

Wells Carolyn

The Curved Blades



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I

MISS LUCY CARRINGTON

“Garden Steps” was one of the show-places of Merivale Park, Long Island. In summer it was an enchanting spot, and the dazzling white marble steps which led to the sunken gardens justified their right to give the place its name. Other stone steps gave on terraces and flower banks, others still led to the Italian landscape gardens, and a few rustic steps of a wooden stile transported one to an old-fashioned garden, whose larkspur and Canterbury bells were the finest of their sort.

The house seemed an integral part of this setting. Its wide verandahs, or more often loggias, were so lavishly furnished with flowering plants, its windows so boxed with them, that the whole effect was that of a marvellously well-planned horticultural exhibition.

But all this was of the summer. In winter – for it was an all-round-the-year home – only the varied and extraordinary collection of evergreens shared with the steps the honor of making picturesque and beautiful the view from the house windows.

And now, in January, one of the all too seldom enjoyed white snow storms had glorified the whole estate. Wind-swept drifts half hid, half disclosed the curving marble balustrades, and turned the steps to snowy fairyland flights.

And, for it was night, a cold, dear, perfect winter night, a supercilious moon looked down, a little haughtily and condescended to illumine the scene in stunning, if a bit theatric, fashion.

“Ripping picture, eh?” said Gray Haviland, as he held back the heavy curtain for the golden-haired young woman at his side to look out.

“Oh, isn’t it a wonderful sight!” And as Anita Frayne took a step forward, toward the casement, Haviland let the curtain fall behind him and the two were alone in the deep embrasure of the wide bay-window.

“Not nearly such a wonderful sight as you are!” Haviland swung her round to face him, and stood gazing at the pretty, doll-like face that half laughed, half frowned into his own.

“Me! I’m not like a moonlit landscape!”

“No, you’re just a golden morsel of summer sunshine – ” Haviland’s eulogy was interrupted by a petulant voice calling shrilly:

“Where are you two? I hear you talking; come on. I’m waiting.”

“Oh, Lord! come on,” and, holding the curtain aside, he let Anita pass and then followed her.

“Here we are, Cousin Lucy, all ready for the fray. Good evening, Count.”

Count Charlier bowed Frenchily, and Anita gave him the bright, flashing smile that she kept on hand for mankind in general, and which was quite different from that she used on special occasions or for special friends.

Annoyed at the duration of this delaying smile, Miss Lucy Carrington tapped impatiently on the bridge table, and looked her impatience most unmistakably.

Mistress of Garden Steps, wealthy, well-born, of assured social position, capable and efficient, Miss Carrington lacked the one gift of Fate for which she would have bartered all else. She was not beautiful, and had not even enough pretension to good looks to think herself beautiful. Plain features, graying hair – dyed red – big, prominent light-blue eyes, and a pasty, pudgy complexion left no hope for the miracles worked by beauty doctors to avail in her case. Her figure was short and dumpy, the despair of her staymakers, and her taste in dress ran to the extremes in coloring and fashion.

Passionately fond of all beauty, Miss Carrington felt keenly her own lack of it, and to this lack she attributed the fact that she was a spinster. Those who knew her felt there might be other reasons why her suitors had been few, but, as a matter of fact, the acidity of her disposition was a direct result of her disappointed, loveless life, and even yet, though nearing fifty, Miss Lucy Carrington had by no means laid aside all thoughts of matrimonial adventure.

Heiress to immense wealth, there had been fortune-seekers who asked her hand, but Lucy Carrington would none of these. Aristocratic and high-minded, she had unerring perception of motives, and the men who had been willing to marry her face as well as her fortune had been of such unworth that the lady scorned them.

But now, looming on her hopes' horizon was a welcome possibility. Count Henri Charlier, a visitor of a neighbor, seemingly admired the mistress of Garden Steps and had fallen into the habit of frequent calling. Courteous and polished of manner, he flattered Miss Carrington in such wise that his attitude was acceptable if not indubitably sincere. Her closest scrutiny and most challenging provocation failed to surprise any admission of her lack of perfection in his eyes, and his splendid physique and brilliant mind commanded her complete approval and admiration. There had been hints that his title could not be read entirely clear, but this was not sufficient to condemn him in Miss Carrington's eyes.

To be sure, the Count had as yet said no word that could be construed as of definite intention, but there had been certain signs, deemed portentous by the willing mind of the lady in question.

Bridge was Miss Carrington's favorite diversion, and, as the Count also enjoyed it, frequent evenings were devoted to the game.

