations of horror. Then Walter Parks, whose emotion they have scarcely noticed, turns toward them and looks closely at the seared spot upon the temple.

“Boys,” he asks, in slow, set tones, “did you, any of you, ever *see* a man killed by lightning?”

They all stare up at him, and no one answers.

“Because,” he proceeds, after a moment’s silence, “I never saw the effects of a lightning stroke, and don’t feel qualified to judge.”

“It’s lightnin’,” says the man called Bob, in a positive voice; “I’ve never seen a case, but I’ve read of ’em. It’s lightnin’, sure.”

“Of course it is,” breaks in another. “What else can it be? There ain’t an Injun about and besides – ”

A sharp flash of lightning, instantly followed by a loud peal of thunder, interrupts this speech, and, when they can hear his voice, Parks says, quietly:

“I suppose you are right, Menard. Now, let’s take him down to the wagons; quick, the rain is coming again.”

Slowly they move down the hill with their burden, Walter Parks supporting the head and shoulders of the dead. And as they go, one of them says:

“Shall I run ahead and tell the Krutzers?”

“No,” replies Parks, sternly; “we will take him to my wagon. I will inform Mrs. Krutzer.”

So they lay him in the wagon belonging to their leader, and before they leave him there Parks does a strange thing. He takes off the oil-skin cap from his own head and pulls it tight upon the head of the dead man. Then he strides over to the wagon occupied by the Krutzers.

II

A flickering, sputtering candle, lights up the interior of a large canvas-covered wagon. On a narrow pallet across one side of the vehicle, a man tosses and groans, now and then turning his haggard face, and staring, blood-shot eyes, upon a woman who crouches near him, holding upon her knees a child of two summers, who slumbers peacefully through the storm, with its fair baby face upturned to the flickering candle. In the corner, opposite the woman, lies a boy of perhaps ten years, ragged, unkempt, and fast asleep.

A blaze of lightning and a rush of wind cause the man to cry out nervously, and then to exclaim, peevishly:

“Oh, I wish the morning would come; this is horrible!”

“Hush, Krutzer,” says the woman, in a low, hissing whisper; “you act like a fool.”

She bends forward and lays the sleeping child beside the dirty boy in the corner. Then she lifts her head and listens.

“Hush!” she whispers again; “they are astir outside; I hear them talking. Ah! some one is coming.”

“Mrs. Krutzer.”

It is the voice of Walter Parks, and this time the woman parts the tent flap and looks out.

“Is that you, Mr. Parks? I thought I heard voices out there. Is the storm doing any damage?”

“Not at present. Is Krutzer awake?”

She glances toward the form upon the pallet; it is shivering as with an ague. Then she says, unhesitatingly:

“Krutzer has been in such misery since this storm came up, that I’ve just given him morphine. He ain’t exactly asleep, but he’s stupid and flighty; get into the wagon, Mr. Parks, and see how he is for yourself. Poor man; this is the fifth day of his rheumatism, and he has not stood on his feet once in that time.”

The visitor hesitates for a moment, then drawing nearer and lowering his tone somewhat, he says:

“If Krutzer is in a bad state now, he had better not know what I have come to tell. Can he hear me as I speak?”

“No; not if you don’t raise your voice.”

“Pearson is dead, Mrs. Krutzer.”

She starts, gasps, and then, with her head protruding from the canvas, asks, huskily:

“How? when? who? – ”

“We found him up by the rocks, lying on his blanket – ”

“Killed?”

“Killed; yes.”

“How – how?” she almost gasps.

“There is a burn upon his head. Menard says it was a stroke of lightning.”

“Oh,” she sighs, and sinks back in the wagon, turning her head to look at the form upon the pallet.

“Mrs. Krutzer.”

She leans toward him again and listens mutely.

“We – Menard, Joe Blakesly, and myself – will watch to-night with the body. We know very little about Pearson, and the little one; what can you tell us?”

“Not much;” clasping and unclasping her hands nervously. “It was like this: Pearson joined our train just before we crossed Bear Creek – beyond the reserve, you know. That was three weeks before we left the others, to join your train. The child was ailing at the time, and so Pearson put it in my

charge, most of the other women having more children than I to take care of. I liked the little thing, and it did not seem a trouble to me; so after a while Pearson offered to pay me, if I would look after it until we struck God's country. But I would not let him pay me, for the baby seems like my own."

"And *now*, Mrs. Krutzer?"

"I am coming to that. Pearson told us, at the first, that the little girl was not his; that its father was a miner back among the mountains. Its mother was dead, and the father, who was an old friend of Pearson's, had put it in his care, to be taken to New York, where its relatives live. Pearson was obliged to quit mining, you know, on account of his health."

"Yes; do you know the address of the child's friends?"

"Yes; it's an aunt, her father's sister. About two weeks ago – I think Pearson must have had a presentiment or something of the kind – he came to me, and gave me a letter and a package, saying that if anything happened to him during the trip, he wanted me to see the little girl safely in the hands of her relatives. The letter was from the baby's father, and the packet contained the address of the New York people, and enough money to pay my expenses after I leave the wagon train. I promised Pearson that I would take care of the child and put her safe in her aunt's hands, and so I will – but, Oh, dear! I never expected to be obliged to do it."

A hollow groan breaks upon her speech; the man upon the pallet is writhing as if in intensest agony. The woman makes a signal of dismissal, and drops the canvas curtain.

Walter Parks hesitates a moment, and then, as a second groan greets his ear, turns and strides away.

III

The clouds hang overhead like a murky canopy. The wind is sighing itself to sleep. The rain has ceased, but large drops drip dismally from the great branches that lately sheltered Arthur Pearson's death-bed.

Beside the rocks, three men are standing. It is three o'clock in the morning. Two of the three men bend down to examine something which the third, lighted by a lantern, has just taken from the wet ground at his feet.

It is a small thing to excite so much earnest scrutiny; only the half burned fragment of a lucifer match.

"Boys," says Walter Parks, solemnly, swinging the lantern upon his arm and carefully wrapping the bit of match in a paper as he speaks, "poor Pearson was never killed by lightning. That sear upon his forehead was made by the simple application of a burning match. *I've* seen men killed by lightning."

"But you said –"

"No matter what I said *then*, Joe; what I *now* say to you and Menard is *the truth*. You have promised to keep what I am about to tell you a secret, and to act according to my advice. Menard, Blakesly, *Arthur Pearson has been foully murdered!*"

"No!"

"Parks, you are mad!"

"You will believe the evidence of your own senses, boys. I am going to prove what I assert."

"But who? how? –"

"Who? – ah, that's the question! There are ten men of us; if the guilty party belongs to our train, we will ferret him out if possible. If we were to gather all our party here, and show them how poor Pearson met his death, the assassin, if he is among us, would be warned, and perhaps escape."

"True."

"Boys, I believe that the assassin *is* among us; but I have not the faintest suspicion as to his identity. We are ten men brought together by circumstances. We three have known each other back there in the mining camps. The others are acquaintances of the road; good fellows so far as we know them: but nine of us ten are innocent men; *one is a murderer!* Come, now, and let me prove what I am saying."

As men who feel themselves dreaming; silently, slowly, with anxious faces, they follow their leader to the wagon where the dead man lies alone.

"Get into the wagon, boys; here, at this end, and move softly."

It is done and the three men crouch close together about the body of the dead.

"Hold the lantern, Joe. There, Menard lift his head."

Silently, wondering, they obey him.

Then Walter Parks removes the cap from the lifeless head, and shudderingly parts away the thick hair from about the crown.

"Hold the lantern closer, Joe. Look, both of you; do you see *that?*"

They bend closer; the lantern's ray strikes upon something tiny and bright.

"My God!" cries Joe Blakesly, letting the lantern fall and turning away his face.

"Parks, what — *what* is it?"

"A *nail!* Touch it, boys; see the hellish cleverness of the crime; think what the criminal must be, to drive that nail home with one blow while poor Pearson lay sleeping, and then to rearrange the thick hair so skillfully. That was before the storm, I feel sure. If we had found him sooner, there might have been no mark upon his forehead. Then we, in our ignorance, would have called it heart disease, and poor Pearson would have had no avenger. After the storm, the cunning villain crept back, struck

a match, and applied it to his victim's temple. And but for an accident, we would all have agreed that he was killed by a lightning-stroke."

Menard lays the head gently back upon the damp hay and asks, shudderingly:

"How did you discover it, Parks?"

"In examining the sear, you may remember, I brushed the hair away from the temple. As I ran my fingers through it, I touched – that."

They look from one to the other silently for a moment, and then Joe Blakesly says:

"Has he been robbed?"

"Let us see," Menard says, "he wore a money-belt, I know. Look for it, Parks."

Parks examines the body, and shakes his head.

"It's gone; has been cut away. The belt was worn next the flesh; the print of it is here plainly visible. The belt has been taken, and the clothing replaced!"

"What coolness! what cunning! Shall we ever run the fellow down, Parks?"

"Yes! Boys, you know why I am leaving the mountains. I am going home to England, to be near my father who must die soon. I am not a poor man; I shall some day be richer still. If *we* fail to find this murderer, I shall put the matter in the hands of the detectives, *and I will never give it up*. Arthur Pearson met his death while traveling for safety with a party which calls me its leader, and *I will be his avenger!* It may be in one year, or two, or twenty; it may take a fortune, and a lifetime; *but Arthur Pearson shall be avenged!*"

CHAPTER I. “STARS OF THE FORCE.”

“Yes, sir,” said Policeman No. 46, with an air of condescending courtesy, “this *is* the office.”

It is characteristic of the metropolitan policeman; he is not a man to occupy middle ground. If he is not gruffly discourteous, he is pretty certain to be found patronizingly polite.

Number 46 had just breakfasted heartily, and had swallowed a large schooner of beer at the expense of the bar keeper, so he beamed benignly upon the tall, brown-faced, grey-bearded stranger who had just asked, “Is this the office of the City Detective Agency?”

“This *is* the office, sir; up two flights and turn to your left.”

The stranger shifted his position slightly, glanced up and down the street, drew a step nearer the policeman, and asked:

“Is it a large force?”

“Well, I should say!”

“I suppose you know some of them pretty well?”

“Yes, *sir*; I know some of the best men of the lot.”

The stranger jingled some loose coin in his pocket, and seemed to have forgotten his interest in the detective force.

“Officer, where does a man go to get a good brandy cocktail?”

Policemen are not over bashful, and No. 46 smiled anew as he replied.

“Just wait a few minutes, and I’ll show you. I must stop that con – ”

The last syllable was lost to the stranger as 46 dashed off to wave his club before the eyes of an express-man, who was occupying too much space on the wrong side of the street. In a moment he was back again, and, as he approached, the stranger said:

“I’m a new-comer in the city, and want to see things. I take a sort of interest in the doings of the police, and in detectives especially. I’d like to have you point me out some of these chaps, officer. Oh, about that brandy cock-tail; you’ll join me, I hope?”

No. 46 consulted his watch.

“I’ll join you, sir. Yes sir; in ten minutes, if you’ll wait. There’s a capital place right here handy. And if you want to see *detectives*, just you stand here with me a while. Vernet and Stanhope went down to breakfast half an hour ago.”

“Vernet and Stanhope?”

““The Stars of the force, sir; a perfect matched team. Splendid fellows, too. They always spend their mornings at the office, when not ‘on the lay.’ They’ve been back in the city four or five days; hard workers, those boys.”

“Young men, I suppose?”

“Well, yes, they’re young, but you can’t fool them much. A little under thirty, I should call Vernet; Stanhope is the younger of the two.”

“Americans?”

“Stanhope is, an out-and-outer. Vernet’s got some French in him.”

“Um, yes; well, I’d like to take a look at them, after we refresh ourselves.”

“They won’t be back for a good half hour; there’s no fear of missing them.”

Half an hour, and a brandy cock-tail, makes some men firm friends. When that period of time had elapsed, No. 46, more affable than ever, and the tall stranger, looking quite at his ease, stood again near the entrance to the office of the City Detective Agency.

Two men were coming down the street, walking and talking with the air of men on good terms with themselves and each other.

Both were young, well dressed, well-looking; but a more marked contrast never was seen.

One, the taller of the two, was dark and decidedly handsome, with black waving hair, dusky eyes, that were by turns solemn, tender, severe, and pathetic; “faultily faultless” features, that wore an habitual look of gravity and meditation; an erect, graceful carriage, and a demeanor dignified and somewhat reserved. Slow of speech and punctillious in the use of words, he was a man of tact and discretion; a man fitted to lead, and capable of ruling in stormy times. At first sight, people pronounced him “a handsome fellow;” after long acquaintance, they named him “a perfect gentleman.”

His companion was not quite so tall, of medium height, in fact, but muscular and well built. He walked with a springy, careless stride, carrying his head erect, and keeping his observant, twinkling, laughing brown eyes constantly employed noting everything around and about him, but noting all with an expression of careless unconcern that seemed to say, “all this is nothing to me, why should it be?” His hair, brown, soft, and silky, was cropped close to his head, displaying thus a well developed crown, and brow broad, high and full. The nose was too prominent for beauty, but the mouth and chin were magnificent features, of which a physiognomist would say: Here are courage and tenderness, firmness and loyalty. He was easy of manner – “off-hand,” would better express it; careless, and sometimes brusque in speech. At first sight one would call him decidedly plain; after a time spent in his society you voted him “a good looking fellow,” and “a queer fish.” And those who had thoroughly tested the quality of his friendship, vowed him a man to trust and to “tie to.”

“Here they come,” whispered No. 46; “those two fellows in grey.”

“Which is which?”

“To be sure. The taller is Van Vernet; the other Dick Stanhope.”

As they approached, Van Vernet touched his hat with a glance of courteous recognition. But Richard Stanhope merely nodded, with a careless, “how are you, Charlie?” And neither noted the eager, scrutinizing glance bent upon them, as they passed the grey-bearded stranger and ran lightly up the stairs. “You’re wanted in the Chief’s office, Mr. Vernet,” said the office boy as they entered; “And you too, I think, Mr. Stanhope.”

“Not both at once, stupid?”

“Um, ah; of course not. Now look here, Mr. Dick – ”

And Stanhope and the office boy promptly fell into pugilistic attitudes, the former saying, with a gay laugh:

“You first, Van, if the old man won’t let us ‘hunt in couples.’”

With the shadow of a smile upon his face, Van Vernet turned his back upon the two belligerents and entered the inner office.

“Ah, Vernet, good morning,” said his affable chieftain. “Are you ready for a bit of business?”

“Certainly, sir.”

“I don’t think it will be anything very deep, but the young fellow insisted upon having one of my best men; one who could be courteous, discreet, and a gentleman.”

Van Vernet, who had remained standing, hat in hand, before his chief, bowed deferentially, and continued silent.

“There are no instructions,” continued the Chief. “You are to go to this address – it’s a very aristocratic locality – and act under the gentleman’s orders. He wants to deal with you direct; the case is more delicate than difficult, I fancy. I am only interested in the success or failure of your work.”

Taking the card from his outstretched hand, Vernet read the address.

“A. Warburton.

No. 31 B – Place.”

“When shall I wait upon Mr. Warburton?”

“At once. Your entire time is at his disposal until the case is finished; then report to me.”

Vernet bowed again, turned to go, hesitated, turned back, and said:

“And the Raid?”

“Oh, that – I shall give Stanhope charge of that affair. Of course he would like your assistance, but he knows the ground, and I think will make the haul. However, if you are not occupied to-morrow night, you might join them here.”

“Thank you. I will do so if possible,” turning again to go.

