

Wells Carolyn

The Luminous Face



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Содержание

CHAPTER I – DOCTOR FELL	5
CHAPTER II – The Telephone Call	11
CHAPTER III – The Lindsays	17
CHAPTER IV – Pollard’s Threat	23
CHAPTER V – Mrs Mansfield’s Story	29
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	31

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CHAPTER I – DOCTOR FELL

“A bit thick, I call it,” Pollard looked round the group; “here’s Mellen been dead six weeks now, and the mystery of his taking-off still unsolved.”

“And always will be,” Doctor Davenport nodded. “Mighty few murders are brought home to the villains who commit them.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” drawled Phil Barry, an artist, whose dress and demeanor coincided with the popular idea of his class. “I’ve no head for statistics,” he went on, idly drawing caricatures on the margin of his evening paper as he talked, “but I think they say that only one-tenth of one per cent, of the murderers in this great and glorious country of ours are ever discovered.”

“Your head for statistics is defective, as you admit,” Doctor Davenport said, his tone scornful; “but percentages mean little in these matters. The greater part of the murders committed are not brought prominently before public notice. It’s only when the victim is rich or influential, or the circumstances of some especial interest that a murder occupies the front pages of the newspapers.”

“Old Mellen’s been on those same front pages for several weeks – off and on, that is,” Pollard insisted; “of course, he was a well-known man and his exit was dramatic. But all the same, they ought to have caught his murderer – or slayer, as the papers call him.”

“Him?” asked Barry, remembering the details of the case.

“Impersonal pronoun,” Pollard returned, “and probably a man anyway. ‘Cherchez la femme,’ is the trite advice, and always sounds well, but really, a woman seldom has nerve enough for the fatal deed.”

“That’s right,” Davenport agreed. “I know lots of women who have all the intent of murder in their hearts, but who never could pull it off.”

“A good thing, too,” Barry observed. “I’d hate to think any woman I know capable of murder! Ugh!” His long, delicate white hand waved away the distasteful idea with a gesture that seemed to dismiss it entirely.

There were not many in the Club lounge, the group of men had it mostly to themselves, and as the afternoon dusk grew deeper and the lights were turned on, several more went away, and finally Fred Lane rose to go.

“Frightfully interesting, you fellows,” he said, “but it’s after five, and I’ve a date. Anybody I can drop anywhere?”

“Me, please,” accepted Dean Monroe. “That is, if you’re going my way. I want to go downtown.”

“Was going up,” returned Lane, “but delighted to change my route. Come along, Monroe.”

But Monroe had heard a chance word from Doctor Davenport that arrested his attention, and he sat still.

“Guess I won’t go quite yet – thanks all the same,” he nodded at Lane, and lighted a fresh cigarette.

Dean Monroe was a younger man than the others, an artist, but not yet in the class with Barry. His square, firm-set jaw, and his Wedgwood blue eyes gave his face a look of power and determination quite in contrast with Philip Barry’s pale, sensitive countenance. Yet the two were friends – chums, almost, and though differing in their views on art, each respected the other’s opinions.

“Have it your own way,” Lane returned, indifferently, and went off.

“Crime detection is not the simple process many suppose,” Davenport was saying, and Monroe gave his whole attention. “So much depends on chance.”

“Now, Doctor,” Monroe objected, “I hold it’s one of the most exact sciences, and – ”
Davenport looked at him, as an old dog might look at an impertinent kitten.

“Being an exact science doesn’t interfere with dependence on chance,” he growled; “also, young man, are you sure you know what an exact science is?”

“Yeppy,” Monroe defended himself, as the others smiled a little. “It’s – why, it’s a science that’s exact – isn’t it?”

His gay smile disarmed his opponent, and Davenport, mounted on his hobby, went on: “You may have skill, intuition, deductive powers and all that, but to discover a criminal, the prime element is chance. Now, in the Mellen case, the chances were all against the detectives from the first. They didn’t get there till the evidences were, or might have been destroyed. They couldn’t find Mrs Gresham, the most important witness until after she had had time to prepare her string of falsehoods. Oh, well, you know how the case was messed up, and now, there’s not a chance in a hundred of the truth ever being known.”

“Does chance play any part in your profession, Doctor?” asked Monroe, with the expectation of flooring him.

“You bet it does!” was the reply. “Why, be I never so careful in my diagnosis or treatment, a chance deviation from my orders on the part of patient or attendant, a chance draught of wind, or upset nerves – oh, Lord, yes! as the Good Book says, ‘Time and Chance happeneth to us all.’ And no line of work is more precarious than establishing a theory or running down a clew in a murder case. For the criminal, ever on the alert, has all the odds on his side, and can block or divert the detective’s course at will.”

Doctor Ely Davenport was, without being pompous, a man who was at all times conscious of his own personality and sure of his own importance. He was important, too, being one of the most highly thought of doctors in New York City, and his self-esteem, if a trifle annoying, was founded on his real worth.

He often said that his profession brought him in contact with the souls of men and women quite as much as with their bodies, and he was fond of theorizing what human nature might do or not do in crucial moments.

The detection of crime he held to be a matter requiring the highest intelligence and rarest skill.

“Detection!” he exclaimed, in the course of the present conversation, “why detection is as hard to work out as the Fourth Dimension! As difficult to understand as the Einstein theory.”

“Oh, come now, Doctor,” Pollard said, smiling, “that’s going a bit too far. I admit, though, it requires a superior brain. But any real work does. However, I say, first catch your motive.”

“That’s it,” broke in Monroe, eagerly. “It all depends on the motive!”

“The crime does,” Davenport assented, drily, “but not the detection. You youngsters don’t know what you’re talking about – you’d better shut up.”

“We know a lot,” returned Monroe, unabashed. “Youth is no barrier to knowledge these days. And I hold that the clever detective seeks first the motive. You can’t have a murder without a motive, any more than an omelette without eggs.”

“True, oh, Solomon,” granted the doctor. “But the motive may be known only to the murderer, and not to be discovered by any effort of the investigator.”

“Then the murder mystery remains unsolved,” returned Monroe, promptly.

“Your saying so doesn’t make it so, you know,” drawled Phil Barry, in his impertinent way. “Now, to me it would seem that a nice lot of circumstantial evidence, and a few good clews would expedite matters just as well as a knowledge of the villain’s motive.”

“Circumstantial evidence!” scoffed Monroe.

“Sure,” rejoined Barry; “Give me a smoking revolver with initials on it, a dropped handkerchief, monogrammed, of course, half a broken cuff-link, and a few fingerprints, and I care not who knows

the motive. And if you can add a piece – no, a fragment of tweed, clutched in the victim’s rigid hand – why – I’ll not ask for wine!”

“What rubbish you all talk,” said Pollard, smiling superciliously; “don’t you see these things all count? If you have motive you don’t need evidence, and *vice versa*. That is, if both motive and evidence are the real thing.”

“There are only three motives,” Monroe informed. “Love, hate and money.”

“You’ve got all the jargon by heart, little one,” and Pollard grinned at him. “Been reading some new Detective Fiction?”

“I’m always doing that,” Monroe stated, “but I hold that a detective who can’t tell which of those three is the motive, isn’t worth his salt.”

“Salt is one commodity that has remained fairly inexpensive,” said Barry, speaking slowly, and with his eyes on his cigarette, from which he was carefully amputating the ash, “and a detective who could truly diagnose motive is not to be sneezed at. Besides, revenge is often a reason.”

“That comes under the head of hate,” promptly responded Monroe. “The three motives include all the gamut of human emotion, and some of their ramifications will include every murder motive that ever existed.”

“Fear?” quietly suggested Doctor Davenport.

“Part of hate,” said Monroe, but he was challenged by Pollard.

“Not necessarily. A man may fear a person whom he does not hate at all. But there’s another motive, that doesn’t quite fit your classification, Monroe.”

Before the inevitable question could be put another man joined the group.

“Hello, folks,” said Robert Gleason, as he sat down; “hope I don’t intrude – and all that. What you talking about?”

“Murder,” said Barry. “Murder as a Fine Art, you know.”

“Don’t like the subject. Let’s change it. Talk about the ladies, or something pleasant, you know. Eh?”

“Or Shakespeare and the musical glasses,” said Pollard.

“No musical glasses, nowadays,” bewailed Gleason. “No more clink the canakin, clink. It’s drink to me only with thine eyes. Hence, the preponderance of women and song in our lives, since the third of the trio is gone.”

Gleason was the sort of Westerner usually described as breezy. He was on intimate terms with everybody, whether everybody reciprocated or not. Not a large man, not a young man, he possessed a restless vitality, a wiry energy that gave him an effect of youth. About forty, he was nearer the age of Doctor Davenport than the others, who were all in their earliest thirties.

Nobody liked Gleason much, yet no one really disliked him. He was a bit forward, a little intrusive, but it was clear to be seen that those mannerisms were due to ignorance and not to any intent to be objectionable. He was put up at the Club by a friend, and had never really overstepped his privileges, though it was observable that his ways were not club ways.

“Yep, the Ladies – God bless ’em!” he went on. “What could be a better subject for gentlemen’s discussion? No personalities, of course; that goes without saying.”

“Then why say it?” murmured Pollard, without looking at the speaker.

“That’s so! Why, indeed?” was the genial response. “Now, you know, out in Seattle, where I hail from, there’s more – oh, what do you call it, sociability like, among men. I go into a club there and everybody sings out something gay; I come in here, and you all shut up like clams.”