It was, perhaps, a mistake that Miss Carrington should have allowed this, for her temper, always uncertain, lost all restraint when she suffered ill-luck at cards. A poor hand always brought down violent objurgation on the head of her partner and sarcastic comment or criticism on her adversaries. These exhibitions of wrath were not good policy if she wished to charm the French visitor, but, as he invariably kept his own temper, his irate hostess made little effort to curb hers.

"What are you doing, Anita?" cried Miss Carrington, petulantly, as they settled themselves at the table. "You know I always play with the blue cards, and you are dealing them!"

"Sure enough! Pardon me, Lady Lucy, I will take the red ones."

"Then, pray, wait till I make them up. There. No, let the Count cut them! Have you no notion of bridge rules? You are quite the most inattentive player! Will you kindly concentrate on the game?"

"Yes, indeed," and Anita Frayne smiled as she deftly dealt the red cards. "I hope you have a good hand."

"You hope I have a good hand! A strange idea for an adversary!"

"But I know you like to win," and Miss Frayne hastily gathered up her own cards.

"I do not like to have you want me to win! That's babyish. I like to win by superior skill, not merely by lucky cards!"

This was an awful whopper, and all at the table knew it, but it was ignored and the game began.

Miss Carrington – Lady Lucy, as she liked to be called – did not hold good hands. On the contrary, she had a run of bad luck that made her more and more irate with each hand dealt. Miss Frayne, who was her *protégée* and social secretary, watched with growing apprehension the red spots that appeared in Miss Carrington's cheeks, infallible danger signals of an impending outbreak.

It came.

"Another handful of blanks!" Miss Carrington exclaimed, angrily, and flung the offending thirteen cards across the wide room.

"There now, Cousin Lucy," said Gray Haviland, determined to keep the peace if possible, "that was a clever idea! It will certainly change your luck! I'll collect the pasteboards, and we'll start fresh."

Easily, the big, good-looking young chap sauntered across the room and gathered up the cards, chatting meanwhile. "You don't lose your deal, you know; so try again, Cousin Lucy, and good luck to you!"

In angry silence Miss Carrington dealt again, and examined her hand. "Nothing above a nine spot!" she declared, throwing them, backs up, on the table.

"Too bad!" murmured Miss Frayne, carelessly picking up the hand. "Why, you didn't look closely! Here's an ace and two queens and –"

"They're nothing! How dare you dispute my word? I say the hand is worthless!" She fairly snatched the cards from the girl and turned them face down again.

"But mad'moiselle," began the Count, "if you have an ace and two queens, I could have played a no-trump hand grand, – ah, splendid!"

"Yes, *you* could have played it! You want to play all the open hands! You want me to sit here a dummy, a figure-head, every time!"

"Now, now, Lady Lucy –" and Anita Frayne laughed pleasantly.

"Be quiet! You're worse yet! You want to deal me good hands to humor me! I believe you would cheat to do it! I don't want good cards that way!"

"Ah," begged the Count, seeing Anita flush, "do not tell the young lady she cheats! Do not do that!"

"I'll tell her what I choose! Gray, say something! You sit there like a mummy, while these people are insulting me right and left! Tell Anita that I am right in not wishing her to deal me good cards purposely."

"But she didn't," declared Haviland; "you know she didn't. Why, she couldn't, even if she wanted to!"

"Oh, yes, she could!" and Miss Carrington gave a disagreeable sneer. "She's quite clever enough for any deceit or treachery."

"Stop, Cousin Lucy! I can't let you talk so about Miss Frayne in my presence!"

"Oh, you can't, can't you? And, pray, what right have you to defend her? Go away, both of you! I'll play with you no longer. Go away and send Pauline and Mr. Illsley in here. They, at least, will play fair."

Anita Frayne rose without a word. Haviland rose too, but talking volubly. "Let up, Cousin Lucy," he said sternly. "You've no right to treat Miss Frayne so. You ought to apologize to her for such rudeness."

"Apologize!" Miss Carrington fairly shrieked; "she'll do the apologizing, and you, too, my foolish young cousin. You little know what's going to happen to me! To-morrow you may sing another song!"

Haviland looked at her in astonishment; the Count, thoughtfully. The same idea was in both their minds. Could she mean that she was expecting the Count to propose to her that evening?

"Nothing nice can happen to you unless you learn to control that temper of yours," and Haviland swung away after Anita.

He found her in the next room, nestled in the corner of a big davenport, weeping into a sympathetic sofa-cushion.

"Go and find the others," she whispered, as he came near her. "Make them go and play with her!"