“Send Stanhope in, Vernet. I must settle this business about the Raid.”

Opening the door softly, and closing it gently after him, Vernet approached his comrade, and laid a light hand upon his arm.

“Richard, you are wanted.”

“All right; are you off, Van?”

“Yes;” putting his hat upon his head.

“On a lay?”

“Yes.”

“Wish you good luck, old man; tra la.”

And Dick Stanhope bounced into the presence of his Chief with considerable noise and scant ceremony.

Number 46, who, with the stranger beside him, was slowly pacing his beat, lifted his eyes as Vernet emerged from the stairway.

“There comes Vernet, and alone. I’ll bet something he’s off on a case,” he said.

“Looks like it.”

“He looks more serious than usual; wonder if he’s got to work it without Stanhope.”

“Do they always pull together?”

“Not always; but they’ve done their biggest work together. When there’s a very knotty case, it’s given to Vernet *and* Stanhope; and they seldom fail.”

“Which acts as leader and is the best man of the two?”

“Well, sir, that’s a conundrum that no man can guess, not even the Chief. And I don’t believe any body ever will know, unless they fall out, and set up an opposition to each other. As for who leads, they both pull together; there’s no leader. I tell you what I don’t want to see two such splendid fellows fall out; they’ve worked in double harness a good while. But if the Chief up there wants to see what detectives *can* do, let him put those two fellows on opposite sides of a case; then he’d see a war of wits that would beat horse-racing.”

“Um!” said the stranger, consulting an English repeater, “it’s time for me to move on. Is this your regular beat, my friend? Ah! then we may meet again. Good morning, sir.”

“That’s a queer jockey,” muttered No. 46. “When he first came up, I made sure he was looking for the Agency – looking just for curiosity, I reckon.”

And the stranger, as he strolled down the street, communed thus with himself:

“So these two star detectives have never been rivals yet. The Chief has never been anxious to see what detectives *can* do, I suppose. This looks like *my* opportunity. Messrs. Vernet and Stanhope, *you shall have a chance to try your skill against each other*, and upon a desperate case: and the wit that wins need never work another.”

CHAPTER II. ODDLY EMPLOYED

While the stranger was thus communing with himself, and while Van Vernet was striding toward that fashionable quarter of the city which contained the splendid Warburton mansion, Richard Stanhope, perched upon one corner of a baize covered table, his hands clasped about one knee, his hat pushed far back upon his head, his whole air that of a man in the presence of a familiar spirit, and perfectly at his ease, was saying to his Chief:

“So you want me to put this business through *alone*? I don’t half like it.”

“You are equal to it, Dick.”

“I know that,” with a proud curve of the firm lips, “but I’m sure Van expected to be in this thing, and –”

“Vernet has another case in hand. I have given him all his time until it is finished, with the privilege of joining you here and assisting in the Raid to-morrow night, if he can do so without interfering with his other duties. You seem to fear to offend Vernet, Dick?”

“I *fear* no one, sir. But Van and I have pulled well together, and divided the honors equally. This Raid, if it succeeds, will be a big thing for the man, or men, engineering it. I know that Van has counted upon at least a share of the glory. I hate to see him lose the chance for it.”

“You are a generous friend, Dick, and Van may rejoice that you *are* his friend instead of his rival. Now, leaving friendship to take care of itself, do you feel that the *success* of the Raid depends upon Vernet’s assistance?”

“Perdition! *No*.”

“You know the ground?”

“Every inch of it!”

“And Van does not.”

“One pilot is enough.”

“You know the people?”

“Well, rather!”

“Do you doubt the success of the undertaking?”

“No, sir. I see only one chance for failure.”

“And that?”

“I have made this Raid a study. If anything occurs to prevent my leading the expedition, and you put another man at the head, it will fail.”

“Even if it be Vernet?”

“Even Vernet. Satan himself would fail in those alleys, unless he knew the ground.”

“And yet you would share your honors with Vernet for friendship’s sake? Dick, you are a queer fish! But why do you suggest a possibility of your absence?”

“Because,” sliding off the table and pulling his hat low over his eyes, “The Raid is thirty-six hours distant, and one never knows what may happen in thirty-six hours. Is there any thing else, sir?”

“Yes; I’ve a dainty bit of mystery for you. No blind alleys and thieves dens in *this*; it’s for to-morrow evening, too.”

Stanhope resumed his former position upon the corner of the table, pushed back his hat, and turned an attentive face to his Chief.

“Your Raid will not move until a little after midnight; this other business is for ten o’clock. You can be at liberty by eleven. You know Follingsbee, the lawyer?”

“By reputation; yes. Is *he* in the mystery?”

“He’s negotiating for a client; a lady.”

“A lady!” with a stare of dismay. “Why didn’t you turn her over to Van; you know he is just the man to deal with women, and I – ”

“You are afraid of a petticoat! I know; and I might have chosen Vernet, if the choice had been given me. But the lawyer asked for *you*.”

Stanhope groaned dismally.

“Besides, it’s best for you; you are better than Vernet at a feminine make up.”

“A feminine make up!”

“Yes. Here is the business: Mr. Follingsbee desires your services for a lady client; he took care to impress upon me that she *was* a lady in every sense of the word. This lady had desired the services of a detective, and he had recommended you.”

“Why I?”

“Never mind why; you are sufficiently vain at present, You have nothing on hand after the Raid, so I promised you to Follingsbee; he is an old friend of mine. To-morrow evening, at ten o’clock, you are to drive to Mr. Follingsbee’s residence in masquerade costume.”

“Good Lord!”

“In a feminine disguise of some sort. Mr. Follingsbee, also in costume, will join you, and together you will attend an up-town masquerade, you personating Mrs. Follingsbee, who will remain at home.”

“Phew! I’m getting interested.”

“At the masquerade you will meet your client, who will be introduced by Follingsbee. Now about your disguise: he wants to know your costume beforehand, in order to avoid any mistakes.”

“Let me think,” said Stanhope, musingly. “What’s Mrs. Follingsbee’s style?”

“A little above the medium. Follingsbee thinks, that, with considerable drapery, you can make up to look sufficiently like her.”

“Considerable drapery; then I have it. Last season, when Van and I were abroad, we attended a masquerade in Vienna, and I wore the costume of the Goddess of Liberty, in order to furnish a partner for Van. In hiring the costume, I, of course, deposited the price of it, and the next day we left the city so hurriedly that I had no opportunity to return it, so I brought it home with me. It’s a bang-up dress, and no one has seen it on this side of the water, except Van. How will it do?”

“Capitally; then I will tell Follingsbee to look for the Goddess of Liberty.”

“All right, sir. You are sure I won’t be detained later than eleven?”

“You have only to meet the lady, receive her instructions, and come away.”

“I hope I shall live through the ordeal,” rising once more and shaking himself like a water-spaniel, “but I’d rather face all the hosts of Rag Alley.”

And Richard Stanhope left the Agency to “overhaul” the innocent masquerade costume that held, in its white and crimson folds, the fate of its owner.

Leaving him thus employed, let us follow the footsteps of Van Vernet, and enter with him the stately portals of the home of the Warburtons.

Crossing a hall that is a marvel of antique richness, with its walls of russet, old gold, and Venetian red tints; its big claw-footed tables; its massive, open-faced clock, with huge weights a-swing below; its statuettes and its bass-reliefs, we pass under a rich *portierie*, and hear the liveried footman say, evidently having been instructed:

“This is Mr. Warburton’s study, sir; I will take up your name.”

Van Vernet gazes about him, marking the gorgeous richness of the room. A study! There are massive book-cases filled with choicest lore; cabinets containing all that is curious, antique, rare, beautiful, and costly; there are plaques and bronzes; there is a mantle laden with costly bric-a-brac; a grand old-fashioned fire-place and fender; there are divans and easy chairs; rich draperies on wall and at windows, and all in the rarest tints of olive, crimson, and bronze.

Van Vernet looks about him and says to himself:

“This is a room after my own heart. Mr. Warburton, of Warburton Place, must be a sybarite, and should be a happy man. Ah, he is coming.”

But it is not Mr. Warburton who enters. It is a colored valet, sleek, smiling, obsequious, who bears in his hand a gilded salver, with a letter upon it, and upon his arm a parcel wrapped in black silk.

“You are Mr. Vernet?” queries this personage, as if in doubt.

“Yes.”

“Then this letter is for you.”

And the valet bows low, and extends the salver, adding softly:

“I am Mr. Warburton’s body servant.”

Looking somewhat surprised, as well as annoyed, Van Vernet takes up the letter, breaks the seal and reads:

Sir:

My business with you is of so delicate a nature that it is best, for all concerned, to keep our identity a secret, for a time at least. Your investigation involves the fair fame of a lady and the honor of a stainless name.

Come to this house to-morrow night, in the costume which I shall send for your use. The enclosed card will admit you. My valet will show you the domino by which you will recognize me. This will enable me to instruct you fully, and to point out to you the persons in whom you are to take an interest. This letter you will please destroy in the presence of my valet.

A. W.

After reading this strange note, Van Vernet stands so long, silently pondering, that the servant makes a restless movement. Then the detective says, with a touch of imperiousness.

“Give me a match.”

It is proffered him in silence, and in silence he turns to the grate, applies the match to the letter, and lets it fall from his fingers to the fire-place, where it lies a charred fragment that crumbles to ashes at a touch.

The dark servant watches the proceeding in grave silence until Vernet turns to him, saying:

“Now, the domino.”

Then he rapidly takes from the sable wrapper a domino of black and scarlet, and exhibits it to the detective, who examines it critically for a moment and then says brusquely:

“That will do; tell your master that I will follow his instructions —*to the letter*.”

As the stately door swings shut after his exit, Van Vernet turns and glances up at the name upon the door-plate, and, as he sets his foot upon the pavement, he mutters:

“A. Warburton is my employer; A. Warburton is the name upon the door: I see! My services are wanted by the master of this mansion: he asks to deal with a *gentleman*, and – leaves him to negotiate with a colored servant! There’s a lady in the case, and ‘an honorable name at stake;’ Ah! Mr. A. Warburton, the day may come when you will wear no domino in my presence; when you will send no servant to negotiate with Van Vernet!”

CHAPTER III.

THE EFFECT OF AN ADVERTISEMENT

A rickety two-story frame building, in one of the worst quarters of the city.

It is black with age, and guiltless of paint, but a careful observer would note that the door is newer than the dwelling, and that it is remarkably solid, considering the tumble-down aspect of the structure it guards. The windows of the lower story are also new and substantial, such of them as serve for windows; but one would note that the two immediately facing the street are boarded up, and so tightly that not one ray of light can penetrate from without, nor shine from within.

The upper portion of the dwelling, however, has nothing of newness about it. The windows are almost without glass, but they bristle with rags and straw, while the dilapidated appearance of the roof indicates that this floor is given over to the rats and the rain.

Entering at the stout front door, we find a large room, bare and comfortless. There is a small stove, the most battered and rusty of its kind; two rickety chairs, and a high wooden stool; a shelf that supports a tin cup, a black bottle, and a tallow candle; a sturdy legged deal table, and a scrap of rag carpet, carefully outspread in the middle of the floor.

An open door, in one corner, discloses the way to the rat-haunted second floor. There are some dirty bundles and a pile of rags just behind the door; some pieces of rusty old iron are lying near a rear entrance, and a dismal-looking old man is seated on a pallet in one corner.

This is what would be noted by the casual observer, and this is all. But the old man and his dwelling are worthy of closer inspection.

He is small and lean, with narrow, stooping shoulders; a sallow, pinched face, upon which rests, by turns, a fawning leer, which is intended, doubtless, for the blandest of smiles, a look of craftiness and greed, a scowl, or a sneer. His hair, which has been in past years of a decided carrot color, is now plentifully streaked with gray, and evidently there is little affinity between the stubby locks and a comb. He is dirty, ragged, unshaven; and his age may be any where between fifty and seventy.

At the sound of a knock upon the outer door, he sits erect upon his pallet, a look of wild terror in his face: then, recovering himself, he rises slowly and creeps softly toward the door. Wearing now his look of cunning, he removes from a side panel a small pin, that is nicely fitted and comes out noiselessly, and peeps through the aperture thus made.

Then, with an exclamation of annoyance, he replaces the pin and hurriedly opens the door.

The woman who enters is a fitting mate for him, save that in height and breadth, she is his superior; old and ugly, unkempt and dirty, with a face expressive of quite as much of cunning and greed, and more of boldness and resolution, than his possesses.

"It's you, is it?" says the man, testily. "What has brought you back? and empty-handed I'll be bound."

The old woman crossed the floor, seated herself in the most reliable chair, and turning her face toward her companion said, sharply:

"You're an old fool!"

Not at all discomposed by this familiar announcement, the man closed and barred the door, and then approached the woman, who was taking from her pocket a crumpled newspaper.

"What have you got there?"

"You wait," significantly, "and don't tell *me* that I come empty-handed."

"Ah! you don't mean –"

Again the look of terror crossed his face, and he left the sentence unfinished.

“Old man, you *are* a fool! Now, listen: Nance and I had got our bags nearly filled, when I found this,” striking the paper with her forefinger. “It blew right under my feet, around a corner. It’s the morning paper.”

“Well, well!”

“Oh, you’ll hear it soon enough. It’s the morning paper, and you know *I* always read the papers, when I can find ’em, although, since you lost the few brains you was born with, you never look at one.”

“Umph!”

“Well, I looked at this paper, and see what I found!”

She held the paper toward him, and pointed to a paragraph among the advertisements.

Wanted. Information of any sort concerning one Arthur Pearson, who left the mining country with a child in his charge, twenty years ago. Information concerning said child, Lea Ainsworth, or any of her relatives. Compensation for any trouble or time. Address,
O. E. Mears, Atty,
Melbourne,
Australia.

The paper fluttered from the man’s nerveless fingers, but the woman caught it as it fell.

“Oh, Lord!” he gasped, the drops of perspiration standing out upon his brow, “oh, Lord! it has come at last.”

“What has come, you old fool!”

“Everything; ruin! ruin!”

“We’re a pretty looking pair to talk of *ruin*,” giving a contemptuous glance at her surroundings. “Stop looking so like a scared idiot, and listen to me.”

“Oh, I’m listening!” sinking down upon the pallet in a dismal huddle; “go on.”

The woman crossed over and sat down beside him.

“Now, look here; suppose the worst comes, how far away is it? How long will it take to get a letter to Australia, and an answer or a journey back?”

“Oh, I don’t know.”

“Well, it’ll take all the time *we* want. But who is there to answer that advertisement?”

“Oh, dear!”

“You miserable coward! *She* wouldn’t know what it meant if she saw it.”

“No.”

“Arthur Pearson – ”

“Oh, *don’t*!”

“Arthur Pearson has not been heard of in twenty years.”

The old man shuddered, and drew a long sighing breath.

“Walter Parks, after all his big talk, never came back from England,” she hurried on. “Menard is dead; and Joe Blakesley is in California. The rest are dead, or scattered south and west. There are none of the train to be found here, except – except the Krutzers; and who can identify *them* after twenty years?”

“I shall never feel safe again.”

“Yes, you will. You always feel safe when the dollars jingle in your pockets, although it’s precious little good they bring you.”

“But *her* money is already gone.”

“Her husband has a full purse.”

“But how – ”

“Oh, I see the way clear enough. It’s only half the work of the other job, and double the money.”

“The money! Ah! how do you think to get it?”

“Honestly, this time; honestly, old man. It shall come to us *as a reward!*”

Drawing nearer still to her hesitating partner, the woman began to whisper rapidly, gesticulating fiercely now and then, while the old man listened in amazement, admiration, doubt, and fear; asking eager questions, and feeling his way cautiously toward conviction.