“You objected to the subject we were discussing,” began Monroe, indignantly, but Barry interrupted, with a wave of his hand, “The effete East, my dear Gleason. Doubtless you’ve heard that expression? Yes, you would. Well, it’s our renowned effeteness that prevents our falling on your neck more effusively.”

“Guying me?” asked Gleason, with a quiet smile. “You see, boys, before I went to Seattle, I was born in New England. I can take a little chaff.”

“You’re going to tell us of your ancestry?” said Pollard, and though his words were polite his tone held a trace of sarcastic intent.

Gleason turned a sudden look on him.

“I might, if you really want me to,” he said, slowly. “I might give you the story of my life from my infancy, spent in Coggs’ Hollow, New Hampshire, to the present day, when I may call myself one of the leading citizens of Seattle, Wash.”

“What or whom do you lead?” asked Pollard, and again the only trace of unpleasantness was a slight inflection in his really fine voice.

“I lead the procession,” and Gleason smiled, as one who positively refuses to take offense whether meant or not. “But, I can tell you I don’t lead it here in New York! Your pace is rather swift for me! I’m having a good time and all that, but soon, it’s me for the wildness and woolliness of the good old West again! Why, looky here, I’m living in a hole in the wall – yes, sir, a hole in the wall!”

“I like that!” laughed Doctor Davenport. “Why, man, you’re in that apartment of McIlvaine’s – one of the best put-ups in town.”

“Yes, so Mac said,” Gleason exploded. “Why, out home, we’d call that a coop. But what could I do? This old town of yours, spilling over full, couldn’t fix me out at any hotel, so when my friend offered his palatial home, I took it – and – ”

“You’d be surprised at the result!” Barry broke in. “That’s because you’re a Western millionaire, Mr Gleason. Now we poor, struggling young artists think that apartment you’re in, one of the finest diggings around Washington Square.”

“But, man, there’s no service!” Gleason went on, complainingly. “Not even a hall porter! Nobody to announce a caller!”

“Well, you have that more efficient service, the – ”

“Yes! the contraption that lets a caller push a button and have the door open in his face!”

“Isn’t that just what he wants?” said Barry, laughing outright at Gleason’s disgusted look. “Then, you see, Friend Caller walks upstairs, and there you are!”

“Yes, *walks* upstairs. Not even an elevator!”

“But your friends don’t need one,” expostulated Davenport. “You’re only one flight up. You don’t seem to realize how lucky you are to get that place, in these days of housing problems!”

“Oh, well, ’tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church door, but it will serve,” said Gleason, with one of his sudden, pleasant smiles.

“I see your point, though, Mr Gleason,” said Dean Monroe. “And if I were a plutocrat from Seattle, sojourning in this busy mart, I confess I, too, should like a little more of the dazzling light in my halls than you get down there. I know the place, used to go there to see McIlvaine. And while it’s a decent size, and jolly well furnished, I can see how you’d prefer more gilt on your ginger bread.”

“I do, and I’d have it, too, if I were staying here much longer. But I’m going to settle up things soon now, and go back to home, sweet home.”

“How did you, a New Englander, chance to make Seattle your home?” asked Monroe, always of a curious bent.

“Had a chance to go out there and get rich. You see, Coggs’ Hollow, as one might gather from its name, was a small hamlet. I lived there till I was twenty-five, then, getting a chance to go West and blow up with the country, I did. Glad of it, too. Now, I’m going back there, and – I hope to take with me a specimen of your fair feminine. Yes, sir, I hope and expect to take along, under my wing, one of these little mopsy-haired, brief-skirted lassies, that will grace my Seattle home something fine!”

“Does she know it yet?” drawled Barry and Gleason stared at him.

“She isn’t quite sure of it, but I am!” he returned with a comical air of determination.

“You know her pretty well, then,” chaffed Barry.

“You bet I do! I ought to. She’s my sister’s stepdaughter.”

“Phyllis Lindsay!” cried Barry, involuntarily speaking the name.

“The same,” said Gleason, smiling; “and as I’m due there for dinner, I’ll be toddling now to make myself fine for the event.”

With a general beaming smile of good nature that included all the group, Gleason went away.

For a few moments no one spoke, and then Monroe began, “As I was saying, there are only three motives for murder – and I stick to that. But you were about to say, Pollard – ?”

“I was about to say that you have omitted the most frequent and most impelling motive. It doesn’t always result in the fatal stroke, but as a motive, it can’t be beat.”

“Go on – what is it?”

“Just plain dislike.”

“Oh, hate,” said Monroe.

“Not at all. Hate implies a reason, a grievance. But I mean an ineradicable, and unreasonable dislike – why, simply a case of:

‘I do not like you, Doctor Fell,
The reason why I cannot tell;
But this I know and know full well,
I do not like you, Doctor Fell.’

One Tom Brown wrote that, and it’s a bit of truth, all right!”

“One Martial said it before your friend Brown,” informed Doctor Davenport. “He wrote:

‘Non amo, te, Sabidi,
nec possum dicere quore;
Hoc tantum possum dicere,
non amo te.’

Which is, being translated for the benefit of you unlettered ones, ‘I do not love thee, Sabidius, nor can I say why; this only can I say, I do not love thee.’ There’s a French version, also.”

“Never mind, Doc,” Pollard interrupted, “we don’t want your erudition, but your opinion. You say you know psychology as well as physiology; will you agree that a strong motive for murder might be just that unreasonable dislike – that distaste of seeing a certain person around?”

“No, not a strong motive,” said Davenport, after a short pause for thought. “A slight motive, perhaps, by which I mean a fleeting impulse.”

“No,” persisted Pollard, “an impelling – a compelling motive. Why, there’s Gleason now. I can’t bear that man. Yet I scarcely know him. I’ve met him but a few times – had little or no personal conversation with him – yet I dislike him. Not detest or hate or despise – merely dislike him. And, some day I’m going to kill him.”

“Going to kill all the folks you dislike?” asked Barry, indifferently.

“Maybe. If I dislike them enough. But that Gleason offends my taste. I can’t stand him about. So, as I say, I’m going to kill him. And I hold that the impulse that drives me to the deed is the strongest murder motive a man can have.”

“Don’t talk rubbish, Manning,” and young Monroe gave him a frightened glance, as if he thought Pollard in earnest.

“It isn’t altogether rubbish,” said Doctor Davenport, as he rose to go, “there’s a grain of truth in Pollard’s contention. A rooted dislike of another is a bad thing to have in your system. Have it cut out, Pollard.”

“You didn’t mean it, did you, Manning?”

Monroe spoke diffidently, almost shyly, with a scared glance at Pollard.

The latter turned and looked at him with a smile. Then, glaring ferociously, he growled, “Of course I did! And if you get yourself disliked, I’ll kill you, too! *Booh!*”

They all laughed at Monroe’s frightened jump, as Pollard Booh’d into his face, and Doctor Davenport said, “Look out, Pollard, don’t scare our young friend into fits! And, remember, Monroe, ‘Threatened men live long?’ I’ve my car – anybody want a lift anywhere?”

“Take me, will you?” said Dean Monroe, and willingly enough, Doctor Davenport carried the younger man off in his car.

“You oughtn’t to do it, Pol, you know,” Barry gently remonstrated. “Poor little Monroe thinks you’re a gory villain, and he’ll mull over your fool remarks till he’s crazy – more crazy than he is already.”

“Let him,” said Pollard, smiling indifferently. “I only spoke the truth – as to that motive, I mean. Don’t you want to kill that Gleason every time you see him?”

“You make him seem like a cat – with nine or more lives! How *can* you kill a man every time you see him? It isn’t done!”

The two men left the Club together, and walked briskly down Fifth Avenue.

“Going to the Lindsays’ to-night, of course?” asked Barry, as they reached Forty-fifth Street, where he turned off.

“Yes. You?”

“Yes. See you later, then. You gather that Gleason has annexed the pretty Phyllis?”

“Looks like it, doesn’t it? I suppose the announcement will be made to-night at the dinner or the dance.”

“Suppose so. How I hate to see it that way. I’m in love with that little beauty myself.”

“Who isn’t?” returned Pollard, smiling, and then Barry turned off in his own street, and Pollard went on down toward his home, a small hotel on West Fortieth.

Held up for a few moments by the great tide of traffic at Forty-second Street, he glanced at his wrist watch and found it was ten minutes after six. And then, a taxicab passed him, and in it he saw Phyllis Lindsay. She did not see him, however, so, the traffic signal being given, he went on his way.

CHAPTER II – The Telephone Call

Every hour of every twenty-four is filled with amazing occurrences and startling episodes. Astonishing incidents and even more startling coincidences are happening every minute of every sixty minutes, but the fact that those most interested are unaware of these deeds is what makes the great cases of mystery.

Only an omniscient eye that could see all the activities of the few hours following the events just related could pierce the veil of doubt and uncertainty that overhung the ensuing tragedy.

The first human being to receive news of it was Miss Hester Jordan.

This capable and efficient young woman was the office nurse of Doctor Davenport, and her position was no sinecure.

Of a highly nervous temperament, she yet managed to preserve the proper calm and poise that nurses should always show, except when, at the end of a long, hard day, she became mentally and physically exhausted.

Though supposed to be off duty at six o'clock, her relief was frequently late in arriving and in this instance had not yet put in an appearance, though it was half past the hour.