Obediently, Haviland went. In the glassed sun-parlor he found Pauline Stuart, Miss Carrington's niece, and Stephen Illsley, one of the most favored of Pauline's many suitors.

"For goodness' sake, people," he began, "do go and play bridge with the Lady of the Manor! She's in a peach of a fury, and you'll have to take your life in your hands, but *go*!"

"I won't," said Pauline, bluntly; "It's Anita's turn to-night. She said she'd do it."

“She did! But she came off second best, and she’s weeping buckets on the best Empire embroidery sofa-cushions! I’m going to comfort her, but you must go and keep the gentle Lucy from pulling the house down about our ears! She’s sure queering herself with his nibs! He can’t admire her sweet, flower-like soul after this night’s exhibition.”

“I don’t want to go a bit, but I suppose we’ll have to,” and Pauline smiled at her guest.

“Oh, go on,” said Haviland, as he turned to leave them; “and, for Heaven’s sake, give her all the good cards. Can you manage that, Illsley?”

“I am afraid not. Her eyes are too sharp.”

“Well, if her luck stays bad, get her to play mumble-peg or something, instead of bridge.”

Haviland disappeared and Pauline rose unwillingly. “I do so hate to play with Aunt Lucy,” she said, “but it must be done. Are you willing to sacrifice yourself?”

“For you? Always!” And the two went to the cardroom.

Pauline Stuart, tall, dark, graceful, was a striking-looking girl. Only twenty-four, she carried herself with the dignity and poise of a duchess, and her heavy, dark brows gave her face an expression of strength and will-power that contrasted forcibly with the delicate Dresden china beauty of Anita Frayne. The two girls were not especially friendly, though never definitely at odds. Anita was envious of the more fortunate Pauline. The latter, Miss Carrington’s niece, would inherit a goodly part of her aunt’s large fortune, while the humble position of the secretary commanded only a liberal, not munificent, salary.

The girls, however, were at one in their dread of Miss Lucy’s ebullitions of temper and their resentment of the biting sarcasms and angry diatribes she flung at them in her frequent spasms of fury.

Illsley, a well-set-up chap of good address, followed Pauline into her aunt’s presence.

“You waited long enough,” grumbled Miss Carrington. “Sit down. It’s your deal now, Pauline.”

Matters went well for a time. Miss Lucy held good cards, and once or twice she triumphed through a mistake of her adversaries, which she fortunately did not discover was made on purpose.

Count Charlier’s little bright black eyes darted inquiringly from aunt to niece, but he made no comment. All four played well, and when at last Miss Carrington made a grand slam her joy was effervescent.

“Good play,” she flattered herself. “You must admit, Count, that it was clever of me to take that difficult *finesse* just at that critical point.”

“Clever indeed, mademoiselle. You have the analytical mind; you should have been a diplomat. Also, Fortune favors you. You are beloved of the fickle goddess.”

“Let us hope so,” and for a moment Miss Carrington looked grave.

And then, with the perversity of that same goddess, the card luck changed. Pauline and Illsley held all the high cards, Miss Lucy and the Count only the low ones.

Storm signals showed. Whiter grew the stern, set face; tighter drew the thin, wide lips; and rigid muscles set themselves in the angry, swelling throat. Then, as she scanned a hand of cards, all below the ten, again they went in a shower across the room, and she cried, angrily: “A Yarborough!” reverting to the old-fashioned term.

“Never mind, Aunt Lucy,” and Pauline tried to laugh it off; “this is not your lucky night. Let’s give up bridge for to-night. Let’s have some music.”

“Yes! because you love music and hate bridge! It makes no difference what *I* want. My wishes are never considered. You and Anita are just alike! Selfish, ungrateful, caring for nothing but your own pleasure. Mr. Illsley, don’t you think young girls should pay some slight attention to the wishes of one who does everything for them? Where would either of them be but for me? Are you not sorry for me?”

“Why, – I – you must excuse me, I am not sure I understand – ”

“Yes, you understand, perfectly well. You know the girls slight me and snub me every chance they get. But it will not always be thus. To-morrow – ”

“Come, Aunt Lucy,” pleaded Pauline, “let us have some music. You know there are some new records, just arrived to-day. Let us hear them.”

“Are there new records? Did you get the ones I wanted?”

“Some of them. We couldn’t get them all.”

“Oh, no, of course not! But if *you* had wanted certain records they would have been found!”

“But, Auntie Lucy, we couldn’t get them if they aren’t made, could we? Gray tried his best.”