When the argument was ended, he said, slowly:

“I shall never feel safe until it’s over, and we are away from this place. When can you do – the job?”

“To-morrow night.”

“To-morrow night!”

“Yes; it’s the very time of times. To-morrow night it shall be.”

“It’s a big risk! We will have to bluff the detectives, old woman.”

“A fig for the detectives! They will have a cold scent; besides – we have dodged detectives before.”

CHAPTER IV. ENLISTED AGAINST EACH OTHER

It is early in the evening of the day that has witnessed the events recorded in the preceding chapters, and the Chief of the detectives is sitting in his easiest office chair, listening attentively to the words that fall from the lips of a tall, bronzed, gray-bearded man who sits opposite him, talking fast and earnestly.

He has been thus talking, and the Chief thus listening, for more than an hour, and the story is just reaching its conclusion when the stranger says:

"There, sir, you have the entire case, so far as I know it. What I ask is something unusual, but what I offer, in compensation, is something unusual too."

"A queer case, I should say," returns the Chief, half to himself; "and a difficult one. Twenty years ago a man was murdered – killed by a nail driven into his skull. Detectives have hunted for the murderer, singly, in twos and threes. English experts have crossed the ocean to unravel the mystery and it remains a mystery still. And now, when the secret is twenty years old, and the assassin dead and buried, perhaps, you come and ask me for my two best men, – men who have worked together as brothers – and ask me to set their skill *against each other*, in a struggle, which, if it ends as you desire, will mean victory and fortune for the one, defeat and loss of prestige for the other."

"There is no such thing as loss of prestige. A man may bow to a superior and yet retain his own skill. Plainly, I have come to you as an honorable man should. I wish to deal with these men through you, if possible. But they are free agents. What you refuse to do for me, I must do for myself; and I tell you plainly, that if money can purchase their services, I will have Van Vernet and Richard Stanhope to work this case."

"You are frank, sir! But I have observed that, in relating your story, you have been careful to avoid giving either your own name or the name of the murdered man."

"As I shall continue to do until I state the case to the two detectives, *after* they have enlisted in my service."

The Chief ponders for a time and then says:

"Now, hear my proposition: you are justified in believing that, if there *is* a bottom to this ancient mystery, Vernet and Stanhope, singly or together, are the men to find it. That is my belief also. As for your idea of putting them on their mettle, by offering so magnificent a reward to the man who succeeds, *that* is not bad – for you and the man who wins. Vernet and Stanhope have, this very day, taken in hand two cases, – working separately, understand. If you will wait in patience until these cases are finished, you shall have the men from this office, – if they will accept the case."

"Put my proposition before the two men at once. When I know that I shall have their services, I can wait in patience until their duty of the present is done."

"Then," said the Chief rising, "the question can soon be settled; Vernet is in the outer office; Stanhope will soon be here. You will find the evening papers upon that desk; try and entertain yourself while I put your case before Vernet."

Ten minutes later, Van Vernet was standing before his Chief, listening with bent head, compressed lip, and glowing cheek, to the story of the man who was murdered twenty years before, and to the splendid proposal of the tall stranger. When it was all told, and the Chief paused for a reply, the young detective moved a pace nearer and said with decision:

"Tell him that I accept the proposition. A man can't afford to lose so splendid a chance for friendship's sake. Besides," his eyes darkening and his mouth twitching convulsively, "it's time for Dick and I to find out *who is the better man!*"

Returning to the inner office, the Chief of the force found his strange patron walking fiercely up and down the room, with a newspaper grasped firmly in his hand, and on his countenance traces of agitation.

“Look!” he cried, approaching and forcing the paper upon the astonished Chief; “see what a moment of waiting has brought me!”

And he pointed to a paragraph beginning:

WANTED. INFORMATION OF ANY SORT CONCERNING one Arthur Pearson, etc. etc.

“An advertisement, I see;” said the Chief. “But I fail to understand why it should thus excite you.”

“A moment ago it was my intention to keep the identity of the murdered man a secret. This,” indicating the paper by a quick gesture, “changes the face of affairs. After twenty years, some one inquires after Arthur Pearson – ”

“Then Arthur Pearson is – ”

“The man who was murdered near the Marais des Cygnes!”

“And the child?”

“I never knew her name until now. No doubt it is the little girl that was in Pearson’s care.”

“What became of the child?”

“I never knew.”

“And how does this discovery affect your movements?”

“I will tell you; but, first, you saw Vernet?”

“Yes; and he accepts.”

“Good! That notice was inserted either by some friend of Pearson’s, or by the child’s father, John Ainsworth.”

“What do you know of him?”

“Nothing; I never met him. But, as soon as you have seen Stanhope, and I am sure that these two sharp fellows are prepared to hunt down poor Pearson’s assassins, I *will* meet him, if the notice is his, for I am going to Australia.”

“Ah!”

“Yes; I can do no good here. To-morrow morning, business will take me out of the city. When I return, in two days, let me have Stanhope’s answer.”

When Richard Stanhope appeared at the office that night a little later than usual, the story of Arthur Pearson and his mysterious death was related for the third time that day, and the strange and munificent offer of the stranger, for the second time rehearsed by the Chief.

“What do you think of it, my boy? Are you anxious to try for a fortune?”

“No, thank you.”

It was said as coolly as if he were declining a bad cigar.

“Consider, Dick.”

“There is no need. Van and I have pulled together too long to let a mere matter of money come between us. *He* would never accept such a proposition.”

The Chief bit his lip and remained silent.

“Or if he did,” went on Stanhope, “he would not work against me. Tell your patron that *with* Van Vernet I will undertake the case. He may make Van his chief, and I will gladly assist. *Without* Van as my rival, I will work it alone; but *against* him, as his rival for honors and lucre, *never!*”

The Chief slowly arose, and resting his hands upon the shoulders of the younger man, looked in his face with fatherly pride.

“Dick, you’re a splendid fellow, and a shrewd detective,” he said, “but you have a weakness. You study strangers, but you trust your friends with absolute blindness. Van is ambitious.”

“So am I.”

“He loves money.”

“A little too well, I admit.”

“If he should accept this offer?”

“But he won’t.”

“If he *should*,” persisted the Chief.

“If such a thing were possible, – if, without a friendly consultation, and a fair and square send off, he should take up the cudgel against me, then – ”

“Then, Dick?”

Richard Stanhope’s eyes flashed, and his mouth set itself in firm lines.

“*Then*,” he said, “I would measure my strength against his as a detective; but always as a friend, and never to his injury!”

“And, Dick, if, in the thick of the strife, Van forgets his friendship for you and becomes your enemy?”

“Then, as I am only human, I should be his enemy too. But that will not happen.”

“I hope not; I hope not, my boy. But – Van Vernet has already accepted the stranger’s proposition.”

Stanhope leaped to his feet.

“What!” he cried, “has Van *agreed* to work against me – without a word to me – and so soon!”

His lips trembled now, and his eyes searched those of his Chief with the eager, inquiring look of a grieved child.

“It is as I say, Stanhope.”

“Then,” and he threw back his head and instantly resumed his usual look of careless indifference, “tell your patron, whoever he may be, that *I am his man*, for one year, or for twenty!”

CHAPTER V. “STANHOPE’S FIRST TRICK.”

Van Vernet and Richard Stanhope had been brother detectives during the entire term of their professional career.

Entering the Agency when mere striplings, they had at once formed a friendship that had been strong and lasting. Their very differences of disposition and habits made them the better fellow-workmen, and the *role* most difficult for one was sure to be found the easier part for the other to play.

They had been a strong combination, and the Chief of the detectives wasted some time in pondering the question: what would be the result, when their skill and courage stood arrayed against each other?

Meantime, Richard Stanhope, wasting no thought upon the matter, hastened from the presence of his Chief to his own quarters.

“It’s my last night,” he muttered, as he inserted his key in the lock, “and I’ll just take one more look at the slums. I don’t want to lose one bird from that flock.”

Half an hour later, there sallied forth from the door where Stanhope had entered, a roughly-dressed, swaggering, villainous-looking fellow, who bore about with him the strongly defined odors of tobacco and bad whiskey.

This individual, armed with a black liquor flask, two revolvers, a blood-thirsty-looking dirk, a pair of brass knuckles, and a quantity of plug tobacco, took his way through the streets, avoiding the more popular and respectable thoroughfares, and gradually approaching that portion of the city almost entirely given over to the worst of the bad, – a network of short streets and narrow alleys, as intricate as the maze, and as dangerous to the unwary as an African jungle.

But the man who now entered these dismal streets walked with the manner of one familiar with their sights and sounds. Moving along with an air of stolid indifference to what was before and about him, he arrived at a rickety building, somewhat larger than those surrounding it, the entrance to which was reached by going down, instead of up, a flight of stone steps. This entrance was feebly illuminated by a lantern hung against the doorway, and by a few stray gleams of light that shone out from the rents in the ragged curtains.

Pushing open the door, our visitor found himself in a large room with sanded floor, a counter or bar, and five or six tables, about which a number of men were lounging, – some at cards, some drinking, and some conversing in the queer jargon called thieves’ slang, and which is as Greek to the unenlightened.

The buzz of conversation almost ceased as the door opened, but was immediately resumed when the new comer came forward toward the light.

“Is that you, Cull?” called the man behind the bar. “You’ve been keepin’ scarce of late.”

The man addressed as “Cull” laughed discordantly.

“I’ve been visitin’ in the country,” he returned, with a knowing wink. “It’s good for my health this time o’ year. How’s business? You’ve got the hull deck on hand, I should say.”

“You better say! Things is boomin’; nearly all of the old uns are in.”

“Well, spread out the drinks, Pap, I’m tolerably flush. Boys, come up, and if I don’t know any of ye we’ll be interduced.”

Almost instantly a dozen men were flocking about the bar, some eager to grasp the hand of the liberal last arrival, and others paying their undivided attention to the bar keeper’s cheerful command:

“Nominate yer dose, gentlemen.”

While the party, glasses in hand, were putting themselves *en rapport*, the door again opened, and now the hush that fell upon the assembled “gentlemen” was deeper and more lasting.

Evidently, the person who entered was a stranger to all in the Thieves' Tavern, for such the building was.

He was a young man, with a countenance half fierce, half desperate, wholly depraved. He was haggard, dirty, and ragged, having the look and the gait of a man who has travelled far and is footsore and weary. As he approached the group about the bar it was also evident that he was half intoxicated.

"Good evenin', sirs," he said with surly indifference. Then to the man behind the bar: "Mix us a cocktail, old Top, and strong."

While the bar keeper was deftly shaking up the desired drink, the men before the counter drew further away from the stranger, and some of them began a whispered conversation.

The last arrival eyed them with a sneer of contempt, and said to the bar keeper, as he gulped down his drink: "Your coves act like scared kites. Probably they ain't used to good society."

"See here, my friend," spoke a blustering fellow, advancing toward him, "you made a little mistake. This 'ere ain't a tramps' lodgin' house."

"Ain't it?" queried the stranger; "then what the Moses are *you* doin' here?"

"You'll swallow *that*, my hearty!"

"When?"

The stranger threw himself into an attitude of defence and glared defiance at his opponent.

"Wax him, Charley!"

"Let's fire him out!"

"Hold on gentlemen; fair play!"

"I'll give you one more chance," said the blusterer. "Ask my pardon and then mizzle instantly, or I'll have ye cut up in sections as sure as my name's Rummey Joe."

The half intoxicated man was no coward. Evidently he was ripe for a quarrel.

"I intend to stop here!" he cried, bringing his fist down upon the counter with a force that made it creak. "I'm goin' to stay right here till the old Nick comes to fetch me. And I'm goin' ter send your teeth down your big throat in three minutes."

There was a chorus of exclamations, a drawing of weapons, and a forward rush. Then sudden silence.

The man who had lately ordered drinks for the crowd, was standing between the combatants, one hand upon the breast of the last comer, the other grasping a pistol levelled just under the nose of Rummey Joe.

"Drop yer fist, boy! Put up that knife, Joe! Let's understand each other."

Then addressing the stranger, but keeping an eye upon Rummey Joe, he said:

"See here, my hearty, you don't quite take in the siteration. This is a sort of club house, not open to the general public. If you want to hang out here, you must show your credentials."

The stranger hesitated a moment, and then, without so much as a glance at his antagonist, said:

"*Your* racket is fair enough. I know where I am, and ye've all got a right to see my colors. I'll show ye my hand, and then" – with a baleful glare at Rummey Joe – "I'll settle with *that* blackguard."

Advancing to one of the tables, he deliberately lifted his foot and, resting it upon the table top, rolled up the leg of his trousers, and pulled down a dirty stocking over his low shoe.

"There's my passport, gentlemen."

They crowded about him and gazed upon the naked ankle, that bore the imprint of a broad band, sure indication that the limb had recently been decorated with a ball and chain.

"And now," said the ex-convict, turning fiercely, "I'll teach you the kind of a tramp I am, Mr. Rummey Joe!"

Before a hand or voice could be raised to prevent it, the two men had grappled, and were struggling fiercely for the mastery.

"Give them a show, boys!" some one said.

The crowd drew back and watched the combat; watched with unconcern until they saw their comrade, Rummey Joe, weakening in the grasp of his antagonist; until knives flashed in the hand of each, and fierce blows were struck on both sides. Then, when Rummey Joe, uttering a shriek of pain, went down underneath the knife of the victor, there was a roar and a rush, and the man who had conquered their favorite was borne down by half a dozen strong arms, menaced by as many sharp, glittering knives.

But again the scene shifted.

An agile form was bounding about among them; blows fell swift as rain; there was a lull in the combat, and when the wildly struggling figures, some scattered upon the floor, some thrown back upon each other, recovered from their consternation, they saw that the convict had struggled up upon one elbow, while, directly astride of his prostrate body, stood the man who had asked for his credentials, fierce contempt in his face, and, in either hand, a heavy six shooter.

“Don’t pull, boys, I’ve got the drop on ye! Cowards, to tackle a single man, six of ye!”

“By Heavens, he’s killed Rummey!”

“No matter; it was a fair fight, and Rummey at the bottom of the blame.”

“All the same he’ll never kill a pal of ours, and live to tell it! Stand off, Cully Devens!”

“*No, sir!* I am going to take this wounded man out of this without another scratch, if I have to send every mother’s son of you to perdition.”

His voice rang out clear and commanding. In the might of his wrath, he had forgotten the language of Cully Devens and spoken as a man to cowards.

The effect was electrical.

From among the men standing at bay, one sprang forward, crying:

“Boys, here’s a traitor amongst us! Who are ye, ye sneak, that has played yerself fer Cully Devens?”

The lithe body bent slightly forward, a low laugh crossed the lips of the bogus Cully, the brown eyes lighted up, and flashed in the eyes of the men arrayed against him. Then came the answer, coolly, as if the announcement were scarcely worth making:

“Richard Stanhope is my name, and I’ve got a trump here for every trick you can show me. Step up, boys, don’t be bashful!”

CHAPTER VI.

STANHOPE'S HUMANITY

"Richard Stanhope is my name, and I've got a trump here for every trick you can show me. Step up, boys, don't be bashful!"

Momentous silence followed this announcement, while the *habitués* of the Thieves' Tavern glanced into each others' faces in consternation.

An ordinary meddler, however much his courage and skill, would have met with summary chastisement; but *Dick Stanhope!*

Not a man among them but knew the result of an attack upon him. Bullets swift and sure, in the brains or hearts of some; certain vengeance, sooner or later, upon all.