Wearily, Miss Jordan answered telephone calls, striving to keep her tired voice pleasant and amiable.

"No," she would answer the anxious speakers, "Doctor Davenport is not in." "Yes, I expect him soon." "Can you leave a message?" "Yes, I will tell him." "He will surely be in by seven." "No, he left no message for you." "No, I don't know exactly where he is." "Yes, I will let you know."

Replies of this sort, over and over, strained her nerves to their furthest tension, and when at six-forty the telephone bell jangled again she took the receiver from its hook with what was almost a jerk.

"Hello," she said, unable to keep utter exasperation out of her voice.

But instead of a summons from some impatient patient, she heard a faint voice say, "Come, Doctor – oh, come quick – I'm – I'm done for – shot –"

There were more incoherent words, but Nurse Jordan couldn't catch them.

"Who are you?" she cried, alert now. "Who is speaking?"

"Gleason," came back the faint voice. "Wash' – t'n Square – come – can't you come quick –"

She could get no more. The voice ceased, and only blank silence met her frantic queries.

She hung up her receiver, and a sudden realization of the situation came to her. She seemed to see the scene – somebody shot – somebody telephoning that he was shot – somebody's voice getting weaker and ceasing to sound at all – the picture was too much for her tired brain, and she buried her face in her hands and sobbed hysterically from sheer nervous excitement.

Only for a moment did she give way. Nurse Jordan's training and personality was not to be conquered by a sudden shock of any sort.

Pulling herself together, she set to work to find the doctor.

This meant telephoning to two or three places where she knew there was a chance of locating him.

And at the third call she found him at Mrs Ballard's, and, though still shaken and quivering, she controlled her voice and told him distinctly of the tragic telephone call she had taken.

"Gleason!" cried the Doctor, "Washington Square? What number?"

But Nurse Jordan didn't know, and Doctor Davenport had to call up somebody to inquire.

He tried Mrs Lindsay, who was Gleason's sister, but her wire was busy and after an impatient moment, Davenport called Pollard, at his hotel.

"Here," he cried, handing the receiver to a staring butler, "take this and when the gentleman answers, ask him the address of Robert Gleason. Tell him Doctor Davenport's inquiring."

He then returned to the prescription he had been writing, and gave it to Mrs Ballard, who was indignant at having her interview with her doctor intruded upon.

“I’ll call to-morrow,” he soothed her; “you’ll be better in the morning. Let fish alone, and stick to simple diet for a few days. Get that address, Jenkins?”

“Yes, sir,” and the butler gave him a slip of paper.

“H’m – near Washington Square, not on it,” he murmured, looking at the written number, and then he ran down the Ballard front steps, and jumping into his waiting car, gave his chauffeur Gleason’s address.

“Wonder what’s up?” he thought, as his car rolled down Fifth Avenue. “Accident, I suppose. Jordan is always on edge this time of night. Have to take her excitement with a grain of salt.”

But when he reached the house, and pushed the button that indicated McIlvaine’s apartment, there was no response from the closed street door.

He rang again, long and insistently, then, still getting no encouragement, he pushed another button.

The door gave a grudging grunt, and, unwillingly, as it seemed, moved slowly inward.

Doctor Davenport was half way up the first flight of stairs, when a woman’s head appeared through a doorway.

“What do you want?” she inquired, a little crisply.

“Mr McIlvaine’s apartment.”

“That’s it, opposite,” she returned, more affable as she caught sight of the good-looking man. “Mr Gleason’s in there now.”

“Yes, he’s the man I want. Thank you, madame.”

She still stood, watching, as he rang the doorbell of the designated apartment.

There was no answer, nor any sound from inside. The doctor looked apprehensively at the door.

“Your key wouldn’t let me in, I suppose,” he said, turning back to the now frankly curious spectator.

“Oh, Lord, no! We don’t have interchangeable keys! He’s out, I expect. He’s mostly out.”

“But I want to get into his place – ”

“You do! And he not there! You a friend of his?”

“Why – yes; I’m his doctor – and I’m afraid he’s ill.”

“Oh – that. But look here – if you’re his doctor, why didn’t you know which was his place? You’re pretty slick, mister, but it’s a bit fishy – I think.”

She half withdrew back into her own doorway, but curiosity still detained her, and, too, Doctor Davenport’s demeanor impressed her as being quite all right.

“Nothing wrong – is there?” she whispered, coming across the small hall, and peering into the doctor’s face.

“Oh, no – I think not. But he may be helpless, and I must get in. I’ve never been here before, but I’ve been called by him just now. I *must* get in. Where’s the janitor?”

“Where, indeed? If you can find him, I’ll bless you forever. I’ve wanted him all day.”

“Isn’t he on duty?”

“He doesn’t know the meaning of duty. It’s something he’s never on.”

She smiled at him, and noticing her for the first time, Davenport saw that she was handsome, in a careless, rather blatant way.

Her ash-blond hair was loosely pinned up, and her dress – negligee or tea-gown – was fussy with lace, and not quite immaculate.

Her wide, light blue eyes returned his scrutiny, and for an instant each studied the other.

“There is something wrong,” she nodded, at last, “What you going to do, Doctor?”

“I’m going to get in. I’ve wasted precious time already.” He ran down the stairs and opening the front door summoned his chauffeur.

“Come up here, Chris,” he ordered, and the two returned together.

“Can we break in that door?” he said, ignoring the woman now.

“My husband’ll help,” she volunteered, but Chris was already delivering effective blows.

However, the lock held, and turning to her, Doctor Davenport said, “Do ask your husband to help us, please. I assure you it’s an emergency. I’m Doctor Ely Davenport.”

“Come here, Jim,” she obeyed orders. “This is Doctor Davenport.”

“I’ve heard of you,” said a big, commonplace looking man, appearing. “I’m Mansfield. What’s up?”

“I have reason to think Mr Gleason is very ill. He just telephoned for me. I must get in. These old doors are strongly built, so I’d like your help.”

Mansfield looked at him sharply, and seeming satisfied, put his shoulder to the door.

United effort succeeded, and the three men entered, the woman hanging back in fear.

Gleason lay on the floor, in a crumpled heap, and the first glance proclaimed him dead.

Stooping quickly, Doctor Davenport felt for his heart, and shook his head as he rose again to his feet.

“He’s dead,” he said, quietly. “Shot through the temple. Suicide, apparently, as the door was locked on the inside. Better take your wife away, Mr Mansfield. She’ll be getting hysterical.”

“No, I won’t,” declared the lady referred to, but she was quite evidently pulling herself together. “Let me come in.”

“No,” forbade Davenport. “You’ve no call in here. Go back home, both of you. I shall send for the police and wait till they come.”

But the doctor hesitated as he was about to touch the telephone.

The matter was mysterious. “Suicide, of course,” he ruminated, as he remembered the message received by Nurse Jordan. “Shot himself, then, still living, cried to me for help. Wish I knew exactly what he said to Jordan. But, anyway, I’m not going to disturb things – there may be trouble ahead. Guess I’ll leave the telephone alone – and everything else.”

“Sit right here, Chris,” he said, “and don’t move or stir. Look around all you like – note anything and everything that strikes you. I’ll be back soon.”

Closing the broken door behind him, he went to the Mansfield’s apartment and asked to use their telephone. On this, he called the police, while the two listened eagerly.

“Why did he do it?” broke out Mrs Mansfield, as the receiver was hung up. “Oh, Doctor, tell us something about it! I’m eaten alive with curiosity.”

Her big blue eyes shone with excitement, which her husband tried to suppress.

“Now, be quiet, Dottie,” he said, laying a hand on her shoulder.

“I won’t be quiet,” and she shook off the hand. “Here’s a great big mystery right in my own house – on my own floor – and you say, ‘be quiet!’ I’ve got a right to know all about it, and I’m going to! I’m going up now, to tell Mrs Conway!”

Her husband held her back forcibly, but Doctor Davenport said, “Of course, it must become known, and if Mrs Mansfield enjoys spreading the news, I suppose she has a right to do so. No one may enter the Gleason rooms, though – understand that.”

“Go on, then, Dottie,” Mansfield said; “maybe you’d better.”

“She’s very excitable,” he sighed, as his wife ran up the stairs.

“She’s better off, unburdening her news, than being thwarted,” said the doctor, indifferently. “Let her do what she likes. What can you tell me, Mr Mansfield, of your neighbor, Gleason?”

“Not much, Doctor. He kept to himself, as far as the people in this house were concerned. We didn’t know him socially – no one in the house did – and though he said good-day, if we met in the halls, it was with a short and unsocial manner.”

“Nobody actively disliked him?”

“Nobody knew him well enough for that – unless – well, no, I may say none of us knew him.”

“Yet you hesitated,” the doctor looked at him keenly; “why did you?”

“A mere passing thought – better left unspoken.”

“All right, Mr Mansfield – perhaps you are wise. But, if asked to, you’d better speak your thought to the police.”

“Oh, sure. I’m a law-abiding citizen – I hope. Will they be here soon?”

“Nothing happens soon in matters like this. It’s delay, linger and wait on the part of everybody. I’m bothered – I’ve important affairs on hand – but here I must stick, till the arm of the law gets ready to strike.”

Davenport returned to Gleason’s apartment, where the stolid Chris kept guard.

“Well?” said the doctor, glancing at his man.