“Oh, tried his best! He forgot to ask for them, so he says he ‘tried his best,’ to excuse his carelessness. If Anita had wanted them – ”

The starting of the music drowned further flow of the lady’s grievances.

II

A CLASH OF TONGUES

True to its reputation for calming the impulses of the turbulent spirit, the music soothed Miss Carrington's ruffled temper, and she waxed amiable and even gay. Enthroned on her favorite red velvet chair, resplendent in an elaborately decorated gown of sapphire blue satin, with her bright auburn locks piled high and topped by an enormous comb of carved tortoise-shell, she dominated the little group and gave orders that must be obeyed.

She wore, among other jewels, a magnificent rope of pearls. So remarkable were these, that the Count, who had never seen them before, ventured to refer to them.

"Yes," agreed Miss Carrington, "they are wonderful. Practically priceless, I assure you. It took my agent years to collect them."

"And you grace an informal home evening with these regal gems?"

"Not usually, no. But you know, Count Charlier, pearls must be worn frequently to preserve their lustre. Laid away a long time, they grow dead and dull-looking."

"You keep them here? Is it safe, think you?"

"I don't keep them here all the time. Indeed, I got these from the Safe Deposit only this morning. I shall return them there in a few days. While here, I shall wear them all I can to liven them up."

"You brought a lot of your other jewels, didn't you, Aunt Lucy?" said Pauline, casually; "why did you? Are you going to a ball?"

"No: I wish to – to look them over and plan to have some reset."

"But are they safe?" inquired the Count again; "do you not fear thieves?"

"No, we never have such things as robbery in Merivale Park. It is a quiet, well-behaved neighborhood."

"But you have a safe?" went on the Count; "you take at least that precaution?"

"Oh, yes, I have a safe in my boudoir. There is really no danger. Count Charlier, would you like to hear me sing? Find one of my records, Gray."

Miss Carrington's singing voice had been a fine one and was still fair. She sometimes amused herself by making records for her phonograph, and Gray Haviland managed the mechanical part of it.

"Which one, Lady Lucy?" he asked, as he rummaged in the record cabinet.

"Any of those pretty love songs," and Miss Carrington glanced coyly at the Count.

"Here's a fine one," and Haviland placed a disk in the machine.

"Listen," he said, smiling; "don't miss the introduction."

The needle touched the record, and Miss Lucy's laugh rang out, so clear and true, it was difficult to believe it was a recorded laugh and not a sound from the lady herself. Then the recorded voice said: "This song is one of Carr's favorites, I'll sing it for him." And then, with only a few seconds' interval, Miss Carrington's voice sang, "Believe me, if all those endearing young charms."

It was well sung, and a perfect record, so that the incident of the singer listening to her own voice was interesting in itself.

"Capital!" applauded the Count, as it was finished. "It is indeed pleasant to preserve one's songs thus. May I not some time record my own amateur attempt?"

"Delighted to have you, Count," said Haviland, cordially. "Come over some morning, and we'll do up a lot of records."

"Since when have you been master here, Gray?" said Miss Lucy, with fine scorn. "I will give the invitations to my own house, if you please! Count Charlier, if you will come to-morrow afternoon I will instruct Mr. Haviland to make the records."

It was not so much the words as the manner of their utterance that was offensive, and Haviland set his lips in stifled anger. It was not at all unusual, this sort of rebuff, but he could not endure it as patiently as the two girls did. Haviland was a second cousin of Miss Carrington, and, while he lived with her in the capacity of a business secretary and general man of affairs, the post was a sinecure, for the services of her lawyer and of her social secretary left little for Haviland to do. His salary was a generous one and he was substantially remembered in her will, but he sometimes thought the annoying and irritating fleers he had to accept smilingly, were worth more than he was receiving. He was continually made to feel himself a dependent and an inferior.

These trials also fell to the lot of the two girls. Pauline, although her aunt's heiress to the extent of half the fortune, the other half to go to an absent cousin, was by no means treated as an equal of Miss Carrington herself. It seemed to give the elder lady delight to domineer over her niece and in every possible way make her life uneasy and uncomfortable. As to the social secretary, Miss Frayne, she was scolded for everything she did, right or wrong.

Often had the three young people declared intentions of leaving Garden Steps, but so far none of them had made good the threat.

Vanity was the key-note of Lucy Carrington's nature, and, knowing this, they could, if they chose, keep her fairly sweet-tempered by inordinate flattery often administered. This proceeding hurt their self-respect, jarred their tempers, and galled their very souls, but it was that or dismissal, and thus far they had stayed. Matters were nearing a crisis, however, and Haviland's patience was so sorely strained that he was secretly looking for another position. Anita Frayne, whose pretty blonde doll-face belied a very fiery disposition, was on the verge of a serious break with her employer, and Pauline Stuart continually assured herself that she could not go on this way.