To avoid, on all possible occasions, an open encounter with an officer of the law, is the natural instinct of the crook. Besides, Stanhope was never off his guard; his presence, alone among them, was sure indication that *they* were in more danger than he.

So reasoned the astonished scoundrels, instantly, instinctively.

"Look here, boys," Stanhope's cool voice broke in upon their silence; "I'm here on a little private business which need not concern you, unless you make me trouble. This man," nodding down at the prostrate ex-convict, "is my game. I'm going to take him out of this, and if you raise a hand to prevent it, or take a step to follow me, you'll find yourselves detained for a long stretch."

He threw back his head and gave a long, low whistle.

"Hear that, my good sirs. That's a note of preparation. One more such will bring you into close quarters. If you are not back at those tables, every man of you, inside of two minutes, I'll give the second call."

Some moved with agility, some reluctantly, some sullenly; but they all obeyed him.

"Now, Pap, come out and help me lift this fellow. Are you badly hurt, my man?"

The wounded man groaned and permitted them to lift him to his feet.

"He can walk, I think," went on Stanhope, in a brisk, business-like way. "Lean on me, my lad." Then, turning to the bar keeper and thrusting some money into his hand: "Give these fellows another round of drinks, Pap. Boys, enjoy yourselves; ta-ta."

And without once glancing back at them he half led, half supported, the wounded man out from the bar-room, up the dirty stone steps, and into the dirtier street.

"Boys," said the bar keeper as he distributed the drinks at Stanhope's expense, "you done a sensible thing when you let up on Dick Stanhope. He's got the alley lined with peelers and don't you forget it."

For a little way Stanhope led his man in silence. Then the rescued ex-convict made a sudden convulsive movement, gathered himself for a mighty effort, broke from the supporting grasp of the detective, and fled away down the dark street.

Down one block and half across the next he ran manfully. Then he reeled, staggered wildly from side to side, threw up his arms, and fell heavily upon his face.

"I knew you'd bring yourself down," said Stanhope, coming up behind him. "You should not treat a man as an enemy, sir, until he's proven himself such."

He lifted the prostrate man, turning him easily, and rested the fallen head upon his knee.

"Can you swallow a little?" pressing a flask of brandy to the lips of the ex-convict.

The man gasped and feebly swallowed a little of the liquor.

"There," laying down the flask, "are your wounds bleeding?"

The wounded man groaned, and then whispered feebly:

"I'm done for – I think – are you – an officer?"

“Yes.”

“Af – after me?”

“No.”

“Do – do you – know – ”

“Do I know who you are? Not exactly, but I take you to be one of the convicts who broke jail last week.”

The man made a convulsive movement, and then, battling for breath as he spoke, wailed out:

“Listen – you want to take me back to prison – there is a reward – of course. If you only knew – when I was a boy – on the western prairies – free, free. Then here in the city – driven to beg – to steal to – . Oh! *don't* take me back to die in prison! You don't know the horror of it!”

A look of pitying tenderness lighted the face bent above the dying man.

“Poor fellow!” said Stanhope softly. “I am an officer of the law, but I am also human. If you recover, I must do my duty: if you must die, you shall not die in prison.”

“I shall die,” said the man, in a hoarse whisper; “I know I shall die – die.”

His head pressed more heavily against Stanhope's knee; he seemed a heavier weight upon his arm. Bending still lower, the detective listened for his breathing, passed his hand over the limp fingers and clammy face. Then he gathered the form, that was more than his own weight, in his muscular arms, and bore it away through the darkness, muttering, as he went:

“That *was* a splendid stand-off! What would those fellows say, if they knew that Dick Stanhope, single-handed and alone, had walked their alleys in safety, and bluffed their entire gang!”

CHAPTER VII. HOW A MASQUERADE BEGAN

A crush of carriages about a stately doorway; a flitting of gorgeous, mysterious, grotesque and dainty figures through the broad, open portal; a glow of lights; a gleaming of vivid color; a glory of rich blossoms; a crash of music; a bubble of joyous voices; beauty, hilarity, luxury everywhere.

It is the night of the great Warburton masquerade, the event of events in the social world. Archibald Warburton, the invalid millionaire, has opened his splendid doors, for the pleasure of his young and lovely wife, to receive the friendly five hundred who adore her, and have crowned her queen of society.

He will neither receive, nor mingle with his wife's guests; he is too much an invalid, too confirmed a recluse for that. But his brother, Alan Warburton, younger by ten years, handsomer by all that constitutes manly beauty, will play the host in his stead – and do it royally, too, for Alan is a man of the world, a man of society, a refined, talented, aristocratic young man of leisure. Quite a Lion as well, for he has but recently returned from an extended European tour and is the “newest man” in town. And society dearly loves that which is new, especially when, with the newness, there is combined manly beauty – and wealth.

With such a host as handsome Alan Warburton, such a hostess as his brother's beautiful wife, and such an assistant as her sparkling, piquant little companion, Winnifred French, who could predict for this masquerade anything but the most joyous ending, the most pronounced success? Ah! our social riddles are hard to read.

Into this scene of revelry, while it is yet early, before the music has reached its wildest strains, and the dancing its giddiest whirl, comes a smart servant girl, leading by the hand a child of four or five summers, a dainty fair-haired creature. In her fairy costume of white satin with its silvery frost work and gleaming pearls; with her gossamer wings and glittering aureole of spun gold; her dainty wand and childish grace, she is the loveliest sight in the midst of all that loveliness, for no disfiguring mask hides the beautiful, eager face that gazes down the long vista of decorated drawing rooms, library, music room, boudoir, in wondering, half frightened expectation.

“They're beginning to dance down there,” says the maid, drawing the child toward a lofty archway, through which they can watch the swiftly whirling figures of the dancers. “Why, *do* come along, Miss Daisy; one would think your Pa's house was full of bears and wild-cats, to see your actions.”

But the child draws back and grasps fearfully at the skirts of her attendant.

“What makes 'em look so queer, Millie? Isn't you afraid?”

“Why no, Miss Daisy. There's nothing to be afraid of. See; all these funny-looking people are your papa's friends, and your new mamma's, and your uncle Alan's. Look, now,” – drawing the reluctant child forward, – “just look at them! There goes a – a *Turk*, I guess, and – ”

“What makes they all have black things on their faces, Millie?”

“Why, child, that's the fun of it all. If it wasn't for them masks everybody would know everybody else, and there wouldn't be no masquerade.”

“No what?”

“No *masquerade*, child. Now look at that; there goes a pope, or a cardinal; and there, oh my! that must be a Gipsy – or an Injun.”

“A Gipsy or an Indian; well done, Millie, ha ha ha!”

At the sound of these words they turn swiftly. A tall masker, in a black and scarlet domino, is standing just behind them, and little Daisy utters one frightened cry and buries her face in Millie's drapery.

“Why, Daisy,” laughs the masker; “little Daisy, are you frightened? Come, this will never do.”

With a quick gesture he flings off the domino and removes the mask from his face, thus revealing a picturesque sailor’s costume, and a handsome face that bears, upon one cheek, the representation of a tattooed anchor.

While he is thus transforming himself, the outer door opens and admits a figure clad in soft flowing robes of scarlet and blue and white, with a mantle of stars about the stately shoulders, and the cap of Liberty upon the well-poised head. The entrance of the Goddess of Liberty is unnoticed by the group about the archway, and, after a swift glance at them, that august lady glides behind a screen which stands invitingly near the door, and, sinking upon a divan in the corner, seems intent upon the classic arrangement of her white and crimson draperies.

“Now look,” says Alan Warburton, flinging the discarded domino upon a chair; “look, Daisy, darling. Why, pet, you were afraid of your own uncle Alan.”

The little one peers at him from behind Millie’s skirts and then comes slowly forward.

“Why, uncle Alan, how funny you look, and – your face is dirty!”

“Oh! Daisy,” taking her up in his arms and smiling into her eyes; “you are a sadly uncultivated young person. My face is tattooed, for ‘I’m a sailor bold.’”

While uncle and niece are thus engaged in playful talk, and Millie is intently watching the dancers, they are again approached; this time by two ladies, – one in the flowing, glittering, gorgeous robes of Sunlight, the other in a dainty Carmen costume of scarlet and black and gold. Both ladies are masked, and, as they enter from an alcove in the rear of the room, they, too, approach unperceived. Seeing the group about the archway, one of them makes a signal of silence. They stop, and standing close together, wait.

“It just occurs to me, Millie,” says Alan Warburton, turning suddenly to the maid; “it just occurs to me to inquire how you came in charge of Miss Daisy here. Where is Miss Daisy’s maid?”

The girl throws back her head, with a gesture that causes every ribbon upon her cap to flutter, as she replies, with a look of defiance and an indignant sniff:

“Mrs. Warburton put Miss Daisy in my care, sir, and I don’t know *where* Miss Daisy’s maid may be.”

“Umph! well it seems to me that – ” He stops and looks at the child.

“That I ain’t the properest person to look after Miss Daisy, I ’spose you mean – ”

“Millie, you are growing impertinent.”

“Because I’m a poor girl that the *mistress* of this house took in out of kindness – ”

“Millie; *will* you stop!” and he puts little Daisy down with a gesture of impatience.

“I’m trying to do my duty,” goes on the irate damsel; “and Mrs. Warburton, *my* mistress, has given me my orders, sir, *consequently*– ”

“Oh! if Mrs. Warburton has issued such judicious orders,” and he takes up his mask and domino, “I retire from the field.”

“It’s time to stop them, Winnie,” says the lady in the garments of Sunlight, taking off her mask hastily. “Alan never could get on with a raw servant. I see war in Millie’s eyes.”

Then she comes forward, mask in hand, and followed by the laughing Carmen.

“Alan, you are in difficulty, I see,” laughing, in spite of her attempt at gravity. “Millie, I fear, is not quite up to your standard of silent perfection.”

“May I ask, Mrs. Warburton, if she is your ideal of a companion for this child?”

The tone is faintly tinged with scorn and sternness, and Leslie Warburton’s eyes cease to smile as she replies, with dignity:

“She is my servant, Mr. Warburton. We will not discuss her merits in her presence. I will relieve you of any further trouble on her account.”

“Where, may I ask, is Daisy’s own maid?”

“In her room, with a headache that unfits her for duty. Come here, Daisy.”

Up to this moment Alan Warburton has kept the hand of the child clasped in his own. He now releases it with evident reluctance, and the little fairy bounds toward her stepmother.

"Mamma, how lovely you look!" reaching up her arms to caress the head that bends toward her. "Mamma, take me with you where the music is."

"Have you been to Papa's room, Daisy? You know we must not let him feel lonely to-night."

"Exceeding thoughtfulness," mutters Alan Warburton to himself, as he turns to resume his domino. Then aloud, to his sister-in-law, he says:

"I have just visited my brother's room, Mrs. Warburton; he wished to see you for a moment, I believe. Daisy, will you come with me?"

He extends his hand to the child, who gives a willful toss of the head as she replies, clinging closer to her stepmother the while:

"No; I going to stay with my new mamma."

As Alan Warburton turns away, with a shade of annoyance upon his face, he meets the mirthful eyes of Carmen, and is greeted by a saucy sally.

"What a bear you can be, Alan, when you try your hand at domestic discipline. Put on your domino and your dignity once more. You look like a school boy who has just been whipped."

"Ah, Winnie," he says seriously, coming close to her side and seeking to look into the blue, mocking eyes, "no need for me to see *your* face, your sweet voice and your saucy words both betray you."

"Just as your bad temper has betrayed you! It's a pity you can't appreciate Millie, sir; but then your sense of the ridiculous is shockingly deficient. There goes a waltz," starting forward hastily.

"It's my waltz; wait, Winnie."

But the laughing girl is half way down the long drawing-room, and he hurries after, replacing his mask and pulling on his domino as he goes.

Then Leslie Warburton, with a sigh upon her lips, draws the child again toward her and says:

"You may wait here, Millie; I will take care of Daisy for a short time. And, Millie, remember in future when Mr. Warburton addresses you, that you are to answer him respectfully. Come, darling."

She turns toward the entrance, the child's hand clasped tightly in her own, and there, directly before her, stands a figure which she has longed, yet dreaded, to meet – the Goddess of Liberty.

With a gasp of surprise, and a heart throbbing with agitation, Leslie Warburton hurriedly replaces her mask and turns to Millie.

"Millie, on second thought, you may take Daisy to her papa's room, and tell him I will be there soon. Daisy, darling, go with Millie."

"But, Mamma, –"

"There, there, dear, go to papa now; mamma will come."

With many a reluctant, backward glance, Daisy suffers herself to be led away, and then the Goddess of Liberty advances and bows before the lady of the mansion.

"I am not mistaken," whispers that lady, glancing about her as if fearing an eavesdropper; "you are –"

"First," interrupts a mellow voice from behind the starry mask, "are *you* Mrs. Warburton?"

"Yes."

"Then I am Richard Stanhope."

CHAPTER VIII. VERNET “CALLS A TURN.”

Leslie Warburton had replaced her mask, but the face she concealed was engraven upon the memory of her *vis-a-vis*.

A pure pale face, with a firm chin; a rare red mouth, proud yet sensitive; a pair of brown tender eyes, with a touch of sadness in their depths; and a broad low brow, over which clustered thick waves of sunny auburn. She is slender and graceful, carrying her head proudly, and with inherent self-poise in gait and manner.

She glances about her once more, and then says, drawing still nearer the disguised detective:

“I have been looking for you, Mr. Stanhope, and we have met at a fortunate moment. Nearly all the guests have arrived, and everybody is dancing; we may hope for a few undisturbed moments now. You – you have no reason for thinking yourself watched, or your identity suspected, I hope?”

“None whatever, madam. Have *you* any fears of that sort?”

“No; none that are well grounded; I dislike secrecy, and the necessity for it; I suppose I am nervous. Mr. Stanhope,” with sudden appeal in her voice, “how much do you know concerning me, and my present business with you?”

“Very little. During my drive hither with Mr. Follingsbee, he told me something like this: He esteemed you very highly; he had known you for years; you desired the services of a detective; he had named me as available, and been authorized by you to secure my services. He said that he knew very little concerning the nature of your business with me, but believed that all that you did would be done wisely, discreetly, and from the best of motives. He pointed you out to me when we entered the house. That is all, madam.”

“Thank you. Mr. Follingsbee is, or was, the tried friend, as well as legal adviser, of my adopted father, Thomas Uliman, and I know him to be trustworthy. When he spoke of you, Mr. Stanhope, he knew that I desired, not only a skillful detective, but a true-hearted man; one who would hold a promise sacred, who would go no further than is required in the matter in hand, and who would respect an unhappy woman’s secret – should it become known to him.”

Her voice died in her throat, and Stanhope rustled his garments uneasily. Then she rallied and went on bravely:

“Mr. Follingsbee assured me that you were all I could desire.”

“Mr. Follingsbee does me an honor which I appreciate.”

“And so, Mr. Stanhope, I am about to trust you. Let us sit here, where we shall be unobserved, and tolerably secure from interruption.”

She turns toward the divan behind the screen and seats herself thereon, brushing aside her glittering drapery to afford the disguised detective a place beside her.

He hesitates a moment, then takes the proffered seat and says, almost brusquely:

“Madam, give me my instructions as rapidly as possible; the very walls have eyes sometimes, and – I must be away from here before midnight.”

“My instructions will be brief. I will state my case, and then answer any questions you find it necessary to ask.”

“I shall ask no needless questions, madam.”