“Looks like a suicide to me, sir. Looks like he shot himself – there’s the revolver – I haven’t touched it. And then he fell over all in a heap.”

“It seems he telephoned after he shot – ”

“He did? How could he?”

“Look again at his position. Near the desk, on which the telephone sits. He might have shot, and then – ”

“Not that shot in his temple!”

“No; but there may be another. I haven’t looked carefully yet. Ah, yes – see, Chris, here’s another bullet hole, in his left shoulder. Say, he fired that shot, then, getting cold feet, called off the suicide idea and telephoned for me. Then, getting desperate again, fired a second shot through his temple, which, of course, did for him – oh, a fanciful tale, I know – but, you see, the detective work isn’t up to me. When the police come they’ll look after that and I can go.”

But the police, arriving, were very much interested in this theory of Doctor Davenport’s.

Prescott, an alert young detective, who came with the inspector especially interested the physician by his keen-witted and clearly put questions.

“Did you know this man?” he asked among his first queries.

“Yes,” returned Davenport, “but not well. I’ve never been here before. He’s Robert Gleason, a very rich man, from Seattle. Staying here this winter, in this apartment which belongs to McIlvaine, a friend of Gleason’s.”

“Where’s McIlvaine?”

“In California. Gleason took over the place, furnished and all, for the winter months.”

“Any relatives?”

“Yes”; Davenport hated to drag in the Lindsays, but it had to be done. “His sister, Mrs Lindsay, lives in upper Park Avenue.”

“Have you called her up?”

“No; I thought wiser to do nothing, until you people came. Also, I’m a very busy man, and outside my actual duty here, I can’t afford to spend much time.”

“I see. Then the sister is the only relative in New York?”

“I think so. There are two Lindsay children, but they’re not hers. She married a widower.”

“I see. And the address?”

Doctor Davenport gave it, and then started to go.

“Wait a minute, please,” urged Prescott. “Had the dead man any friends, that you know of?”

“Oh, yes. Many of them. He was put up at the Camberwell Club, by McIlvaine himself. And he had many friends among the members.”

“Names?”

Doctor Davenport thought quickly, and decided to give no names of the group that had been with Gleason that same afternoon.

He gave the names of three other Club members, and sending Chris down ahead, again endeavored to depart himself.

Again Prescott detained him.

“Sorry, Doc,” he said, pleasantly, “but you’re here now, and something tells me it’ll be hard to get hold of you again, once I lose you. Inspector Gale, here, is putting through the necessary red tape and all that, and he’ll see to notifying relatives and friends, and he’ll take charge of the premises – but – well, I’ve a hunch, this isn’t a suicide.”

“What, murder?” cried the doctor, his quick acceptance of the suggestion proving the thought had been in his own mind.

“Well, you never can tell. And I want to get all the sidelight on the case I can. Was Mr Gleason happy – and all that?”

“Yes; so far as I know. I tell you I was not an intimate – scarcely enough to be called a friend – merely an acquaintance.”

“I see. Had the man any enemies?”

The direct glance that accompanied these words discomfited Davenport a little.

“Why do you ask me that?” he said, shortly. “How should I know?”

“Oh, it’s a thing anybody might know – even a mere acquaintance. And your desperate hurry to get away makes me think you don’t take kindly to this catechism.”

“Rubbish! I’m a busy man – a doctor sometimes is. I’ve numerous and important engagements for the evening. Now, if that’s incriminating, make the most of it!”

“Fie, fie, don’t get peeved! Now, tell me once again, what the injured man said to your nurse and I’ll let you go.”

“I don’t know the exact words. I’ve not seen her. But he called my office, said he was shot, and for me to come right here and quickly. That’s all I know of the message. Now as to my report – it’s that the man received two shots – whether by his own hand or another’s. One, in his left shoulder – and another – the fatal one – through his temple, producing instant death. You can get me at any time – if necessary. But I don’t want to be hauled over here, or summoned to headquarters to repeat these facts. I’ll send a typed report, and I’ll do anything in reason – but I know how you detectives mull over things, and how your slow processes eat up time – which though it seems of little account to you, is mighty valuable to me.”

“Yes, sir – yes, sir. Now if you’ll speak to Inspector Gale a minute, you can go.”

Grunting an assent, Davenport waited for the Inspector to finish writing a bit of memorandum on which he was busily engaged.

The doctor was sitting in a big easy chair, and as he squirmed impatiently, he felt something soft beneath his heavy frame.

Feeling about the chair cushions, he found it was fur, and a fleeting thought that he had sat on a cat passed through his mind.

A second later he knew it was a fur strip, probably a neck piece, doubtless belonging to some woman.

Now, the doctor had a very soft place in his heart for the feminine sex in general, and his mind leaped to the idea of this fur, left there by some indiscreet girl visitor, and the possibility of its getting the doubtless innocent young lady into a moil of trouble.

Also, he had a dim, indistinct notion that he recognized the fur, at which he had stolen a furtive look.

At any rate, unseen by the Inspector or either of his two colleagues present, Davenport adroitly slipped the small fur collar into his capacious overcoat pocket, and sat, looking as innocent of duplicity as a canary-fed cat.

“Now, Doctor,” and Inspector Gale frowned importantly, “this may be a simple case of suicide, and again it may not. So, I want your opinion as to whether it is possible that both those shots were fired by Mr Gleason himself.”

“Quite possible, Inspector, and, it seems to me, decidedly probable, as I cannot see how the victim could have telephoned, with a murderer in the room.”

“That’s apparently true, but we have to think of even the remotest possibilities. If the murderer – granting there was one – had been merely intending to frighten his victim, maybe a robber, he might have been – and if after that call for help, the intruder finished off his victim – oh, well, all these ideas must be looked into, you know. The case is not entirely clear to me.”

“Nor to me,” returned Davenport, “but I cannot feel that I can help you in your deductions. Answering your questions, I say it would have been quite possible for Mr Gleason to have fired those two shots himself. You see the first one hit his left shoulder, leaving his right arm available to fire the second shot.”

“Why did he merely maim himself first?”

“Heavens, man! I don’t know. Missed aim, perhaps – or, just shooting for practice! Such questions make me mad! If you want any more medical statements, say so – if not, for goodness’ sake, let me go!”

“For goodness’ sake, let him go,” repeated Prescott, and Dr Davenport went.

“Some mess,” Prescott said, after the doctor’s angry footsteps tramped down the stairs.

CHAPTER III – The Lindsays

“You’re sure no one in this building knew Mr Gleason any better than you two did?” Prescott asked of the Mansfields, as he put them through a course of questioning.

“Oh, no,” Mrs Mansfield informed him, volubly, “and we didn’t know him much, but being on the same floor – there are only two apartments on each floor, we saw him once in a while, going in or out, and he would bow distantly, and mumble ‘good-morning,’ but that’s all.”

“You heard no noise from his apartment, during the last hour?”

“No; but I wasn’t noticing. It’s across the hall, you know, and the walls are thick in these old houses.”

“Was he going out, do you think?” asked Jim Mansfield, thoughtfully. “He always went out to dinner.”

“Probably he was, then. It’s evident he was dressing – he was in his shirtsleeves – his day shirt – and his evening clothes were laid out on the bed.”

“When did it happen?”

“As nearly as I can make out, he telephoned for the doctor about quarter before seven. He must have expired shortly after. As I figure it – oh, well, the medical examiner is in there now, and I don’t want to discuss the details until he gets through his examination. It’s an interesting case, but I’m only out for side evidence. What about Gleason’s visitors? Did he have many?”

“No,” offered Mrs Mansfield, “but he had some. I’ve heard – well, people go in there, and he was mighty glad to see them, judging by the gay laughter and chatter.”

“Oh – lady friends?”

Mrs Mansfield smiled, but her husband said quickly, “Shut up, Dottie! You talk too much! You’ll get us involved in this case, and make a lot of trouble. He had callers occasionally, Mr Prescott, but we never knew who they were and we’ve no call to remark on them.”

“Well, I give you the call. Don’t you see, man, your information may be vitally necessary – ”

Here Prescott was recalled to the Gleason apartment.

The medical examiner had concluded his task. He agreed with Doctor Davenport that the shots could have been fired by Gleason himself, though, but for the locked door, he should have thought them the acts of another person. The presence of powder stains proved that the shots were fired at close range, but not necessarily by the dead man himself.

Still, the door being locked on the inside, it looked like suicide.

“No,” Prescott disagreed, “that doesn’t cut any ice. You see, it’s a spring catch. It fastens itself when closed. If an intruder was here and went out again, closing that door behind him, it would have locked itself.”

“That’s right,” assented Gale. “So, it may be suicide or murder. But we’ll find out which. We’ve hardly begun to investigate yet. Now, we must let his sister know.”

“It’s pretty awful to spring it on her over the telephone,” demurred Prescott, as Gale started for the desk.

“Got to be done,” Inspector Gale declared, “I mean we’ve got to tell somebody who knew him. How about those men at the Club?”

“That’s better,” consented Prescott. “Just call the Camberwell Club, and get any one of those Davenport mentioned. But, I say, Gale, use the Mansfields’ telephone. I’m saving up this one for fingerprint work.”

“Oh, you and your fingerprint work!” Gale grumbled. “You attach too much importance to that, Prescott.”

“All right, but you let the telephone alone. And the revolver, too. Why, I wouldn’t have those touched for anything! I’ll get them photographed to-morrow. Shall I call the Club?”