Pauline was the orphaned daughter of Lucy's sister, and had lived with her aunt for many years. Carrington Loria, the son of another sister, was engaged in antiquarian research in Egypt, where he had been since his graduation as an engineer. He, too, was an orphan and had lived with Lucy in his younger days, and he and Pauline were equal heirs to their aunt's wealth.

The father of the three Carrington sisters, having become angered at his two daughters who married against his wishes, had left his entire fortune to Lucy, his only remaining child. Thus her niece and nephew were her only direct heirs, and, save for some comparatively small bequests, the Carrington estate would eventually be theirs.

Pauline well knew that if she left her aunt's roof it meant complete disinheritance, for Lucy Carrington was proud of her beautiful niece, and, too, was fond of her in her own way. But the ungovernable temper of the lady made her home an almost unbearable abiding-place.

Since childhood years Carrington Loria had lived there only during his college vacations; but had been back occasionally for short visits from his now permanent Egyptian occupation. He had always come laden with gifts of Oriental products, and the rooms at Garden Steps showed many rare specimens of cunning handiwork and rich fabrics and embroideries.

To break the awkward pause that followed Miss Carrington's rude speech to Gray Haviland, Pauline picked up an antique scarab from a side table and drew the Count's attention to its inscription.

He expressed a polite interest, but cast furtive glances at his hostess, as if afraid of a further outbreak.

Nor were his fears unjustified. Miss Carrington administered a scathing reproach to Pauline for intruding herself upon the Count's attention, and bade her put aside the scarab and hold her tongue.

"Don't speak to me like that, Aunt Lucy; I am not a child!" And Pauline, unable to control herself longer, faced her angry aunt with an air of righteous wrath.

"I'll speak to you as I choose, miss! It is for you to mend your tone in addressing me! If you don't, you may have cause to regret it. Count Charlier came here to see me, and I refuse to countenance your clumsy attempts to engage his interest in your silly babble!"

“But – I insist – ” stammered the greatly embarrassed Count, “allow me, madame, let me say, I call on you all – all – ”

“Nothing of the sort!” declared Miss Lucy; “you came, Count, to play bridge with us. Our opponents behaved so rudely and played so badly it was impossible for us to continue the game. Nor can we enjoy music in this inharmonious atmosphere. Let us stroll in the conservatory, you and I.”

She rose, trailing her heavy silks and flashing her sparkling jewels, and the Count, a little hesitatingly, followed her. They crossed the great hall, and, going through a reception room and the delightful sun-parlor, came to the warm, heavily-scented conservatory.

“Poor old Charlier!” said Haviland, as the pair disappeared; “he’s in for it now! Do you suppose the palms and orchids will bring him up to the scratch? ‘Nita, I’ll bet you a box of gloves against a box of simple little cigarettes that he doesn’t propose to the lady to-night?”

“Done!” cried Miss Frayne, who was sparkling again, now that the dread presence was removed. “I doubt he can help himself. She has him at her mercy. And he’s too good-mannered to disappoint her wish.”

“He’ll propose,” said Pauline, with an air of conviction. “He’s a typical fortune-hunter, that man. Indeed, I am not sure he’s a Count at all. Do you know, Mr. Illsley?”

“I know almost nothing of the man, save that he’s a guest of the Frothinghams. That’s not entirely in his favor, I think.”

“Right you are!” agreed Haviland. “Those people are, – well, they’re to be queried. But I say, Polly, if the two do hit it off, it’s grinding poverty for us, eh?”

“It may be a blessed relief, Gray. She’ll give us something, of course, and send us away from here. I, for one, shouldn’t be sorry to go. She is getting too impossible!”

“She is!” put in Anita; “every day she pounds us worse! I’d like to kill her!”

The fierce words and would-be menacing glance of the little blonde beauty were about as convincing as a kitten declaring himself a war lord, and even the stately Pauline smiled at the picture.

“She ought to be killed,” declared Haviland, “and I say this dispassionately. I wouldn’t do it, because killing is not in my line, but the eternal fitness of things requires her removal to another sphere of usefulness. She makes life a burden to three perfectly good people, and some several servants. Not one would mourn her, and – ”

“Oh, stop, Gray!” cried Pauline; “don’t talk in that strain! Don’t listen to him, Mr. Illsley. He often says such things, but he doesn’t mean them. Mr. Haviland loves to talk at random, to make a sensational hearing.”