“Then listen.” She nerves herself for a brave effort, and hurries on, her voice somewhat agitated in spite of herself. “For three months past I have been conscious that I am watched, followed, spied upon. I have been much annoyed by this *espionage*. I never drive or walk alone, without feeling that my shadow is not far away. I begin to fear to trust my servants, and to realize that I have an enemy. Mr. Stanhope, I want you to find out who my enemy is.”

Behind his starry mask, her listener smiled at this woman-like statement of the case. Then he said, tersely:

“You say that you are being spied upon. How do you know this?”

“At first by intuition, I think; a certain vague, uneasy consciousness of a strange, inharmonious presence near me. Being thus put on my guard and roused to watchfulness, I have contrived to see, on various occasions, the same figure dogging my steps.”

“Um! Did you know this figure?”

“No; it was strange to me, but always the same.”

“Then your spy is a blunderer. Let us try and sift this matter: A lady may be shadowed for numerous reasons; do you know why you are watched?”

“N – no,” hesitatingly.

“So,” thought the detective, “she is not quite frank, with me.” Then aloud: “Do you suspect any one?”

“No.”

“Madam, I must ask some personal questions. Please answer them frankly and truly, or not at all, and be sure that every question is necessary, every answer important.”

The lady bows her head, and he proceeds:

“First, then, have you a secret?”

She starts, turns her head away, and is silent.

The detective notes the movement, smiles again, and goes on:

“Let us advance a step; you *have* a secret.”

“Why – do you – say that?”

“Because you have yourself told me as much. We never feel that uneasy sense of *espionage*, so well described by you, madam, until we have something to conceal – the man who carries no purse, fears no robber. You have a secret. This has made you watchful, and, being watchful, you discover that you have – what? An enemy, or only a tormentor?”

“Both, perhaps,” she says sadly.

“My task, then, is to find this enemy. Mrs. Warburton, I shall not touch your secret; at the same time I warn you in this search it is likely to discover itself to me without my seeking. Rest assured that I shall respect it. First, then, you have a secret. Second, you have an enemy. Mrs. Warburton, I should ask fewer questions if I could see your face.”

Springing up suddenly, she tears off her mask, and standing before him says with proud fierceness:

“And why may you not see my face! There is no shame for my mask to conceal! I *have* a secret, true; but it is not of *my* making. It has been forced upon me. I am not an *intrigante*: I am a persecuted woman. I am not seeking it to conceal wrong doing, but to protect myself from those that wrong me.”

The words that begin so proudly, end in a sob, and, covering her face with her white, jeweled hands, Leslie Warburton turns and rests her head against the screen beside her.

Then impulsive, unconventional Dick Stanhope springs up, and, as if he were administering comfort to a sorrowing child, takes the two hands away from the tear-wet face, and holding them fast in his own, looks straight down into the brown eyes as he says:

“Dear lady, trust me! Even as I believe you, believe *me*, when I say that your confidence shall not be violated. Your secret shall be safe; shall remain yours. Your enemy shall become mine. If you cannot trust me, I cannot help you.”

“Oh! I do trust you, Mr. Stanhope; I *must*. Ask of me nothing, for I can tell you no more. To send for you was unwise, perhaps, but I have been so tormented by this spy upon my movements ... and I cannot fight in the dark. It was imprudent to bring you here to-night, but I dared not meet you elsewhere.”

There is a lull in the music and a hum of approaching voices. She hastily resumes her mask, and Stanhope says:

“We had better separate now, madam. Trust your case to me. I cannot remain here much longer, otherwise I might find a clue to-night, – important business calls me. After to-night my time is all yours, and be sure I shall find out your enemy.”

People are flocking in from the dancing-room. With a gesture of farewell, “Sunlight” flits out through the door just beside the screen, and a moment later, the Goddess of Liberty is sailing through the long drawing-rooms on the arm of a personage in the guise of Uncle Sam.

“What success, my friend?”

“It’s all right,” replies the Goddess of Liberty; “I have seen the lady.”

A moment more and her satin skirts trail across the toes of a tall fellow in the dress of a British officer, who is leaning against a vine-wreathed pillar, intently watching the crowd through his yellow mask. At sight of the Goddess of Liberty, he starts forward and a sharp exclamation crosses his lips.

“Shades of Moses,” he mutters to himself, “I can’t be mistaken; that *is* Dick Stanhope’s Vienna costume! Is that Dick inside it? It is! it must be! What is he doing? On a lay, or on a lark? Dick Stanhope is not given to this sort of frolic; I must find out what it means!”

And Van Vernet leaves his post of observation and follows slowly, keeping the unconscious Goddess of Liberty always in sight.

Passing through a net-work of vines, the British officer comes upon two people in earnest conversation. The one wears a scarlet and black domino, the other a coquettish Carmen costume.

“That black and red domino is my patron,” mutters the officer as he glides by unnoticed. “He does not see me and I do not wish to see *him* just at present.” A few steps farther and the British officer comes to a sudden halt.

“By Heavens!” he ejaculates, half aloud; “what a chance I see before me! It would be worth something to know what brought Dick Stanhope here to-night; it would be worth yet more to *keep* him here *until after midnight*. If I had an accomplice to detain *him* while I, myself, appear at the Agency in time, then the C – street Raid would move without him, the lead would be given to *me*. It’s worth trying for. It *shall* be done, and my patron in black and red shall help me.”

He turns, and only looks back to mutter:

“Go on, Dick Stanhope; this night shall begin the trial that, when ended, shall decide which of the two is the better man!”

And the British officer hurries straight on until he stands beside the black and scarlet domino.

CHAPTER IX.

“A FALSE MOVE IN THE GAME.”

Pretty, piquant Winnifred French was the staunch friend of Leslie Warburton.

When Winnie was the petted only daughter of “French, the rich merchant,” she and Leslie Uliman had been firm friends. When Leslie Uliman, the adopted daughter of the aristocratic Uliman’s, gave her hand in marriage to Archibald Warburton, a wealthy invalid and a widower with one child, Winnie was her first bridesmaid.

Time had swept away the fortune of French, the merchant, and death had robbed Leslie of her adopted parents, and then Winnifred French gladly accepted the position of salaried companion to her dearest friend.

Not long after, Alan Warburton had returned from abroad, and then had begun a queer complication.

For some reason known only to himself, Alan Warburton had chosen to dislike his beautiful sister-in-law, and he had conceived a violent admiration for Winnie, – an admiration which might have been returned, perhaps, had Winnie been less loyal in her friendship for Leslie. But, perceiving Alan’s dislike for her dearest friend, Winnie lost no opportunity for annoying him, and lavishing upon him her stinging sarcasms.

On her part, Leslie Warburton loved her companion with a strong sisterly affection. As for her feelings toward Alan Warburton, it would have been impossible to guess, from her manner, whether he was to her an object of love, hatred, or simple indifference.

When Winnie and Alan turned their backs upon the scene in the anteroom, and entered the dancing hall, the girl was in a particularly perverse mood.

“I shall not dance,” she said petulantly. “It’s too early and too warm,” and she entered a flowery alcove, and seated herself upon a couch overhung with vines.

“May I sit down, Winnie?”

“No.”

“Just for a moment’s chat.” And he seated himself as calmly as if he had received a gracious permission.

“You are angry with me again, Winnie. Is my sister-in-law always to come between us?”

She turned and her blue eyes flashed upon him.

“Once and for all,” she said sharply, “tell me why you hate Leslie so?”

“Tell *me* why she has poisoned your mind against me?” he retorted.

“*She!* Leslie Warburton! This goes beyond a joke, sir. Leslie Warburton *is* what Leslie Uliman was, a *lady*, in thought, word, and deed. Oh, I can read you, sir! Her crime, in your eyes, is that she has married your brother. Is she not a good and faithful wife; a tender, loving mother to little Daisy? You have hinted that she does not love her husband – by what right do you make the assertion? You believe that she has married for money, – at least these are *fashionable* sins! Humph! In all probability I shall marry for money myself.”

“Winnifred!”

“*I shall*; I am sure of it. It’s an admirable feature of our best society. If we are heiresses, we are surrounded with lovers who are fascinated by our bank account. If we are poor, we are all in search of a bank account; and many of us have to do some sharp angling.”

“My sister-in-law angled very successfully.”

“So she did, if you *will* put it so. And she did not land her last chance; she might have married as wealthy a man as Mr. Warburton, or as handsome a man as his *brother*. But then,” with a provoking little gesture of disdain, “Leslie and I never did admire handsome men.”

There was just a shade of annoyance in the voice that answered her:

“Pray go on, Miss French; doubtless yourself and Mrs. Warburton have other tastes in common.”

“So we have,” retorted the girl, rising and standing directly before him, “but I won’t favor you with a list of them. You don’t like Leslie, and I do; but let me tell you, Mr. Alan Warburton, if the day ever comes when you know Leslie Warburton *as I know her*, you will go down into the dust, ashamed that you have so misjudged, so wronged, so slandered one who is as high as the stars above you. And now I am going to join the dancers; you can come – or stay.”

The last words were flung at him over her shoulder, and before he could rise to follow, she had vanished in the throng that was surging to and fro without the alcove.

He starts forward as if about to pursue her, and then sinks back upon the couch.

“I won’t be a greater fool than nature made me,” he mutters in scornful self-contempt. “If I go, she’ll flirt outrageously under my very nose; if I stay – she’ll flirt all the same, of course. Ah! if a man would have a foretaste of purgatory let him live under the same roof with the woman he loves and the woman he hates!”

A shadow comes between his vision and the gleam of light from without, and, lifting his eyes, he encounters two steady orbs gazing out from behind a yellow mask.

“Ah!” He half rises again, then sinks back and motions the mask to the seat beside him.

“I recognize your costume,” he says, as the British officer seats himself. “How long since you came?”

“Only a few moments. I have been waiting for your interview with the lady to end.”

“Ah!” with an air of abstraction; then, recalling himself: “Do you know the nature of the work required of you?”

Under his mask, Van Vernet’s face flamed and he bit his lip with vexation. This man in black and scarlet, this aristocrat, addressed him, not as one man to another, but loftily as a king to a subject. But there was no sign of annoyance in his voice as he replied:

“Um – I suppose so. Delicate bit of a shadowing, I was told; no particulars given.”

“There need be no particulars. I will point you out the person to be shadowed. I want you to see her, and be yourself unseen. You are simply to discover, – find out where she goes, who she sees, what she does. Don’t disturb yourself about motives; I only want the *facts*.”

“Ah!” thought Van Vernet; “it’s a *she*, then.” Aloud, he said: “You have not given the lady’s name?”

“You would find it out, of course?”

“Of course; necessarily.”

“The lady is my – is Mrs. Warburton, the mistress of the house.”

“Ah!” thought the detective; “the old Turk wants me to shadow his wife!”

By a very natural blunder he had fancied himself in communication with Archibald, instead of Alan, Warburton.

“Have you any suspicions? Can you give me any hint upon which to act?” he asked.

“I might say this much,” ventured Alan, after a moment’s hesitation: “The lady has made, I believe, a mercenary marriage and she is hiding something from her husband and friends.”

“I see,” said Vernet. And then, laughing inwardly, he thought: “A case of jealousy!”

In a few words Alan Warburton described to Vernet the “Sunlight,” costume worn by Leslie, and then they separated, Vernet going, not in search of “Sunlight,” but of the Goddess of Liberty.

What he found was this:

In the almost deserted music room stood the Goddess of Liberty, gazing down into the face of a woman in the robes of Sunlight, and both of them engaged in earnest conversation.

He watched them until he saw the Goddess lift the hand of Sunlight with a gesture of graceful reverence, bow over it, and turn away. Then he went back to the place where he had left his patron. He found the object of his quest still seated in the alcove, alone and absorbed in thought.

"I beg your pardon for intruding upon your solitude," began the detective hastily, at the same time seating himself close beside Alan; "but there is a *lady* here whose conduct is, to say the least, mysterious. As a detective, it becomes my duty to look after her a little, to see that she does not leave this house *until I can follow her*."

"Well?" with marked indifference in his tone.

"If she could be detained," went on Vernet, "by – say, by keeping some one constantly beside her, so that she cannot leave the house without being observed – "

Alan Warburton threw back his head.

"Pardon me," he said, "but I object to thus persecuting a lady, and a guest."

"But if I tell you that this *lady* is a man in silken petticoats?"

"What!"

"And that he seems on very free and friendly terms with *your wife*."

"With my wi – "

Alan Warburton stopped short and looked sharply at the eyes gazing out from behind the yellow mask.

Did this detective think himself conversing with Archibald? If so – well, what then? He shrank from anything like familiarity with this man before him. Why not leave the mistake as it stood? There could be no harm in it, and he, Alan, would thus be free from future annoyance.

"I will not remove my mask," thought Alan. "He is not likely to see Archibald, and no harm can come of it. In fact it will be better so. It would seem more natural for him to be investigating his wife's secrets than for *me*."

So the mistake was not corrected – the mistake that was almost providential for Alan Warburton, but that proved a very false move in the game that Van Vernet was about to play.

There was but one flaw in the plan of the proposed incognito.

Alan's voice was a peculiarly mellow tenor, and Van Vernet never forgot a voice once heard.

"Did you say that this disguised person knows – Mrs. Warburton?"

"I did."

"Who is the fellow, and what disguise does he wear?"

"I am unable to give his name. He is costumed as the Goddess of Liberty."

"Oh!"

Van Vernet had his own reasons for withholding Richard Stanhope's name.

"So!" he thought, while he waited for Alan's next words. "I'll spoil your plans for this night, Dick Stanhope! I wonder how our Chief will like to hear that 'Stanhope the reliable,' neglects his duty to go masquerading in petticoats, the better to make love to another man's wife."

For Van Vernet, judging Stanhope as a man of the world judges men, had leaped to the hasty, but natural, conclusion, that his masquerade in the garb of the mother of his country, was in the character of a lover.

"Vernet," said Alan at last, "you are a clever fellow! Let me see; there are half a dozen young men here who are ripe for novelty – set the whisper afloat that behind that blue and white mask is concealed a beautiful and mysterious intruder, and they will hang like leeches about her, hoping to discover her identity, or see her unmask."

"It's a capital plan!" cried Vernet, "and it can't be put into execution too soon."

CHAPTER X.

“I AM YOUR SHADOW.”

It is not a pleasing task to Alan Warburton, but, spurred on by Vernet, and acting according to his suggestions, it is undertaken and accomplished. Within twenty minutes, two gay, fun-loving young fellows, one habited in the garb of a Celestial, the other dressed as a Troubadour, are hastening from room to room in search of the mysterious Goddess of Liberty.

“Who was the Mask that posted us about this mysterious lady?” queries the Celestial, as he lifts a *portierie* for his comrade to pass.

“If I am not mistaken, it was Warburton.”

“Isn’t that a queer move for His Dignity?”

“Well, I don’t know. Presuming the fair Mystery to be an intruder, he may think it the easiest way of putting her to rout. At any rate there’s a little spice in it.”

And there is spice in it. Before the evening closes, the festive Celestial is willing to vote this meeting with a veiled mystery an occasion full of flavor, and worthy to be remembered.

Leaving the pair in full chase after the luckless, petticoat-encumbered Stanhope, we follow Van Vernet, who, having set this trap for the feet of his unconscious comrade, is about to play his next card.

Gliding among the maskers, he makes his way to a side entrance, and passing the liveried servant on guard at the door with a careless jest, he leaves the house, and hastens where, a few rods distant, a solitary figure is standing.

“How long have you been here, Harvey?” he asks hurriedly, but with noticeable affability.