“Yes,” grunted Gale, and Prescott went back to the opposite apartment.

“Sorry to trouble you people,” he said, with his winning smile, “but if you object, say so, and I’ll run out to a drug store.”

“None around here,” vouchsafed Mansfield, looking a little annoyed at the intrusion, however. “Isn’t there a telephone in the Gleason rooms?”

“Yes; but I don’t want to use that.” Prescott had already taken up the Mansfield receiver. “Please let me have this one,” and a bright smile at Dottie Mansfield made her his ally.

Getting the Club, Prescott asked for the names Davenport had supplied. Only one man was available, and Mr Harper was finally connected.

“What is it?” he asked, curtly.

“Mr Robert Gleason has been found dead in his home,” Prescott stated; “and as you’re said to be a friend of his, I’m asking you to inform his sister, or – ”

“Indeed I won’t! Why should I be asked to do such an unpleasant errand? I’ve merely a nodding acquaintance with Mr Gleason. Dead, you say? Apoplexy?”

“No; shot.”

“Good God! Murdered?”

“We don’t know. Murder or suicide. I’m Detective Prescott. I want you to tell his sister, or advise me how best to break the news to her. She’s Mrs Lindsay – ”

“Yes, yes – I know. Well, now, let me see. Dead! Why, the man was here this afternoon.”

“Yes; apparently he returned home safely, and while dressing for dinner, either shot himself or was shot by some one else.”

“Never shot himself in the world! Robert Gleason? No, never shot himself. Well, let me see – let me see. Suppose you call up some closer friend of his. Really, I knew him but slightly.”

“All right. Who was his nearest friend?”

“Humph – I don’t know. He wasn’t long on intimate friends!”

“Little liked?”

“I wouldn’t say that – but close friends, now – let me see; he was talking this afternoon with a bunch – Doctor Davenport, Phil Barry, Dean Monroe, Manning Pollard – oh, yes, Fred Lane. And maybe others. But I know I saw him in the group I’ve just mentioned. Call up Davenport.”

“Tell me the next best one to call.”

“Barry – but wait – they had a quarrel recently. Try Lane or Pollard.”

“Addresses?”

These were given and as soon as he could get connection, Prescott called Pollard.

But he was out, and Philip Barry was also.

“Can’t expect to get anybody at the dinner hour,” Prescott said, and looked at his watch. “After eight, already. One more throw, and then I make straight for the sister.”

Fred Lane proved available.

“No!” he exclaimed at the news Prescott told. “You don’t mean it! Why I was talking with him yesterday. And only to-night I heard – Oh, I say,” he pulled himself together. “Tell me the details. Can I do anything?”

“You sure can. Break it to Mrs Lindsay, Gleason’s sister.”

“Oh, not that! Don’t ask me to. I’m – I’m no good at that sort of thing. I say – let me off it. Get somebody else – ”

“I’ve been trying to, and I can’t. If you won’t do it, I’ll have to call up the lady and tell her myself – or go there.”

“That’s it. Go there. And, I say, get her son – her stepson, you know – young Lindsay. He’s not related to Gleason – and so – ”

“That’s it! Fine idea. I’ll see the young man. What’s his name?”

“Louis Lindsay. There’s a girl, too. Miss Phyllis. She’s more of a man than her brother – oh, not a masculine type at all – I don’t mean that, but she’s a whole lot stronger character than the chappie. It might be better to tell her. But do as you like.”

“Thank you for the information, Mr Lane. Good-by.”

“Oh, wait a minute. Do you think Gleason killed himself?”

“Dunno yet. Lots of things to be looked into. I don’t think it will be a difficult case to handle, yet it has its queer points. Did you say you heard something – ”

“Oh, no – no.”

“Out with it, man. Better tell anything you know.”

“Don’t know anything. You going to the Lindsays’ now?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Well, there’s a dinner party on there. A big one – followed by a dance. I mean it was to have been followed by a dance. Your news will change their plans!”

“You’re rather unconcerned yourself! Didn’t you like Gleason?”

“Not overly. Yet he was a big man in many ways. But, come now, wasn’t he bumped off?”

“By whom?”

“I’m not saying. But while you’re at the Lindsays’, look out Dean Monroe – and ask him what he knows about it!”

“Dean Monroe! The artist?”

“Yes. Oh, he isn’t the criminal – if there *is* a criminal. But maybe he can give you a tip. I’m mighty interested. How can I hear the result of your investigations?”

“Guess it’ll be in the morning papers. Anyway, I may want to see you.”

“All right; call me up or call on me whenever you like. I’m interested – a whole lot!”

“Guess I’d better go right to the Lindsay house,” Prescott said, going back to the Gleason apartment. “There’s a big party on there, and it ought to be stopped. It’s an awkward situation. You see, Mrs Lindsay, Gleason’s sister, has two step-children – they’re having the party, as I make it out. But they’ve got to be told.”

“Yes,” agreed Gale; “go along, Prescott. And you’d better have somebody with you.”

“Not at first. Let me handle it alone, and I can call Briggs if I want him.”

“Go on, then. The sooner we start something the better. I incline more and more to the murder theory, but if the sister thinks there was any reason for suicide – well, run along, Prescott.”

Prescott ran along, and reached the Lindsay home, on upper Park Avenue, shortly after nine o’clock.

He was admitted by a smiling maid, and he asked for Mr Lindsay.

“He’s still at dinner,” she returned, doubtfully, glancing at Prescott’s informal dress. “Can you come some other time?”

“No; the matter is urgent. You must ask him to leave the table and come to me here.”

His manner was imperative, and the maid went on her errand.

In a moment Louis Lindsay came to Prescott, where the detective waited, in the reception hall.

“What is it, my man?” said Lindsay, looking superciliously at his visitor. “I can’t see you now.”

“Just a moment, Mr Lindsay. Listen, please.”

Noting the grave face and serious voice of the speaker, young Lindsay seemed to become panic-stricken.

“What is it?” he said, in a gasping whisper. “Oh, what *is* it?”

“Why do you look like that?” Prescott said quickly. “What do you *think* it is?”

“I don’t know – I’m sure! Tell me!”

The boy, for he was little more than a boy, was ghastly white, his hands trembled and his lips quivered. He took hold of a chair back to steady himself, and Prescott, remembering what he had been told of Miss Lindsay, was tempted to ask for her. But he somehow felt he must go on with this scene.

“It’s about your uncle – or rather your step-uncle – Mr Gleason.”

Lindsay slumped into a chair, and raised his wild, staring black eyes to Prescott’s face.

“Go on,” he muttered; “what about him?”

“Didn’t you expect him here to-night?”

“Yes – yes – and he didn’t come – what is it? Has anything happened? What has happened? Who did it?”

“Who did what?” Prescott flung the words at him, in a fierce low tone. “What do you know? Out with it!”

His menacing air quite finished the young man, and he buried his face in his hands, sobbing convulsively.

A slight rustle was heard, and a lovely vision appeared in the doorway.

“What is going on?” said a clear young voice. “Louis, what is the matter?”

Phyllis Lindsay faced the stranger as she put her query.

The sight nearly dazzled Prescott, for Miss Lindsay was at her best that night.

She was a little thing, with soft dark hair, bundled about her ears, soft, dark eyes, that were now challenging Prescott sternly, and a slim, dainty little figure, robed in sequin-dripping gauze, from which her soft neck and shoulders rose like a flower from its sheath.

“Who are you?” she asked, not rudely, but with her eyes wide in dismay. “What are you doing to my brother?”

“Miss Lindsay?” and Prescott bowed politely. “I bring distressing news. Your uncle – that is, Mr Robert Gleason, is – has – well, perhaps frankness is best – he is dead.”

“Robert Gleason!” Phyllis turned as pale as her brother, but preserved her calm. “Tell me – tell me all about it.”

She, too, placed her little hand on a chair, as if the grip of something solid helped, and turned her anxious eyes to Prescott.

“I thought better to tell you young people,” he began, “and let you tell your mother – Mr Gleason’s sister.”

“Yes; I will tell her,” said Phyllis, with dignity. “Go on, Mr – ”

“Prescott,” he supplied. “The facts in brief are these. Mr Gleason called up Doctor Davenport on the telephone, and asked the doctor to come to him, as he was – well, hurt. When the doctor reached there, Mr Gleason was dead.”

“What killed him?” Phyllis spoke very quietly, and looked Prescott straight in the face. Yet the alert eyes of the detective saw her fingers clench more tightly on the chair, and noticed her red lips lose a little color as they set themselves in a firm line.

He thought her even more beautiful thus, than when she had first arrived, smiling.

“The Medical Examiner is not quite sure, Miss Lindsay. It may be that he took his own life – or it may be – ”

“That he was – murdered,” she said, her gaze never wavering from Prescott’s face.

It was a bit disconcerting, and the detective oddly felt himself at a disadvantage. Yet he went on, inexorably.

“Yes; either deduction is possible.”

“How – how was he killed?”

At last her calm gave way a little. The tremor of her voice as she asked this question proved her not so self-controlled as she had seemed.

“He was shot.” Prescott watched both brother and sister as he spoke. But Louis still kept his face hidden in his hands, and Phyllis was once more perfectly calm.

“What with?” she went on.