“Nothing of the sort, Polly. I do mean it. Lucy Carrington is a misery dispenser, and such are not wanted in this nice little old world.”

“But perhaps,” Pauline looked thoughtful, “the fault is in us. We don’t like her, and so we see nothing good in what she does. Now, Carrington Loria adores her. She had a letter from him to-day – ”

“Yes, Loria adores her!” interrupted Haviland, “because he doesn’t live with her! She sends him love-letters and money, and he doesn’t know the everlasting torture of living under her roof, year in and year out! But he caught on a little the last time he was here. He said, – well, in his quaint Oriental fashion, he said, ‘Gee! she’s the limit!’ that’s what he said.”

“Well, she is,” pouted Anita. “I can’t do a thing to suit her. To-day I wrote a letter over six times before she was satisfied. And every change she wanted made was so foolish she wanted it changed back again. She nearly drove me crazy!”

“But I have to put up with her morning, noon, and night,” sighed Pauline. “You have your hours off, Anita, but I never do. She even wakens me in the night to read to her, or to help her plan her new gowns.”

“It is awfully hard for you,” began Mr. Illsley, and then all stopped short, for the object of their discussion returned to the room.

It was plain to be seen Miss Carrington was in a state of suppressed excitement. She giggled almost hysterically, and tapped the Count playfully on the arm with her fan, as she bade him say good-night and go.

The interested ones watching her could not learn whether the Count had declared himself or not. The presumption was negative, for, had he done so, surely Miss Carrington would have told the good news.

Charlier himself was distinctly non-committal. Debonair as always, he made his adieux, no more demonstrative to his hostess than to the others, and went away. Illsley followed, and the household dispersed. The clock struck midnight as the ladies went upstairs.

Following custom, they all three went to Miss Lucy's boudoir. It was by way of reporting for to-morrow's orders, and was a duty never neglected.

The exquisite apartment, from which opened the bedroom and bath, was softly lighted and fragrant with flowers.

"How do you like Count Henri Charlier?" Miss Carrington quickly demanded of her satellites.

"Charming," said the voluble Anita. "Just a typical French nobleman, isn't he? And how he adores our Lady Lucy!"

The whole speech rang false, but the vanity of the lady addressed swallowed it as truest sincerity. "Yes," she returned, "he is infatuated, I have reason to think. But – we shall see what we shall see! Curb your impatience, girls! You shall know all in due time."

"Can I do anything for you, Auntie, to-night or to-morrow?" asked Pauline, and, though she tried to speak with enthusiasm, her tone did sound perfunctory.

"Not if you offer in that manner," and Miss Carrington looked at her niece coldly. "One would think, Pauline, that it must be an irksome task to do the smallest favor for your aunt and benefactor! Do you feel no pleasure in doing what trifles you can for one who does everything for you?"

"I would feel a pleasure, Aunt Lucy, if you were kinder to me. But –"

"Kinder!" shrieked her aunt; "kinder! Girl, have you taken leave of your senses? I give you a home, fine dresses, money, everything you can want, and you ask me to be kinder to you! Go! never let me see you again, after that speech!"

"Oh, auntie, don't! I didn't mean –"

"You didn't mean to exasperate me beyond endurance? No, of course you meant to stop short of that! But you have done it. I mean this, Pauline: to-morrow you go elsewhere to live. No longer will I give a home to such a monster of ingratitude!"

"But, Miss Carrington" – and Anita Frayne's soft voice implored gently – "don't be hasty. Pauline didn't mean –"

"What!" and Lucy Carrington turned on her, "you take her part? Then you go, too! I want no ingrates here. Leave me, both of you. This night is your last beneath this roof! You are two unworthy girls, to scorn and slight the hand that has fed and clothed you and given you luxury and comfort such as you will never see again! Go, I've done with you! Send me Estelle. She, at least, has some small affection for me."

The two girls left the room. The scene was not without precedent. Before this they had been ordered to leave the house forever, but always forgiveness and reinstatement had followed. This time, however, the Lady Lucy had been rather more in earnest, and the girls looked at each other uncertainly as they turned toward their rooms.

Anita summoned Estelle, the French maid, and then told her to hasten immediately to Miss Carrington.

"Don't undress me," said the mistress as the maid appeared; "I'm not retiring at once. Get me out of this gown and give me a negligée and slippers."

"Yes, mademoiselle," and Estelle deftly obeyed orders and brought a white boudoir gown edged with swans-down.