“About half an hour.”

“Good; now listen, for you are to begin your business. Throw on that domino and follow me; the servants have seen me in conversation with the master of the house and they will not require your credentials. Keep near me, and follow me to the dressing-rooms; by-and-by we will exchange costumes there, after which, you will personate me.”

“But, – ”

“There will be no trouble; just mingle with the throng, saying nothing to anyone. No one will address you who could doubt your identity; I will arrange all that. You comprehend?”

“I think so. You are wanted, or you want to be, in two places at once. This being the least important, you place me here as figure-head, while you fill the bill at the other place.”

“You have grasped the situation, Harvey. Let us go in, and be sure you do justice, in my stead, to the banquet – and the Warburton champagne.”

Van Vernet had planned well. Knowing the importance of the Raid in hand for that night, he had determined to be present and share with Stanhope the honors of the occasion, while he seemed to be devoting all his energies to the solution of the mystery that was evidently troubling his wealthy patron, the master of Warburton Place.

Vernet was a man of many resources, and trying, indeed, must be the situation which his fertile brain could not master.

Having successfully introduced his double into the house, he made his way, once more, to the side of his patron, and, drawing him away from the vicinity of possible listeners, said:

“Mr. Warburton, if you have anything further to say to me, please make use of the present moment. After this it will be best for us to hold no further conversation to-night.”

Alan Warburton turned his eyes toward the detective with a cold, scrutinizing stare.

“Why such caution?”

“Because it seems to me necessary; and, if I may be permitted to suggest, you may make some slight discoveries by keeping an eye, more or less, upon Mrs. Warburton.”

With these words Van Vernet turns upon his heel, and strides away with the air of a man who can do all that he essays.

“He is cool to the verge of impudence!” mutters Alan, as he gazes after the receding figure in the British uniform. “But I will act upon his advice; I *will* watch Mrs. Warburton.”

It is some moments before he catches sight of her glimmering robes, and then he sees them receding, gliding swiftly, and, as he thinks, with a nervous, hurried movement unusual to his stately sister-in-law.

She is going through the drawing-room, away from the dancers, and he hastens after, wondering a little as to her destination.

From a flower-adorned recess, a fairy form springs out, interrupting the lady in the glimmering robes.

“Mamma!” cries little Daisy, “oh Mamma, I have found Mother Goose —*real, live* Mother Goose!”

And she points with childish delight to a quaintly dressed personation of that old woman of nursery fame, who sits within the alcove, leaning upon her oaken staff, and peering out from beneath the broad frill of her cap, her gaze eagerly following the movements of the animated child.

“Oh Mamma!” continues the little one, “can’t I stay with Mother Goose? Millie says I must go to bed.”

At another time Leslie Warburton would have listened more attentively, have answered more thoughtfully, and have noted more closely the manner of guest that was thus absorbing the attention of the little one. Now she only says hurriedly:

“Yes, yes, Daisy; you may stay a little longer, – only,” with a hasty glance toward the alcove, “you must not trouble the lady too much.”

“The lady wants me, mamma.”

“Then go, dear.”

And Leslie gathers up her glimmering train and hastens on without once glancing backward.

Pausing a few paces behind her, Alan Warburton has noted each word that has passed between the lady and the child. And now, as the little one bounds back to Mother Goose, who receives her with evident pleasure, he moves on, still following Leslie.

She glides past the dancers, through the drawing rooms, across the music room, and then, giving a hasty glance at the few who linger there, she pulls aside a silken curtain, and looks into the library. The lights are toned to the softness of moonlight; there is silence there, and solitude.

With a long, weary sigh, Leslie enters the library and lets the curtain fall behind her.

Alan Warburton pauses, hesitates for a moment, and then, seeing that the little group of maskers near him seem wholly absorbed in their own merriment, he moves boldly forward, parts the curtain a little way, and peers within.

He sees a woman wearing the garments of Sunlight and the face of despair. She has torn off her mask, and it lies on the floor at her feet. In her hand is a crumpled scrap of paper, and, as she holds it nearer the light and reads what is written thereon, a low moan escapes her lips.

“Again!” she murmurs; “how can I obey them? – and yet I *must* go.” Then, suddenly, a light of fierce resolve flames in her eyes. “I *will* go,” she says, speaking aloud in her self-forgetfulness; “I will go, – but it shall be *for the last time!*”

She thrusts the crumpled bit of paper into her bosom, goes to the window and looks out. Then she crosses to a door opposite the curtained entrance, opens it softly, and glides away.

In another moment, Alan Warburton is in the library. Tearing off the black and scarlet domino he flings it into a corner, and, glancing down at his nautical costume mutters:

“Sailors of this description are not uncommon. Wherever she goes, I can follow her – in this.”

Ten minutes later, while Leslie Warburton's guests are dancing and making merry, Leslie Warburton, with sombre garments replacing the robes of Sunlight, glides stealthily out from her stately home, and creeps like a hunted creature through the darkness and away!

But not alone. Silently, with the tread of an Indian, a man follows after; a man in the garments of a sailor, who pulls a glazed cap low down across his eyes, and mutters as he goes:

"So, Madam Intrigue, Van Vernet advised me well. Glide on, plotter; from this moment until I shall have unmasked you, *I am your shadow!*"

CHAPTER XI. “DEAR MRS FOLLINGSBEE.”

While the previously related scenes of this fateful night are transpiring Richard Stanhope finds his silken-trained disguise a snare in which his own feet become entangled, both literally and figuratively.

Moving with slow and stately steps through the vista of splendid rooms, taking note of all that he sees from behind his white and blue mask, he suddenly becomes the object of too much attention. A dashing Troubador presents himself, and will not be denied the pleasure of a waltz with “the stately and graceful Miss Columbia.”

The detective’s feet are encased in satin shoes that, if not small, are at least shapely. He has yet nearly an hour to spare to the masquerade, and his actual business is done. Why not yield to the temptation? He dances with the grace and abandon of the true music worshipper; he loves brightness and gayety, laughter and all sweet sounds; above all, he takes such delight in a jest as only healthy natures can.

“It would be a pity to disappoint such a pretty Troubador,” muses Richard while he seems to hesitate; “he may never have another opportunity to dance with a lady like me.”

And then, bowing a stately consent, he moves away on the arm of the Troubador, who, chuckling at his success, mentally resolves to make a good impression on this mysterious uninvited lady.

Van Vernet’s plot works famously. The Troubador is enchanted with the dancing of the mysterious Goddess, who looks at him with the handsomest, most languid and melting of brown, brown eyes, letting these orbs speak volumes, but saying never a word. And when his fellow-plotter claims the next dance, he yields his place reluctantly, and sees the waist of the Goddess encircled by the arm of the Celestial, with a sigh of regret.

Richard Stanhope, now fully given over to the spirit of mischief, leans confidently upon the arm of this second admirer, looking unutterable things with his big brown eyes.

They hover about him after this second dance, and he dances again with each. If the Troubador is overflowing with flattery, the Celestial is more obsequious still. Stanhope finds the moments flying, and the attention of the two gallants cease to amuse, and begin to annoy. In vain he tries to shake them off. If one goes, the other remains.

After many futile efforts to free himself from his tormentors, he sees Mr. Follingsbee approach, and beckons him forward with a sigh of relief.

The two maskers, recognizing Uncle Sam as a fitting companion for Miss Columbia, reluctantly yield their ground and withdraw.

“Have those fellows been pestering you?” queries the lawyer, with a laugh.

“Only as they bade fair to prove a hindrance,” with an answering chuckle. “They’re such nice little lady killers: but I must get away from this in a very few minutes. My disguise has been very successful.”

“I should think so! Why, my boy, half the people here, at least those who have recognized me through my costume, think you are – ha! ha! – my wife!”

“So much the better.”

“Why, little Winnie French – she found me out at once – has been looking all through the card rooms for “Dear Mrs. Follingsbee.”” And the jolly lawyer laughs anew.

“Mr. Follingsbee,” – Stanhope has ceased to jest, and speaks with his usual business brusqueness – “Mrs. Warburton, I don’t know for what reason, wished to be informed when I left the house. Will you tell her I am about to go, and that I will let her hear from me further through you? I will go up to the dressing room floor, and wait in the boudoir until you have seen her.”

The boudoir opening upon the ladies' dressing rooms, is untenanted. But from the inner room, Stanhope catches the hum of feminine voices, and in a moment a quartette of ladies come forth, adjusting their masks as they move toward the stairway.

Suddenly there is a little exclamation of delight, and our detective, standing near the open window, with his face turned from the group, feels himself clasped by a pair of pretty dimpled arms, while a gay voice says in his ear:

"Oh! you dear old thing! Have I found you at last? Follingsbee, you look stunning in that costume. Oh! –" as Stanhope draws back with a deprecating gesture – "you needn't deny your identity: isn't Mr. Follingsbee here as Uncle Sam? I found him out at once, and didn't Leslie and I see you enter together?"

Stanhope quakes inwardly, and the perspiration starts out under his mask. It is very delightful, under most circumstances, to be embraced by a pair of soft feminine arms, but just now it is very embarrassing and – very ridiculous.

Divided between his desire to laugh and his wish to run away, the detective stands hesitating, while Winnie French, for she it is, begins a critical examination of his costume.

"Don't you think the dress muffles your figure a little too much, Follingsbee? If it were snugger here," – giving him a little poke underneath his elbows, – "and not so straight from the shoulders. Why didn't you shorten it in front, and wear pointed shoes?"

And she seizes the flowing drapery, and draws it back to illustrate her suggestion.

Again Stanhope recoils with a gesture which the gay girl misinterprets, and, quite ignoring the persistent silence of the supposed Mrs. Follingsbee, she chatters on:

"I hope you don't resent *my* criticisms, Follingsbee; you've picked *me* to pieces often enough. Or are you still vexed because I *won't* fall in love with your favorite Alan? There, now," – as Stanhope, grown desperate, seems about to speak, – "I know just what you want to say, and you need not say it. Follingsbee," lowering her voice to a more confidential tone, "if I ever *had* a scrap of a notion of that sort, I have been cured of it since I came into this house to live. Oh! I know he's your prime favorite, but you can't tell *me* anything about Alan; I've got him all catalogued on my ten fingers. Here he is pro and con; pro's *your* idea of him, you know. You say he is rich. Well, that's something in these days! He's handsome. Bah! a man has no business with beauty; it's woman's special prerogative. He came of a splendid blue-blooded family. Fudge! American aristocracy is American *rubbish*. He's talented. Well, that's only an accident for which *he* deserves no credit. He's thoroughly upright and honorable. Well, he's *too* bolt upright for me."

"So," murmurs Stanhope to his inner consciousness, "I am making a point in personal history, but – it's a tight place for me!" And as Winnie's arms give him a little hug, while she pauses to take breath, he feels tempted to retort in kind.

"Now, then," resumes Winnie, absorbed in her topic; and releasing her victim to check off her "cons" on the pretty right hand; "here's *my* opinion of Mr. Warburton. He's *proud*, ridiculously proud. He worships his *name*, if not himself. He is suspicious, uncharitable, unforgiving. He's *hard-hearted*. If Leslie were not an angel she would hate him utterly. He treats her with a lofty politeness, a polished indifference, impossible to resent and horrible to endure, – and all because he chooses to believe that she has tarnished the great Warburton name, by taking it for love of the Warburton fortune instead of the race."

Up from the ball-room floats the first strains of a delicious waltz. Winnie stops, starts, and turns toward the door.

"That's my favorite waltz, and I'm engaged to Charlie Furbish – he dances like an angel. Follingsbee, bye, bye!"

She flits to the mirror, gives two or three dainty touches to her coquettish costume, tosses a kiss from her finger tips, and is gone.

“Thank Heaven,” mutters Stanhope. “I consider *that* the narrowest escape of my life! What a little witch it is, and pretty, I’ll wager.”

He draws from beneath his flowing robe a tiny watch such as ladies carry, and consults its jewelled face.

“My time is up!” he ejaculates. “Twenty minutes delay, now, will ruin my Raid. Ah! here’s Follingsbee.” And he moves forward at the sound of an approaching step.

But it is not Follingsbee who appears upon the threshold. It is, instead, Stanhope’s too-obsequious, too-attentive admirer, the Celestial, who has voted the prospect of a flirtation with a mysterious mask, a thing of spice.

CHAPTER XII.

A “MELLICAN LADY’S” LITTLE TRICK

In such an emergency, when every moment has its value, to think is to act with Richard Stanhope. And time just now is very precious to him.

This importunate fellow is determined to solve the mystery of his identity, to see him unmask. Ten minutes spent in an attempt to evade him will be moments of fate for the ambitious detective.

And, for the sake of his patroness, he cannot leave the house at the risk of being followed. This difficulty must be overcome and at once.

These thoughts flash through his mind as if by electricity; and then, as the Celestial approaches, he turns languidly toward the open window and rests his head against the casement, as if in utter weariness.

“Mellican lady slick?” queries the masker solicitously; “Mellican lady walm? Ching Ling flannee, flannee.”

And raising his Japanese fan, he begins to ply it vigorously.

Mentally confiding “Ching Ling,” to a region where fans are needed and are not, Stanhope sways, as if about to faint, and motions toward a reclining chair.

The mask propels it close to the window, and the detective sinks into it, with a long drawn sigh.

Then, plying his fan with renewed vigor, the Celestial murmurs tenderly:

“Mellican lady slick?”

“Confound you,” thinks Stanhope; “I will try and be too *slick* for you.” Then, for the first time, he utters a word for the Celestial’s hearing. Moving his head restlessly he articulates, feebly:

“The heat – I feel – faint!” Then, half rising from the chair, seeming to make a last effort, he reels and murmuring: “Water – water,” sinks back presenting the appearance of utter lifelessness.

“Water!” The Celestial, utterly deceived, drops the fan and his dialect at the same moment, and muttering: “She has fainted!” springs to the door.

It is just what Stanhope had hoped for. When the Celestial returns with the water, the fainting lady will have disappeared.

But Fate seems to have set her face against Stanhope. The Celestial does not go. At the very door he encounters a servant, none other than the girl, Millie, who, having for some time lost sight of little Daisy, is now wandering from room to room in quest of the child.

“Girl,” calls the masker authoritatively, “get some water quick; a lady has fainted.”

Uttering a startled: “Oh, my!” Millie skurries away, and the Celestial returns to the side of the detective, who seems just now to be playing a losing game.

But it is only seeming. The case, grown desperate, requires a desperate remedy, and the Goddess of Liberty resolves to do what, probably, no “Mellican Lady” ever did before.

Through his drooping eyelids he notes the approach of the Celestial, sees him fling aside his fan to bend above him, and realizes the fact that he is about to be unmasked.

The Celestial bends nearer still. His hands touch the draped head, searching for the secret that releases the tightly secured mask. It is a sentimental picture, but suddenly the scene changes. Sentiment is put to rout, and absurdity reigns.

With indescribable swiftness, the body of the Goddess darts forward, and the head comes in sudden contact with the stomach of the too-devoted Celestial, who goes down upon the floor in a state of collapse, while Stanhope, bounding to his feet and gathering up his trailing draperies, springs through the open window!

When Millie returns with water and other restoratives, she finds only a disarranged masker sitting dolefully upon the floor, with one hand pressed against his stomach and the other supporting his head; still too much dazed and bewildered to know just how he came there.

When he has finally recovered sufficiently to be able to give a shrewd guess as to the nature of the calamity that so suddenly overcame him, he is wise enough to see that the victory sits perched on the banner of the vanished Goddess, and to retire from the field permanently silent upon the subject of “spicy flirtations” and mysterious ladies.