“His own revolver. It was found close beside the body, and so as I said, it might have been – ”

“Yes, I know what you said.” Phyllis interrupted him impatiently, as if deeming repetition of the theories unnecessary. “How shall we tell Millicent?”

“Mrs Lindsay?” asked Prescott respectfully.

“Yes; we have never called her mother, of course.” She looked at Louis. “Go to your rooms, if you wish, Buddy,” she said, kindly, and Prescott marveled at this slight, dainty young thing taking the situation into her own hands.

“No, I’ll stand by,” Louis muttered, as he rose slowly. “What shall we do? Call her out here?”

“That would do,” said Prescott, “or take her to some other room. The guests must be told – and the party – ”

“The party broken up and the guests sent home – ” Phyllis declared. “But first, let’s tell Millicent. She’ll be terribly upset.”

At Phyllis’ dictation, Prescott and young Lindsay went into the little library. Like the other rooms this was beflowered for the party and scant of furniture, for dancing purposes. The Lindsay apartment was a fine one, yet not over large, and sounds of conversation and light laughter came from the dining room. Phyllis quickly brought Mrs Lindsay from the dinner table, and they joined the men.

As the girl had predicted, her stepmother was greatly shocked and her nerves utterly upset by Prescott’s story.

The detective said little after outlining the facts, but listened closely while these members of the family talked. Though there on the ungracious errand of breaking the sad news, he was also eagerly anxious to learn any hints as to the solution of the mystery.

“Oh, of course, he never killed himself!” declared the dead man’s sister. “Why should he? He had everything life can offer to live for. He was rich, talented, and engaged to Phyllis, whom he adored – worshipped! How can any one think he would kill himself?”

“But the evidence is uncertain,” Prescott began; “you see – ”

“Of course the evidence is uncertain,” Phyllis broke in. “It always is uncertain! You detectives don’t know evidence when you see it! Or you read it wrongly and make false deductions!”

“Why, Phyllis,” remonstrated her brother, “don’t talk like that! You may – ” he hesitated a long time, “you may make trouble,” he concluded, lamely.

“Trouble, how?” Prescott caught him up.

“Don’t you say another word, Louis,” Phyllis ordered him. “You keep still. Millicent, you go to your room, and let Martha look after you. Louis, you either go to your room – or, if you stay here, don’t babble. Mind, now! Mr Prescott, we must tell the guests. Come with me and we will tell those at the table. They will go home, and those who come later can be told at the door and sent away.”

“Very well, Miss Lindsay,” Prescott replied, feeling that here was a strength of character he had never seen equaled in such a mere slip of a girl!

They went to the dining room, and without preamble, Phyllis said:

“Listen, people. I’ve very bad news. Mr Gleason – Robert Gleason – has just been found dead in his home. He was shot – ” Her voice, steady till this moment, suddenly broke down, and as her eyes filled with tears, Philip Barry, who had already risen, hastened to her side.

There was a general commotion, the ladies rising now, and with scared faces, whispering to one another.

“Wait a moment,” Prescott spoke, as some seemed about to leave; “I must ask you all if you know anything of importance concerning the movements of Mr Gleason this afternoon or evening. I am a detective, the case is a little mysterious, and it may be necessary to question some of you. Will any one volunteer information?”

Nobody did so, and Prescott, steeling himself against the entreaties of Phyllis that all be allowed to depart, asked several of their knowledge of the man.

Most of these declared they were unacquainted with Mr Gleason's whereabouts on that day, and some denied knowing the man at all. These were allowed to go, and at last, Prescott found himself surrounded by the men who knew Gleason and who had seen him that very day.

These included Barry, Pollard and Monroe, of the group that had talked together at the Club in the afternoon, and one or two others who had seen Gleason during the day.

Each was questioned as to the probability, in his opinion, of Robert Gleason having shot himself.

"I can't make a decision," Philip Barry said; "to my mind, Gleason would be quite capable of doing any crazy or impulsive thing. He may have had a fit of depression, he sometimes did, and feeling extra blue, may have wanted to end it all. But, also it's quite on the cards that somebody did for him."

"Why do you say that, Mr Barry?" asked the detective.

"Because you asked me for my opinion," was the retort. "That's it. I would believe anything of Gleason. I'm not knocking him – but he was a freak – eccentric, you know –"

"Oh, not quite that," Dean Monroe spoke very seriously. "Mr Gleason was a Westerner, and had different ideas from some of ours, but he was a good sort –"

"Good sort!" scoffed Barry. "I'd like to know what you call a bad sort, then!"

"Hush, Phil," Phyllis said, quietly. "Don't talk like that of a man who is dead."

"Forgive me, Phyllis, I forgot myself. Well, Mr Prescott, I can only say you'll have to solve your mystery on the evidence you find; for I assure you Mr Gleason would fit into almost any theory."

Prescott questioned Dean Monroe next, remembering what Lane had told him over the telephone.

But, though interested, Monroe told nothing definitely suggestive, and at last Prescott said, directly, "Do you know anything, Mr Monroe, that makes you suspect that Mr Gleason might have been killed by an intruder?"

"Why – why, no," stammered the young artist, quite palpably prevaricating.

"I think you do, and I must remind you that I have a right to demand the truth."

"Well, then," Monroe looked positively frightened, "then – I say, Manning, maybe it'll be better for me to speak out – I heard somebody say to-day, that he meant to – to kill Gleason."

"Indeed," and Prescott, accustomed as he was to surprises, stared wonderingly at the speaker. "And who said that?"

But Monroe obstinately shook his head and spoke no word.

Philip Barry raised his head with a jerk and looked straight at Manning Pollard. Pollard's face was white, and his voice not quite steady, but he stated, "I said it."

"Why?" asked Prescott, simply.

"Oh – oh, because – I – I don't – didn't like Gleason."

"And so you killed him?"

"I haven't said so."

"I'm asking you."

"And I'm not obliged to incriminate myself, am I?" Pollard looked at him coldly.

"Where were you between six and seven this evening?"

"I refuse to tell," Pollard answered, with a belligerent look, and Prescott nodded his head, with a satisfied smile.

CHAPTER IV – Pollard’s Threat

“Of course, you know, Mr Pollard,” Prescott said, “you are incriminating yourself by your refusal to answer my question. No one is as yet under suspicion of crime – indeed, it is not certain that a crime has been committed – but it is my duty to learn all I can of the circumstances of the case, and I must ask you what you meant by a threat to kill Mr Gleason.”

“It wasn’t exactly a threat,” Pollard returned, speaking slowly, and looked decidedly uncomfortable; “it was merely a – a statement.”

“A statement that you would like to – to see him dead?”

“Well, yes, practically that.”

“Why?”

“Because I didn’t like the man. I took a dislike to him the first time I saw him, and I never got over it.”

“But that’s not reason enough to kill a man.”

“I haven’t said I killed him. But I hold it is reason enough. I hold that an utter detestation of seeing a person around, a positive irritation at his mere presence, is a stronger motive for murder than the more obvious ones of jealousy or greed.”

“You weren’t jealous of Mr Gleason?”

Pollard started, the detective had scored that time.

But he replied, quietly. “Not jealous, no.”

“Envious?”

“Your questions are a bit intrusive, but I think I may safely say many men were envious of Mr Gleason.”

“On what grounds?”

“Oh, he was wealthy, important and of a happy, satisfied disposition. Truly an enviable person.”

Pollard’s manner was indifferent and his tone light and flippant. Prescott a judge of human nature and an expert detective, concluded the man was sparring for time, or trying to camouflage his guilt with an effect of careless unconcern in the matter.

“I think, Mr Pollard,” he said, seriously, “I shall have to insist on knowing your whereabouts at the time of Mr Gleason’s death.”

“And I refuse to tell you. But, look here, Mr Prescott, as I understand it, Mr Gleason was found dead in his room, with the door fastened. How do you argue from that a murderer at all? How could he get out and lock the door behind him? Where was the key?”

“Spring catch,” Prescott returned, shortly. “Snapped shut as he closed the door.”

“Oh, come now, Pollard,” said Philip Barry, “say where you were at that time. Six to seven, was it? Why, Pol, you were walking down Fifth Avenue with me. We left the Club together.”

“Did we?” said Pollard. His face was inscrutable. It seemed as if he had made up his mind that no information should be gathered from his words or manner. Prescott, watching him closely thought he had never seen such a strange man, and decided that he was the criminal he sought, and a mighty clever one at that.

Manning Pollard was tall and large, and of fine presence. He would not be called handsome, but he had a well-shaped head, well set on his broad shoulders. His special charm was his smile, which, though rare, was spontaneous and illuminated his face with a real radiance whenever he saw fit to favor his auditors. However, his expression was usually calm and thoughtful, while occasionally it became supercilious and even cynical.

When displeased, Pollard was impossible. He shut up like a clam and preserved a stony silence or blurted out some caustic, almost rude speech.

“Yes, we did,” went on Barry, eagerly. “And I left you at Forty-fourth Street.”

“Did you?” said Pollard, in the same colorless voice.

Now Philip Barry had little love for Manning Pollard. To begin with, they were both in love with the same girl, and – as either of them would have agreed – there was no use in going further than that.

Moreover, they were of widely different temperament. Barry was all artist; dreamy, impractical, full of enthusiasms and a bit visionary. Pollard was a hard-headed business man, successful, rich and influential, but not by any means universally liked, by reason of his sarcastic and cynical outlook. Yet he was polite and courteous of demeanor, and his imperturbable calm and unshakable poise gave him an air of superiority that could not be gainsaid.