“Not that!” cried Miss Carrington. “Bring the gold-embroidered one, – the Oriental.”

“Ah, the green one, from Monsieur Loria?”

“Yes, the one my nephew sent me at Christmas time. My, but it’s handsome, isn’t it, Estelle?”

“Gorgeous!” declared the maid, and she spoke truly. Young Loria knew his aunt’s taste, and he had sent her a typical Egyptian robe, of pale green silk, heavy with gold embroideries. In it Miss Carrington looked like one attired for a masquerade.

“Shall I take down mademoiselle’s hair?” asked Estelle, lingering.

“No. I want to be alone. I will read awhile. You need not return. I will do for myself.”

“There is your glass of milk, ma’mzelle, on the bed-table.”

“Silly! I suppose I can see it for myself.”

“Yes, ma’am. And you will have your tea at eight in the morning?”

“Of course, my tea at eight. As always. You might remember that much yourself. But nobody remembers things for *my* comfort.”

“Pardon, but sometimes it is eight, and, again, it must be half-past.”

“Eight! Now, will you go? You are most exasperating! Why do you stand there like a gibbering idiot?”

“The jewels, mademoiselle; the pearls? Shall I not put them in safety?”

“No! I will put them in the safe myself. Where is the key?”

“There, mademoiselle, on your dresser. But if I might – ”

“You mayn’t do anything except to get out and stay out! Do you hear? Shall I never be obeyed?”

“Yes, mademoiselle; good-night.”

The soft tone was fully belied by the evil glare of the French girl’s eyes, but that was not seen by Miss Lucy Carrington.

III

THE TRAGEDY

The house faced the east, and, built on an English model, was far wider than deep. A broad hall ran through the centre from front to back, and on either side there were successive rooms whose windows looked out on equally beautiful scenes, both front and back. On the right of the hall, as one entered, was the long living room, and beyond it, the library and music room. The other side of the hall was a reception room, opening into the sun parlor, and on to the conservatory, and back of these, the dining room and smaller breakfast room.

Breakfast was served at nine, and the members of the family were usually all present. Miss Carrington, herself, made a point of being on time partly from habit, and also because it gave her opportunity to chide those who were late.

When she was not in her place, on the morning after the stormy bridge game, Pauline expressed surprise, and Haviland echoed her words.

But Anita said scornfully, "She went to bed in an awful tantrum and probably didn't sleep well."

Miss Frayne was looking her prettiest, and her roseleaf face with its fluffy golden halo, was like a Greuze picture. She wore a frivolous little house gown of blue crêpe de chine that just matched her forget-me-not eyes. Not especially appropriate garb for a secretary, but Miss Carrington preferred her household to be well-dressed, and really commanded pretty tints and fabrics for the two girls. Pauline was in white serge, of rather severe cut, but which suited her as no frills and flounces could. Her black hair was smoothly parted and coiled low over her ears, and her clear ivory-tinted skin was flushed faintly pink from the glow of the big, crackling wood fire.

"It's most unusual," went on Pauline, after a few moments more had passed, and the Lady Lucy had not appeared. "I'm going up to see if she is ill, – or –"

"Or merely in a tantrum extraordinary!" said Anita, her blue eyes full of laughing disrespect for her employer.

"Nita," said Haviland, as Pauline disappeared, "hold your breakfast napkin up in front of your face, quick!"

"Why?" said the girl, wondering, as she did his bidding.

"Because, if you hadn't, I should have flown at you and kissed you! And I mustn't now, for Haskins is approaching with muffins."

Down came the shielding napkin and only the arrival of the muffin-laden Haskins saved the lovely laughing face from Haviland's impetuous caress.

The old butler fussed about, and several minutes passed, when Pauline called from above stairs, "Gray! Come here, at once!"

"Desperate case!" and Haviland rose, and unhurriedly left the room, pinching Anita's little ear as he passed her.

Another moment and Miss Frayne heard an exclamation from Haviland that made her rise from the table and go flying upstairs herself.

The door of Miss Lucy's boudoir was open, and entering, she saw Pauline and Haviland with horror-stricken faces, gazing at a terrible sight.

Miss Lucy Carrington, seated before her dressing-table, her face white and ghastly, her large eyes staring wide – staring horribly, – but, without doubt, unseeing. Nor was this all of the strangeness of the sight. She was robed in an embroidered Oriental-looking gown, and wore many jewels. Her red-dyed hair, dressed elaborately, as she had worn it the night before, was still crowned with the enormous comb of carved tortoise-shell, but the comb was broken to bits. One portion, still standing

upright, rose above the disordered coiffure, but the rest, in broken scraps, lay scattered over the puffs of hair, – over the white hands clasped in her lap, – and on the floor at her feet.