Meantime, Stanhope having alighted, with no particular damage to himself or his drapery, upon a balcony which runs half the length of the house, is creeping silently along that convenient causeway toward the gentlemen’s dressing-room, situated at its extreme end.

Foreseeing some possible difficulty in leaving the house unnoticed while attired in so conspicuous a costume, the Goddess had come prepared with a long black domino, which had been confided to Mr. Follingsbee, who, at the proper moment, was to fetch it from the gentlemen’s dressing-room, array Stanhope in its sombre folds, and then see him from the house, and safely established in the carriage which the detective had arranged to have in waiting to convey him to the scene of the Raid.

Owing to his little encounter with the Celestial, Stanhope knows himself cut off from communication with Mr. Follingsbee, and he now creeps toward the dressing-room wholly intent upon securing the domino and quitting the house in the quickest manner possible.

As he approaches the window, however, he realizes that there is another lion in his path.

The room is already occupied; he hears two voices speaking in guarded tones.

“Be quick, Harvey; some one may come in a moment.”

“I have locked the door.”

“But it must be opened at the first knock. There must be no appearance of mystery, no room for suspicion, Harvey.”

At the sound of a most familiar voice, Richard Stanhope starts, and flushes with excitement underneath his mask. Then he presses close against the window and peers in.

Two men are rapidly exchanging garments there; the one doffing a uniform such as is worn by an officer of Her Majesty’s troops, the other passing over, in exchange for said uniform, the suit of a common policeman.

With astonished eyes and bated breath, Stanhope recognizes the two. Van Vernet, his friend, and Harvey, a member of the police force, who is Vernet’s staunch admirer and chosen assistant when such assistance can be of use.

How came Vernet at this masquerade, of all others? And what are they about to do?

He is soon enlightened, for Van Vernet, flushed with his success, present and prospective, utters a low triumphant laugh as he dons the policeman’s coat, and turns to readjust his mask.

“Ah! Harvey,” he says gayly; “if you ever live to execute as fine a bit of strategy as I did to-night, you may yet be Captain of police. Ha! ha! this most recent battle between America and England has turned out badly for America – all because she *will* wear petticoats!”

America! England! petticoats! Stanhope can scarcely suppress an exclamation as suddenly light flashes upon his mental horizon.

“I’ve done a good thing to-night, Harvey,” continues Vernet with unusual animation, “and I’ve got the lead on a sharp man. If I can hold my own to-night, you’ll never again hear of Van Vernet as only ‘one of our best detectives.’ Is your mask adjusted? All right, then. Now, Harvey, time presses; there’s a big night’s work before me. You are sure you understand everything?”

“Oh, perfectly; *my* work’s easy enough.”

“And mine begins to be difficult. Unlock the door, Harvey, I must be off.” Then turning sharply he adds, as if it were an after-thought: “By the way, if you happen to set your eye on a Goddess of

Liberty, just note her movements; I would give something to know when she contrives to leave the house and,” with a dry laugh, “and *how*.”

In another moment the dressing-room is deserted.

And then Richard Stanhope steps lightly through the window. With rapid movements he singles out his own dark domino, gathers his colored draperies close about him, and flings it over them, drawing the hood down about his head, and the long folds around his person. Then he goes out from the dressing-rooms, hurries down the great stairway, and passing boldly out by the main entrance, glances up and down the street.

Only a few paces away, a dark form is hurrying toward a group of carriages standing opposite the mansion, and Stanhope, in an instant, is gliding in the same direction. As the man places a foot upon the step of a carriage that has evidently awaited his coming, Stanhope glides so near that he distinctly hears the order, given in Vernet’s low voice:

“To the X – street police station. Drive fast.”

A trifle farther away another carriage, its driver very alert and expectant, stands waiting.

Having heard Vernet’s order, Stanhope hurries to this carriage, springs within, and whispers to the driver:

“The old place, Jim; and your quickest time!”

Then, as the wheels rattle over the pavement, the horses speeding away from this fashionable quarter of the city, a strange transformation scene goes on within the carriage, which, evidently, has been prepared for this purpose. The Goddess of Liberty is casting her robes, and long before the carriage has reached its destination, she has disappeared, there remaining, in her stead, a personage of fantastic appearance. He is literally clothed in rags, and plentifully smeared with dirt; his tattered garments are decorated with bits of tinsel, and scraps of bright color flutter from his ragged hat, and flaunt upon his breast; there is a monstrous patch over his left eye and a mass of disfiguring blotches covers his left cheek; a shock of unkempt tow-colored hair bristles upon his head, and his forehead and eyes are half hidden by thick dangling elf-locks.

If this absurd apparition bears not the slightest resemblance to the Goddess of Liberty, it resembles still less our friend, Richard Stanhope.

Suddenly, and in an obscure street, the carriage comes to a halt, and as its fantastically-attired occupant descends to the ground, the first stroke of midnight sounds out upon the air.

CHAPTER XIII. A CRY IN THE DARK

One more scene in this night's fateful masquerade remains to be described, and then the seemingly separate threads of our plot unite, and twine about our central figures a chain of Fate.

While Van Vernet is setting snares for the feet of his rival, and while that young man of many resources is actively engaged in disentangling himself therefrom, – while Leslie Warburton, tortured by a secret which she cannot reveal, and dominated by a power she dare not disobey, steals away from her stately home – and while Alan Warburton, soured by suspicion, made unjust by his own false pride, follows like a shadow behind her – a cloud is descending upon the house of Warburton.

Sitting apart from the mirthful crowd, quite unobserved and seemingly wholly engrossed in themselves, are little Daisy Warburton and the quaintly-attired Mother Goose, before mentioned.

It is long past the child's latest bedtime, but her step-mamma has been so entirely preoccupied, and Millie so carelessly absorbed in watching the gayeties of the evening, that the little one has been overlooked, and feels now quite like her own mistress.

"Ha! ha!" she laughs merrily, leaning, much at her ease, upon the knee of Mother Goose; "ha! ha! what nice funny stories you tell; almost as nice as my new mamma's stories. Only," looking up with exquisite frankness, "your voice is not half so nice as my new mamma's."

"Because I'm an old woman, dearie," replies Mother Goose, a shade of something like disapproval in her tone. "Do you really want to see Mother Hubbard's dog, little girl?"

"Old Mother Hubbard – she went to the cupboard," sings Daisy gleefully. "Of course I do, Mrs. Goose. Does Mother Hubbard look like you?"

"A little."

"And – you said Cinderella's coach was down near my papa's gate?"

"So it is, dearie." Then looking cautiously about her, and lowering her voice to a whisper: "How would you like to ride to see Mother Hubbard in Cinderella's coach, and come right back, you know, before it turns into a pumpkin again?"

The fair child clasps two tiny hands, and utters a cry of delight.

"Oh! *could* we?" she asks, breathlessly.

"Of course we can, if you are very quiet and do as I bid you, and if you don't get afraid."

"I don't get afraid – not often," replies the child, drawing still closer to Mother Goose, and speaking with hushed gravity. "When I used to be afraid at night, my mamma, my new mamma, you know, taught me to say like this."

Clasping her hands, she sinks upon her knees and lifts her face to that which, behind its grotesque mask, is distorted by some unpleasant emotion. And then the childish voice lisps reverently:

"Dear God, please take care of a little girl whose mamma has gone to Heaven. Keep her from sin, and sickness, and danger. Make the dark as safe as the day, and don't let her be afraid, for Jesus' sake. Amen."

Something like a smothered imprecation dies away in the throat of the listener, and then she says, in honeyed accents:

"That's a very nice little prayer, and your new mamma is a very fine lady. When you come back from your ride in Cinderella's carriage, you can tell your new mamma all about it."

"Oh! how nice!"

"It will be charming. Come into the conservatory, dearie. I think we can see Cinderella's lamps from there."

With the confidence born of childish innocence, the little one places her hand in that of Mother Goose, and is led away.

The conservatory is all aglow with light and color and rich perfume, and it is almost tenantless. The broad low windows are open, and a narrow balcony, adorned with tall vases and hung with drooping vines, projects from them scarce three feet from the ground.

Out upon this balcony, and close to the railing, the child follows the old woman confidently. Then, as she peers out into the night, she draws back.

“It’s – very – dark,” she whispers.

“It’s the light inside that makes it seem so dark, dearie. Ah! I see a glimmer of Cinderella’s lamp now; look, child!”

Stooping quickly, she lifts the little one and seats her upon the railing of the balcony. Then, as the child, shading her eyes with a tiny hand, attempts to peer out into the darkness, something damp and sickening is pressed to her face; there is an odor in the air not born of the flowers within, and Daisy Warburton, limp and unconscious, lies back in the arms of her enemy.

In another moment, the woman in the garb of Mother Goose has dropped from the balcony to the ground beneath, and, bearing her still burden in her arms, disappeared in the darkness.

And as her form vanishes from the balcony, a city clock, far away, tolls out the hour: *midnight*.

At this same hour, with the same strokes sounding in their ears, a party of men sally forth from the X – street Police station, and take their way toward the river.

They are policemen, mostly dressed in plain clothes, and heavily armed, every man. They move away silently like men obeying the will of one master, and presently they separate, dropping off by twos and threes into different by-ways and obscure streets, to meet again at a certain rendezvous.

It is the Raiding Party on its way to the slums, and, contrary to the hopes of the Chief of the detectives and the Captain of the police, it is led, not by Dick Stanhope, but by Van Vernet.

Contrary to all precedent, and greatly to the surprise of all save Vernet, Richard Stanhope has failed to appear at the time appointed; and so, after many doubts, much hesitation, and some delay, Van Vernet is made leader of the expedition.

“I shall send Stanhope as soon as he reports here,” the Chief had said as a last word to Vernet. “His absence to-night is most reprehensible, but his assistance is too valuable to be dispensed with.”

Mentally hoping that Stanhope’s coming may be delayed indefinitely, Van Vernet bites his lip and goes on his way, while the Chief sits down to speculate as to Stanhope’s absence, and to await his coming.

But he waits in vain. The long night passes, and day dawns, and Richard Stanhope does not appear.

Meanwhile, Van Vernet and the two men who accompany him, arrive first of the party at their rendezvous.

It is at the mouth or entrance to a dark, narrow street, the beginning of that labyrinth of crooked by-ways, and blind alleys, from the maze of which Richard Stanhope had rescued himself and the wounded convict, on the night previous.

Halting here Van Vernet waits the arrival of his men, and meditates. He is tolerably familiar with this labyrinth; knows it as well, perhaps, as most men on such a mission would deem necessary, but he has not given the locality and its denizens the close study and keen investigation that Stanhope has considered essential to success. And now, as he peers down the dark street, thinking of the maze beyond, and the desperate character of the people who inhabit it, he involuntarily wishes for that closer knowledge that only Stanhope possesses.

He knows that Stanhope, in various disguises, has passed days and nights among these haunts of iniquity; that he can thread these intricate alleys in the darkest night, and identify every rogue by name and profession.

He thinks of these things, and then shrugs his shoulder with characteristic inconsequence. He has, and with good reason, unbounded confidence in himself. He has tact, skill, courage; what man may do, *he* can do.

What are these miserable outlaws that they should baffle Van Vernet the skillful, the successful, the daring?

Some one is coming toward them from out the dark alley. They hear the fragment of an idiotic street song, trolled out in a maudlin voice, and then feet running, skipping, seeming now and then to prance and pirouette absurdly.

“What the – ”

The exclamation of the policeman is cut short by the sudden collision of his stationary figure with a rapidly moving body. Then he grapples with his unintentional assailant only to release him suddenly, as Van Vernet throws up the slide of his dark lantern and turns its rays upon the new-comer.

Involuntarily all three utter sharp exclamations as they gather around the apparition.

What a figure! Ragged, unkempt, fantastic; the same which a short time ago we saw descending from a carriage only a few rods distant from this very spot.

It is the same figure; the same rags and tinsel and dirt; the same disfigured face, with its black patch and its fringe of frowzy hair; the same, yet worse to look upon; for now the under jaw is dropped, the mouth drivels, the eye not concealed by the patch leers stupidly.

Unmistakably, it is the face of an idiot.

“How!” ejaculates this being, peering curiously at the three. “How do? Where ye goin’?”

Van Vernet gazes curiously for a moment, then utters a sound expressive of satisfaction. He has heard of a fool that inhabits these alleys; Stanhope has mentioned him on one or two occasions. “A modernized Barnaby Rudge,” Stanhope had called him. Surely this must be him.

Turning to one of his men he says, in an undertone:

“If I’m not mistaken this fellow is a fool who grew up in these slums, and knows them by heart. ‘Silly Charlie,’ I think, they call him. I believe we can make him useful.”

Then turning to the intruder he says suavely:

“How are you, my man? How are you?”

But a change has come over the mood of the seeming idiot. Striking his breast majestically, and pointing to a huge tin star which decorates it, he waves his hand toward them, and says with absurd dignity:

“G’way —g’way! Charlie big p’liceman. Gittin’ late; g’way.”

“We must humor him, boys,” says Vernet aside. Then to Charlie – “So you’re a policeman? Well, so am I; look.”

And turning back the lapel of his coat he displays, on the inner side, the badge of an officer.

Silly Charlie comes close, peers eagerly at the badge, fingers it curiously, then, grasping it firmly, gives a tug at the lapel, saying:

“Gimme it. Gimme it.”

Van Vernet laughs good-naturedly.

“Don’t pull so hard, Charlie, or you’ll have off my entire uniform. Do you want to do a little police duty to-night?”

Silly Charlie nods violently.

“And you want my star, or one like it?”

“Um hum!” with sudden emphasis.

Van Vernet lays a hand on the shoulder of the idiot, and then says:

“Listen, Charlie. I want you to help me to-night. Wait,” for Charlie has doubled himself up in a convulsion of laughter. “Now, if you’ll stand right by me, and tell me what I want to know, you and I will do some splendid work, and both get promoted. You will get a new star, big and bright, and a uniform all covered with bright buttons. Hold on,” for Charlie is dancing in an ecstasy of delight. “What do you say? Will you come with me, and work for your star and uniform?”

Charlie’s enthusiastic gestures testify to his delight at this proposition.

“Um hum,” he cries gleefully; “Charlie go; Charlie be big p’liceman.”

And as if suddenly realizing the dignity of his new employment, he ceases his antics and struts sedately up and down before Vernet and his assistants. Then turning to the detective, with a doleful whine, he extends his hand, saying;

“Gimme star *now*.”

“Not now, Charlie; you must earn it first. I had to earn mine. Do you know the way to Devil’s alley?”

“Um hum!”

“Good: do you know where Black Nathan lives!”

“Um hum!”

“Can you take me to Nancy Kaiser’s lushing ken?”

“Um hum; Charlie knows.”

“Then, Charlie, you shall have that star soon.”

And Vernet turns to his men. “I will take this fellow for guide, and look up these places: they are most important,” he says rapidly. “I shall be less noticed in company with this fellow than if alone. Riley, I leave you in command until I return. Remain here, and keep the fellows all together; some of them are coming now.”

Riley’s quick ear detects the approach of stealthy feet, and as Vernet shuts his lantern, and utters a low “Come, Charlie,” the first installment of the Raiders appears, a few paces away.

Seizing Vernet by the arm, Silly Charlie lowers his head and glides down the alley, as stealthily as an Indian.

“Charlie,” whispers Vernet, imperatively, “you must be very cautious. I want you to take me first to where Black Nathan lives.”

“Hoop la!” replies Charlie in subdued staccato; “I’m takin’ ye; commalong.”