Up to a few months ago the two men had been chums – were still – but the advent of Phyllis Lindsay into their circle had made a difference.

For, though many men admired the little beauty, Pollard and Barry were the most favored and each felt an ever-increasing hope that he might win her.

Then along had come Robert Gleason, the brother of Phyllis’ stepmother. He was at the Lindsay home continually, and by some means or for some reason he had persuaded the girl to marry him. At least, he implied that at the Club in the afternoon, and both Pollard and Barry had been greatly disturbed thereby.

But others were also greatly disturbed and the news, which had flown like wildfire, had caused panic in the breasts of several who were to attend the dinner or the dance.

Then had come the dinner, and the unexplained absence of Gleason. They had telephoned his place twice, but could get no response, Phyllis told the detective in the course of his questioning.

“H’m,” Prescott listened; “at what time did you call him up, Miss Lindsay?”

“Why, about seven o’clock, I think. I was dressing for dinner, and I happened to think of something I wanted to ask Mr Gleason, and I called his number. But nobody answered, so I concluded to wait till he arrived to ask him.”

“And the next time? You called him twice?”

“Yes; the next time was when dinner was ready – about eight. He wasn’t here, and I thought it so strange – I – telephoned – ”

“Yourself?” asked Prescott, quickly, scenting unexpected information.

“No – I – I asked one of the guests to do it.”

“Which one?”

“Me.” Pollard smiled at Phyllis. “Miss Lindsay asked me to telephone to Mr Gleason, and I did, but no one answered the call.”

The speaker turned his calm eyes to Prescott, and met the detective’s suspicious gaze.

“You’re sure you called, Mr Pollard,” Prescott asked, his tone plainly indicating his own doubt.

“I have said so,” Pollard replied, and let his own glance wander indifferently aside.

“Well, I don’t believe you!” Prescott was angered at Pollard’s quite evident lack of interest in his inquiries, and he now spoke sharply. “I believe, Mr Pollard, that you know more than you have told regarding this matter, and unless you see fit to become more communicative, I shall have to resort to outside inquiry as to your own movements this evening, prior to your arrival here.”

“That is your privilege,” Pollard said, with an exaggerated politeness.

“It is my duty also,” Prescott retorted, “and I shall begin right now. You say you left Mr Pollard on Fifth Avenue, Mr Barry?”

“Yes,” was the reply.

“At what time?”

“About six o’clock.”

“It was ten minutes past,” Pollard volunteered, still with the air of superior knowledge that exasperated Prescott almost beyond bounds.

“Did any one present see Mr Pollard between that time and his arrival here for dinner?” Prescott looked about the room.

No one responded, and the detective said, curtly:

“Where do you live, Mr Pollard?”

“At the Hotel Crosby, Fortieth Street, near Fifth Avenue,” and this time Pollard gave his questioner one of his best smiles, which had the effect of embarrassing him greatly.

But with determination, he took up the telephone and called the hotel.

“Ask for the doorman,” said Pollard, helpfully.

Prescott did, and learned that Mr Pollard was out. “Had he been in?” “Yes, he had come in soon after six o’clock, and had left again, later, in a taxicab.”

Nothing more definite could be learned, and Prescott hung up the receiver, conscious only of a great desire to get down to the hotel and ask questions before Pollard could get there himself.

But first, he must look into other matters, and he turned his attention to the guests who sat round, all looking decidedly uncomfortable and some very much scared.

“Now look here, Mr Prescott,” said Pollard, with the air of one humoring a spoiled child, “you have your duty to do – we all comprehend that. But can’t you satisfy yourself regarding the innocence of most of these men and women, and let them go home? I assume there will be no dance this evening, and the troublesome circumstance of sending away the guests who are yet expected will be about all Miss Lindsay – and her brother,” he added, with a sudden remembrance of the unhelpful Louis – “can cope with. I will await your pleasure, as you seem to have picked me out for suspicion, but do get through with these others.”

Angry at this good advice, coming from the man he was questioning, and embarrassed because it was really good advice, Prescott began, a little sulkily, to take the names and addresses of many of them, and inform them they were free to leave. He detained any he thought might be useful to him, and among them he held Barry and Dean Monroe.

This matter took some time, especially as Prescott was twice interrupted by telephone.

Mrs Lindsay and Louis had retired to their rooms, and Phyllis, at the helm of the situation, proved herself a staunch and capable upholder of the dignity of the Lindsay family.

“Send away all you can, please, Mr Prescott,” she requested. “Mr Pollard is right; I have my hands full. I will give the doorman, who is from the caterer’s, instructions to explain the situation and admit none of the evening guests. But, I daresay some intimate friends will insist on coming in. Shall I allow it?”

“Better not, Miss Lindsay. You see, there’s no use giving the thing more publicity than you have to. The reporters will come, of course. Will you see them?”

“Oh, goodness, no! Let some of the men do that. Mr Pollard, won’t you?”

“I’d prefer Mr Monroe should,” interrupted Prescott, and winced under Pollard’s smile.

“Oh, Manning,” said Dean Monroe, “why do you act like that! You make people suspect you, whether they want to or not.”

“Suspect all you like, Dean,” came the quiet reply; “if I’m innocent, suspicion can’t hurt me. If I’m guilty, I ought to be suspected.”

“You did say you intended to kill Gleason,” Monroe repeated, staring at Pollard. “It’s queer he should be killed right afterward.”

“Mighty queer,” agreed Pollard. “But are you sure he was murdered?”

“Yes,” said Prescott. “Inspector Gale told me over the telephone just now, that further investigation proves it is a murder case. I think, Mr Pollard, I’ll ask you to go with me right now to your hotel. I want to check up your story.”

“But I haven’t told you any story,” said Pollard.

“Well, then,” Prescott shrugged impatiently, “I’ll check up the story you didn’t tell! Come along. Anybody got a car I can borrow?”

Nobody had, as the guests had all expected to remain the whole evening. So Prescott called a taxicab, and soon the two started for Pollard’s hotel.

“You’re a queer guy,” the detective said, the semi-darkness in the cab giving him greater freedom of speech.

“As how?” asked Pollard, quietly.

“Well, first, saying you proposed to kill a man.”

“I’m not unique. I’ve often heard people say, ‘I’d like to kill him!’ or ‘I wish he was dead!’”

“Yes, but they don’t mean it.”

“How do you know I meant it?”

“I don’t, for sure, but I’m going to find out. If you haven’t got an air-tight alibi – it’s going to be trouble for yours!”

“I haven’t any alibi. Guilty people prepare alibis.”

“That’s all right. You’re cute enough to fix an alibi that don’t look to be fixed! But I’ll see through it. Here we are. Come along.”

“A little less dictating, please, Mr Prescott. Remember, I’m not under arrest.”

“Not yet – but soon!” was the retort as the two men entered the small, but exclusive, hotel where Manning Pollard made his home.

The doorman bowed, pleasantly, but not obsequiously, and Prescott went straight to the desk.

“I want to learn,” he said, straightforwardly, “all you can tell me of the movements of Mr Pollard tonight between six and seven o’clock.”

The clerk at the desk smiled at Pollard and gazed inquiringly at the other.

“Better tell him, Simpson,” said Pollard; “he’s a detective, and he’s a right to ask. I’m under a cloud – I think I may call it that – and he’s going to – well, clear me.”

Pollard’s smile flashed out, and the desk clerk, in his turn, smiled at the investigator.

“Go ahead, sir,” he agreed, “what do you want to know?”

“What time did Mr Pollard come in this afternoon?”

“What time, Henry?” the clerk asked the doorman.

“Bout quarter past six,” was the reply. “I come on at six, and I’d been here a bit before Mr Pollard came along.”

“What did he do?” went on Prescott, a little less certain of his convictions.

“Went up in the elevator.”

“Same elevator boy on now?”

“Yes, sir. The car’s up. Be down in a minute.”

It was; and the elevator boy related that he had taken Mr Pollard up as soon as he came into the hotel.

“Went right to his room, did he?”

“Yes, sir.” The woolly-headed one rolled his eyes in enjoyment of his sudden importance. “I knows he did, kase I watched after him.”

“Why did you look after him?”

“No reason, p’tikler. Only kase he’s such a fine gentleman. I most allus looks at him march down the hall. He marches like a – a platoon.”

“He does? And he marched straight to his room?”

“Yessuh.”

“When did you bring him down again?”

“Bout an hour later, all dressed up in his glad raggses. Just like he is now.”

“Just so. Now, during that hour do you know that Mr Pollard didn’t leave his room? Didn’t go down stairs again?”

“Not in my car, he didn’t. And he always uses my car.”

“Ask the other boy.” Prescott gave this order shortly. The scene was getting on his nerves. Pollard, quiet, calm, but superior. The clerk, ready to enjoy the detective’s discomfiture, if he failed to prove the point he was evidently trying hard to make. Black Bob, the elevator boy, his white teeth

all in evidence, and his admiration for Pollard equally plain to be seen. And even the telephone girl, smirking from her switchboard nearby.

All of these were in sympathy with Pollard, and Prescott felt himself a rank outsider. But he persevered.

Joe, the other elevator boy, declared he had not carried Mr Pollard up or down that evening, and the clerk said there were but two cars.

“Go on, Mr Prescott,” Pollard adjured him. “I have prepared no air-tight alibi.”

“Did any one here see Mr Pollard in his room,” the detective asked in desperation, and to his surprise a bellhop piped out, “I did.”

“You did!” and Prescott turned to him. “How did you happen to do so?”

“He rang, and I went up there, and he gave me a letter to mail for him. It was a wide letter, too wide to go in the chute.”

“Did you mail it?”

“I put it with the stuff for the postman to take. He hasn’t been round yet.”

“Get the letter.”

The bellhop did so, while the others looked on.

It was a large, square envelope addressed to a business firm downtown.

“Your writing, Mr Pollard?” said Prescott, not knowing, in fact, just what to say.

“Yes,” said Pollard, glancing at it. “Open it, if you want to. It’s not private business.”

“No; I don’t want to. It looks very much as if you were in your room during the hour between six and seven.”

“It does have that appearance,” said Pollard, “but I make no claims.”

“He telephoned twice,” vouchsafed the girl at the switchboard.

“He did!” Prescott wheeled on her.

“Once not very long after he came in – maybe fifteen or twenty minutes after.”

“To whom?”

“To a Cleaning Establishment. I remember, because I couldn’t get them – the shop was closed. And then, he telephoned again for a taxi, when he was ready to go out.”

“At what time?”

“About half-past seven – or maybe a little earlier.”

“Earlier,” said the doorman, who had drawn near again. “Not more’n twenty past. I put him in the taxi myself. And it wasn’t as late as half past.”

“Where did he drive to?”

“I don’t know. He ’most always gives the driver a slip of paper with the numbers on it – ’specially if he’s going to more than one address. He did this tonight.”

“Where’s that taxi man?” asked Prescott, feeling his last prop being pulled from under him.

“He’s outside now,” said the doorman. “He’s waiting for a man upstairs.”

“Call him in.”

The taxi driver looked at Pollard, nodded respectfully, and replied to Prescott’s queries by saying that Mr Pollard did give him a memorandum of the places he wanted to go to, and that they were, first, the Hotel Astor, where he went in for a moment, and came back with some theater tickets which he was putting in his pocket.

“How do you know he had theater tickets?”

“Well, he had a little pink envelope, and he often does get tickets there. Next, he stopped at Bard’s, the Florist’s, and brought out a small square box with him, and next I took him up to a house on Park Avenue, and he stayed there, and I came back.”

“All right, Mr Pollard, my duty is done.” The detective looked a respectful apology. “But I had to find out all this. And remember you did make a surprising statement.”

“Surprising to you, perhaps. But my friends, who know my eccentricities, weren’t surprised at it.”

“No? Well, if it’s your habit to threaten to kill people you don’t like – ”

“I’d rather you didn’t call it a threat. To my mind, a threat is spoken to the intended victim.”

“I don’t know,” Prescott gazed thoughtfully at the speaker. “Can’t you threaten – ”

“But I didn’t threaten. I merely said I should kill Gleason some day. It’s too late, now, to make good my promise, and you’ve satisfied yourself – or, haven’t you? – that I didn’t do it?”

“Yes, I’m satisfied. You couldn’t be here at home and in a taxicab doing errands, between six-fifteen and seven-forty-five, and have any chance to get away long enough to get yourself down to Washington Square and do up that murder business, too.”

“It does look that way,” Pollard agreed. “You’ve checked me up pretty thoroughly. Now do you want me any further? For, though I’m as good-natured and patient as the average man, I *have* something else to do with my time when you’re through with me.”

“Of course, of course. But, I say, Mr Pollard, can you give me a hint which way to look?”

“Sorry, but I can’t.”

The two had drawn aside from the hotel desk, and were by themselves in an alcove of the lobby. Prescott, eagerly trying to learn something further from his vindicated suspect – Pollard, calm and polite, but quite evidently wishing to get away about his business.

“You don’t suspect anybody?”

“No; you see I knew Mr Gleason but slightly. I didn’t like him, but I assure you I didn’t kill him. And I don’t know who did.”

CHAPTER V – Mrs Mansfield’s Story

“Distrust the obvious, Prescott,” said Belknap, didactically. “It is the astute detective’s weak point that he cannot see beyond the apparent – the evident – the obvious.”

“Oh, yes,” Prescott sniffed; “distrust the obvious is as hackneyed a phrase as *Cherchez la femme!* and about as useful in our every day work. You make a noise like a Detective Story.”

“And they’re the Big Noise, nowadays,” Belknap returned, unruffled.

“All the same,” and Prescott spoke doggedly, “when a guy says he’s going to kill somebody, and that somebody is found croaked a few hours later, seems to me – ”

“Seems to me, your guy is the last person in the world to suspect. It’s the obvious – ”

“Yes, an obvious that I sorta hate to distrust!”

“Nonsense! And you’ve disposed of Pollard anyway, haven’t you.”

“Yes, I have. Half a dozen people were in touch with him all through the time of the murder. He’s out of it.”

Prescott looked as disheartened as he felt.

“And you’ve wasted good time tracking him down, when you might have been investigating the evidence while it was fresh! I’m disappointed in you, Prescott; you oughtn’t to have fallen for a steer like that.”

Belknap was the Assistant District Attorney, and the Gleason case seemed to him important and absorbing. In his office the morning after the murder, he was getting all the information Prescott could give him, and he was really disgusted with the detective for having followed up the wild goose chase of Manning Pollard’s impulsive speech about the Western millionaire.

Belknap was an earnest, honest investigator, not so much brilliant by deduction as clear-sighted, hard-headed and practical.

He distrusted the obvious, not so much because of the hackneyed aphorism as because his own experience had proved to him that nine times out of ten, or oftener, the obvious was wrong. It must be looked into, of course, but not to the exclusion of other evidence or the neglect of other lines of investigation. And now, he felt, the trail had cooled somewhat, and valuable clues might be lost because of Prescott’s conviction of Pollard’s guilt.

Belknap was of a higher mentality than Pollard, and he also was a man of more education and refinement. He was especially interested on this case, for the Lindsays were an exclusive family and kept themselves out of the limelight of publicity.

But there were rumors that the lovely daughter was a harum-scarum, that the son of the house was addicted to bright lights and high stakes, and that the still young stepmother was quite as fond of social life as her two charges.

But never were their names seen on the society columns or in the gossip papers and now, Belknap reflected, they could be approached by reporters.

Indeed, he saw himself admitted to that hitherto inaccessible home, and in imagination he was already preening himself for the occasion.

But Belknap was methodical, and he was preparing to go at once to the Gleason apartment, to begin his line of investigation.

“How does Mrs Lindsay act?” he allowed himself to ask as he and Prescott started for Washington Square.

“Oh, I don’t know,” returned Prescott; “about like you’d expect a sister to act. She was fond of her brother, I take it, but – well, I didn’t see much of her; still, I’ve a vague impression that she’s revengeful – anxious to find and punish the murderer – that struck me more than her grief.”

“You can’t tell. She may be sorrowing deeply, and also be desirous of avenging her brother’s death. No question of suicide?”

“Not now, no. There was at first. But an autopsy showed the second shot was fired first.”

“What do you mean?”

“The one they thought was second was first. It seems the first shot – through the temple – killed Gleason. And then, for some unexplained reason, the slayer fired again, through the dead man’s shoulder.”

“Whatever for? And how do they know?”

“Oh, the doctors could tell, by the blood coagulation or something. As to why it was done, I’ve no idea. What’s the obvious – I want to distrust it.”

“Don’t be too funny, Prescott. This is a big case. Not only because of the prominence of the people involved, but it’s pretty mysterious, I think. We ought to get something out of the other people in the house.”

“Not a chance. I tried it.”

Belknap said nothing, but a close observer might have thought his silence not altogether an assent to Prescott’s corollary.

“In fact,” Prescott went on, “I believe you’ll find your murderer among Gleason’s own bunch. Not the people in the house he lived in. You see that place was wished on him by a friend, and Gleason hated it. I got this from those men who know him. Miss Lindsay agreed to it. Gleason meant to move out – only took it because it was represented to him as a bijou apartment, and he thought it was a luxurious little nest – and, it isn’t. As you can now see for yourself.”

At the house, Prescott pushed the button below McIlvaine’s card, and after a moment the door clicked, and grudgingly, as it seemed, moved itself a little, and Prescott pushed it open.

“That’s the way the murderer got in,” he said positively.

“Maybe not,” demurred Belknap. “Maybe he came in with Gleason.”

“Oh, maybe he came in at the window, or down the chimney!” exclaimed Prescott shortly; “you can’t admit the obvious ever, can you?”

Belknap chuckled at the other’s quick temper, and they went upstairs.

They found Policeman Kelly in charge, and he greeted them gladly.

“Get busy,” he said, genially. “Sure, there’s enough to engage your attention.”

Belknap, beyond a word of greeting, ignored the officer, and took a swift, comprehensive survey of the place.

It was a large front room, apparently library and cutting room. A bedroom was back of it and a bath room behind that. An old house, quite evidently remodeled for bachelor or small family apartments.

Though up to date as to plumbing, lighting and decoration, the window and door frames proclaimed it an old building. The furniture was over ornate, and the pictures and ornaments a bit flamboyant. But it was a comfortable enough place, and the personal belongings of the dead Gleason were scattered about and gave a homey appearance. A silver framed photograph of Mrs Lindsay was on a table, and on another were two more portraits of less distinguished-looking ladies.

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