Cautiously they wend their way down the dark, narrow street, into a filthy alley, and through it to an open space laid bare by some recent fire.

Here they halt for a moment, Charlie peering curiously around him, and stooping to search for something among the loose stones.

Suddenly a shriek pierces the silence about them – a woman’s shriek, thrice repeated, its tones fraught with agony and terror!

Silly Charlie lifts himself suddenly erect, and turns his face toward a dark building just across the open space. Then, as the third cry sounds upon the air, both men, as by one humane instinct, bound across the waste regardless of stones and bruises, Silly Charlie flying on before, as if acquainted with every inch of the ground, straight toward the dark and isolated building.

CHAPTER XIV. A PRETTY PLOT

In order to comprehend the cause of the alarm which stimulated to sudden action both the wise man and the fool, Van Vernet and Silly Charlie, let us turn back a little and enter the dark house at the foot of the alley.

It is an hour before midnight. The place is dark and silent; no light gleams through the tightly boarded windows, there is no sign of life about the dwelling. But within, as on a previous occasion, there is light, life, and a measure of activity. The light is furnished by a solitary tallow candle, and the life supplied by the same little old man who, on a former occasion, was thrown into a state of unreasonable terror at sight of a certain newspaper advertisement.

It is the same room, its appointments unchanged; the same squalor and dirt, the same bottle upon the same shelf, the same heap of rags in the corner, the same fragments of iron and copper on the floor. The same deal table and scrap of carpet are there, but not arranged as on a former occasion, for now the table is pushed back against the wall, the piece of carpet is flung in a wrinkled heap away from the place which it covered, exposing to view a dark gap in the floor, with a dangling trap-door opening downward. Beside this opening squats the little old man, his eyes as ferret-like and restless as usual, but his features more complacent and less apprehensive than when last we saw him.

By his side is the sputtering tallow candle, and in his hand a long hooked stick, with which he is lowering sundry bags and bundles down the trap, lifting the candle from time to time to peer into the opening, then resuming his work and muttering meanwhile.

“What’s *this*?” he soliloquizes, lifting a huge bundle and scrutinizing it carefully. “Ah-h! a gentleman’s fine overcoat; *that* must have a nice, safe corner. Ah-h! there you go,” lowering the bundle down the aperture and poking it into position with his stick. “It’s amazin’ what valuables my people finds about the streets,” he chuckles facetiously. “‘Ere’s a – a little silver tea-pot; some rich woman must a-throwed that out. I will put it on the shelf.”

Evidently the shelf mentioned is in the cellar below, for this parcel, like the first, is lowered and carefully placed by means of the stick. Other bundles of various sizes follow, and then the old man rests from his labor.

“What a nice little hole that is,” he mutters. “Full of rags – nothin’ else. Suppose a cop comes in here and looks down, what ’ud he see? Just rags. S’pose he went down, ha! ha! he’d go waist-deep in a bed of old rags, and he wouldn’t like the smell overmuch; such a *nice* smell – for cops. He couldn’t *see* anything, couldn’t *feel* anything but rags, just rags.”

A low tap at the street-door causes the old man to drop his stick and his soliloquy at once. He starts nervously, listens intently for a moment, and then rises cautiously. A long, low whistle evidently reassures him, for with suddenly acquired self-possession he begins to move about.

Swiftly and noiselessly he closes the trap, spreads down the bit of carpet, and replaces the table. Then he shuffles toward the entrance, pulls out the pin from the hole in the door, and peeps out. Nothing is visible but the darkness, and this, somehow; seems to reassure him, for with a snort of impatience he calls out:

“Who knocks?”

“It’s Siebel,” replies a voice from without. “Open up, old Top.”

Instantly the door is unbarred and swung open, admitting a burly ruffian, who fairly staggers under the weight of a monstrous sack which he carries upon his shoulders.

At sight of this bulky burden the old man smiles and rubs his palms together.

“Ah! Josef,” he says, reaching out to relieve the new-comer, “a nice load that; a very nice load!”

But the man addressed as Josef retains his hold upon his burden, and, resting himself against it, looks distrustfully at his host.

"It's been a fine evening, Josef," insinuates the old man, his eyes still fixed upon the bag.

"Fair enough," replies Josef gruffly, as he unties the bag and pushes it toward the old man. "Take a look at the stuff, Papa Francoise, and make a bid. I'm dead thirsty."

Eagerly seizing the bag, Papa Francoise drags it toward the table, closely followed by Josef, and begins a hasty examination of its contents, saying:

"Rags is rags, you know, Josef Siebel. It's not much use to look into 'em; there's nothing here but rags, of course."

"No, course not," with a satirical laugh.

"That's right, Josef; I won't buy nothing but rags, —*never*. I don't want no ill-gotten gains brought to me."

Josef Siebel utters another short, derisive laugh, and discreetly turns his gaze toward the smoky ceiling while Papa begins his investigations. From out the capacious bag he draws a rich shawl, hurriedly examines it, and thrusts it back again.

"The rag-picker can be an honest man as well as another, Josef," continues this virtuous old gentleman, drawing forth a silver soup-ladle and thrusting it back. "These are very good rags, Josef," and he draws out a switch of blonde hair, and gazes upon it admiringly. Then he brings out a handful of rags, examines them ostentatiously by the light of the candle, smells them, and ties up the bag, seeing which Josef withdraws his eyes from the cobwebs overhead and fixes them on the black bottle upon the shelf.

Noting the direction of his gaze, Papa Francoise rests the bag against the table-leg, trots to the shelf, pours a scanty measure from the black bottle into a tin cup, and presents it to Josef with what is meant for an air of gracious hospitality.

"You spoke of thirst, Josef; drink, my friend."

"Umph," mutters the fellow, draining off the liquor at a draught. Then setting the cup hastily down; "Now, old Top, wot's your bid?"

"Well," replies Papa Francoise, trying to look as if he had not already settled that question with his own mind; "well, Josef I'll give you – I'll give you a dollar and a half."

"The dickens you will!"

Josef makes a stride toward the bag, and lifts it upon his shoulder.

"Stop, Josef!" cries Papa, laying eager hands upon the treasure. "What do you want? That's a good price for rags."

"Bah!" snarls the burly ruffian, turning toward the door, "wot d'ye take me for, ye blasted old fence?"

But Papa has a firm clutch upon the bag.

"Stop, Josef!" he cries eagerly; "let me see," pulling it down from his shoulder and lifting it carefully. "Why, it's *heavier* than I thought. Josef, I'll give you two dollars and a half, —*no more*."

The "no more" is sharply uttered, and evidently Siebel comprehends the meaning behind the words, for he reseats himself sullenly, muttering:

"It ain't enough, ye cursed cantin' old skinflint, but fork it out; I've got to have money."

At this instant there comes a short, sharp, single knock upon the street-door, and Papa hastens to open it, admitting a squalid, bleary-eyed girl, or woman, who enters with reluctant step, and sullen demeanor.

"Oh, it's *you*, Nance," says Papa, going back to the table and beginning to count out some money, eyeing the girl keenly meanwhile. "One dollar, – sit down, Nance, – two dollars, fifty; there! Now, Nance," turning sharply toward the girl, "what have you got, eh?"

"Nothin'," replies Nance sullenly; "nothin' that will suit you. I ain't had no luck."

“Nobody left nothin’ lyin’ round loose, I s’pose,” says Siebel with a coarse laugh, as he pockets the price of his day’s labor. “Wal, ye’ve come ter a poor place for sympathy, gal.” And he rises slowly and shuffles toward the door.

But Papa makes a gesture to stay him.

“Hold on, Josef!” he cries; “wait Nance!”

He seizes the bag, hurries it away into an inner room, and returns panting for breath. Drawing a stool toward the table, he perches himself thereon and leers across at the two sneak thieves.

“So ye ain’t had any luck, girl?” he says, in a wheedling tone, “and Josef, here, wants money. Do ye want more than ye’ve got Josef?”

“Ha ha! *Do* I?” And Josef slaps his pockets suggestively.

“Now listen, both of you. Suppose, I could help you two to earn some money easy and honest, what then?”

“Easy and *honest!*” repeats Siebel, with a snort of derision; “Oh, Lord!”

But the girl leans forward with hungry eyes, saying eagerly: “How? tell us how.”

“I’ll tell you. Suppose, just suppose, a certain rich lady —*very* rich, mind — being a little in my debt, should come here to-night to see me. And suppose she is very anxious not to be seen by any body — on account of her high position, you know — ”

“Oh, lip it livelier!” cries Siebel impatiently. “Stow yer swash.”

“Well; suppose you and Nance, here, was to come in sudden and see the lady face to face, why, for fear she might be called on by — say by Nance, she might pay a little, don’t you see — ”

But Siebel breaks in impatiently:

“Oh, skip the rubbish! Is there any body to bleed?”

“Is it a safe lay?” queries Nance.

“Yes, yes; it’s safe, of course,” cries Papa, thus compelled to come down to plain facts.

“Then let’s get down to business. Do you expect an angel’s visit here to-night?”

“Yes.”

“Well, what’s yer plan? Out with it: Nance and I are with ye, if ye divvy fair.”

Beckoning them to come closer, Papa Francoise leans across the table, and sinking his voice to a harsh whisper, unfolds the plan by which, without danger to themselves, they are to become richer.

It is a pretty plan but — “*Man sows; a whirlwind reaps.*”

CHAPTER XV. A COUNTERPLOT

It is a half hour later. The light in the room is increased by a sputtering additional candle, and Papa Francoise, sitting by the deal table, is gazing toward the door, an eager expectant look upon his face.

"If that old woman were here!" he mutters, and then starts forward at the sound of a low hesitating tap.

Hurrying to the door he unbars it with eager haste, and a smile of blandest delight overspreads his yellow face as the new-comer enters.

It is a woman, slender and graceful; a *lady*, who holds up her trailing black garments daintily as she steps across the threshold, repulsing the proffered hand-clasp with a haughty gesture, and gliding away from him while she says in a tone of distressful remonstrance:

"Man, *why* have you sent for me? Don't you know that there is such a thing as a last straw?"

"A last straw!" His voice is a doleful whine, his manner obsequious to servility. "Ah, my child, I wanted to see you so much; your poor mother wanted to see you so much!"

The woman throws back her veil with a gesture of fierce defiance, disclosing the face of Leslie Warburton pale and woe-stricken, but quite as lovely as when it shone upon Stanhope, surrounded by the halo of "Sunlight."

"You hypocrite!" she exclaims scornfully. "Parents do not persecute their children as you and the woman you call my mother have persecuted me. You gave me to the Ulimans when I was but an infant, – that I know, – but the papers signed by you do not speak of me as *your child*. Besides, does human instinct go for nothing? If you were my father would I loathe these meetings? Would I shudder at your touch? Would my whole soul rise in rebellion against your persecutions?"

Her eyes flash upon him and the red blood mounts to her cheeks. In the excitement of the moment she has forgotten her fear. Her voice rises clear and ringing; and Papa Francoise, thinking of two possible listeners concealed not far away, utters a low "sh-h-h-h!"

"Not so loud, my child," he says in an undertone; "not so loud. Ah! you ungrateful girl, we wanted to see you rich and happy, and this is how you thank us," affecting profound grief. "These rich people have taught you to loathe your poor old father!"

He sinks upon the stool as if in utter dejection, wipes away an imaginary tear, and then resumes, in the same guarded tone:

"My dear child, when we gave you to the Ulimans we were very poor, and they were very rich, – a great deal richer than when they died, leaving you only a few thousands."

"Which *you* have already extorted from me! I have given you every dollar I possess and yet you live like beggars."

"And we *are* beggars, my child. Some unfortunate speculations have swept away all our little gains, and now – "

"And now you want more money, – the old story. Listen: you have called me to-night from my husband's home, forced me to steal away from my guests like the veriest criminal, threatening to appear among them if I failed to come. At this moment you, who call yourself my father, stand there gloating and triumphant because of the power you hold over me. I knew you were capable of keeping your word, and rather than have my husband's home desecrated by such presence as yours, I am here. But I have come for the last time – "

"No, my child, oh! – "

But she pays no heed to his expostulations.

“I have come *for the last time!*” she says with fierce decision. “I have come to tell you that from this moment I defy you!”

“Softly, my dear; sh-h-h!”

His face, in spite of his efforts to retain its benign expression, is growing vindictive and cruel. He comes toward her with slow cat-like movements.

But she glides backward as he advances, and, putting the table between herself and him, she hurries on, never heeding that she has, by this movement, increased the distance from the outer door – and safety.

“You have carried your game too far!” she says. “When you first appeared before me, so soon after the loss of my adopted parents that it would seem you were waiting for that event – ”

“So we were, my child,” he interrupts, “for we had promised not to come near you during their lifetime.”

“You had promised *never* to approach me, *never* to claim me, as the documents I found among my mother’s – among Mrs. Uliman’s papers prove. Oh,” she cries, wringing her hands and lifting her fair face heavenward; “oh, my mother! my dear, sweet, gentle mother! Oh, my father! the truest, the tenderest a wretched orphan ever had on earth! that Death should take *you*, and Life bring me such creatures to fill your places! But they cannot, they never shall!”

“Oh, good Lord!” mutters Papa under his breath, “those fools upstairs will hear too much!”

But Leslie’s indignation has swallowed up all thought of caution, and her words pour out torrent-like.

“Oh, if I had but denounced you at the first!” she cries; “or forced you to prove your claim! Oh, if you had shown yourselves *then* in all your greed and heartlessness! But while I was Leslie Uliman, with only a moderate fortune, you were content to take what I could give, and not press what you are pleased to term your *claim* upon my affections. Affections! The word is mockery from your lips! In consideration of the large sums I paid you, you promised never to approach me in the future, and I, fool that I was, believing myself free from you, married David Warburton, only to find myself again your victim, to know you at last in all your baseness.”

Papa Francoise, unable to stem the tide of her eloquence, shows signs of anger, but she never heeds him.

“Since I became the wife of a rich man, you have been my constant torment and terror. Threatening and wheedling by turns, black-mailing constantly, you have drained my purse, you have made my life a burden. And I came here to-night to say, I will have no more of your persecution! All of *my* money has been paid into your hands, but not one dollar of my *husband’s* wealth shall ever come to you from me. I swear it!”

The old man again moves nearer.

“Ah, ungrateful girl!” he cries, feigning the utmost grief; “ah, unkind girl!”

And his affectation of sorrow causes two unseen observers to grin with delight, and brings to Leslie’s countenance an expression of intense disgust.

Moving back as he approaches, she throws up her head with an impatient gesture, and the veil which has covered it falls to her shoulders, revealing even by that dim light, the glisten of jewels in her ears – great, gleaming diamonds, which she, in her haste and agitation, has forgotten to remove before setting out upon this unsafe errand.

It is a most unfortunate movement, for two pair of eyes are peering down from directly above her, and two pair of avaricious hands itch to clutch the shining treasures.

Obeying Papa’s instructions, Josef Siebel and the girl Nance, had mounted the rickety stairway which they reached through a closet-like ante-room opening from the large one occupied by Papa and Leslie. And having stationed themselves near the top of the stairs they awaited there the coming of the lady who, surprised by their presence, was to proffer them hush-money with a liberal hand; but —

“The best-laid plans of men and mice gang aft a’leg.”

And Papa Francoise has not anticipated the spirited outbreak with which Leslie has astonished him. Startled by this, and fearful that; by a false move, he should entirely lose his power over her, he has made feeble efforts to stay the flow of her speech and neglected to give the signal for which the concealed sneak thieves have waited, until it was too late.

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