“What does it mean?” whispered Anita, shuddering, “is she – is she dead?”

“Yes,” answered Haviland, briefly. He stood, hands in pockets, gazing at the startling figure.

“Who? – What? – ” Anita’s eyes riveted themselves on something else.

Around the neck of Miss Lucy was, – yes, it *was* – a snake!

With a low scream, Anita flung herself into Haviland’s arms, but he put her gently away from him.

Aghast at this repulse, Anita put her hand across her eyes and turned to leave the room.

“Mind where you go, Nita!” called out Haviland, and the girl stopped just in time to save herself from stepping into a mass of *débris*.

“Why!” she cried, “why, it’s Miss Lucy’s tray!”

It was. The silver tray that had held the breakfast tea was on the floor, and near it a jumbled heap of silver and broken china that had once been a costly Sevres set. Dainty white serviettes were stained with the spilled tea and a huge wet spot was near the overturned silver teapot.

Hastily Anita ran from the room, but she sank down on a couch in the hall just outside the door, utterly unable to go further.

Fascinated by the beady eyes of the green snake, Pauline stared at it, with clenched hands. Haviland stepped nearer and lightly touched it.

“Is it – is it alive?” gasped Pauline.

“It’s paper,” replied Haviland quietly. “A paper snake, a toy, – you know.”

“But who put it there? Aunt Lucy is deathly afraid of snakes! Did fright kill her? Gray, is she – murdered?”

“Yes, Pauline, she has been killed. But could it be – fright? Impossible!”

“Not for her! You don’t know her horror of snakes. Why, going through the Japanese department of a shop, I’ve seen her turn white and fairly fly from the counter where those paper things were displayed.”

“But what else killed her? There is no wound, no shot, no blood.”

“Get the doctor, Gray! Don’t wait a minute. Telephone at once.”

“He can do nothing, Pauline. She is dead.” Haviland spoke like a man in a daze.

“But no matter, we must call him. Shall I?”

“No, I will.”

“Go into her bedroom, – use that telephone by her bedside.”

Obediently, Haviland went on to the adjoining room, the soft rugs giving forth no sound of his footfalls.

The door was ajar, and as he opened it, he called, “Come here, Pauline; look, the night lights are burning, and the bed untouched. She hasn’t been to bed at all.”

“Of course she hasn’t. She has her hair as it was last evening. But her comb is broken.”

“Broken! It’s smashed! It’s in tiny bits! She has been hit on the head, – don’t touch her, Pauline! You mustn’t! I’ll call Dr. Stanton. You go out of the room. Go and find Anita.”

But Pauline staid. Turning her back to the still figure in the chair, she gazed curiously at the upset tray on the floor. She stooped, when Haviland’s voice came sharply from the next room. “Don’t touch a thing, Pauline!” he cried, as he held his hand over the transmitter.

She looked up, and then as she saw him turn back to speak into the instrument, she stooped swiftly and picking up something from the floor she hurried from the room.

She found Anita on the couch in the hall, and speaking somewhat sharply, Pauline said, “Where’s Estelle?”

“Mercy! I don’t know!” and Anita’s blue eyes stared coldly. “How should I know anything about Estelle?”

“But she must have brought that tray an hour ago. Did she upset it, or who?”

“Pauline, why do you act as if I knew anything about this matter. Is it because *you* do?”

The blue eyes, cold like steel, and the dark ones, flashing fire from their shadows, looked steadily at each other.

Gray Haviland came hurriedly out to the hall.

“The doctor will be here at once,” he said; “and he will call the coroner.”

“Coroner!” screamed Anita; and ran away to her own room.

“Let her alone,” said Pauline, contemptuously; “but Gray, we must nerve ourselves up to this thing. Don’t you think we ought to – to put away the jewels? It’s wrong to let any one come into a room where a fortune in jewels is displayed like that.”

“But Doctor Stanton said to touch nothing, – nothing at all. You see, Pauline, in a murder case, – ”

“Oh, I know; ‘nothing disturbed till the Coroner comes,’ and all that. But this is different, Gray. Doctor Stanton didn’t know there are two hundred thousand dollars’ worth of jewelry on that – that – on her.”

“How do you know so exactly?”

“I’m not exact, but she has told me times enough that the rope of pearls cost one hundred thousand, and that corsage ornament she is wearing and her rings and ear-rings are easily worth the same sum. I tell you there will be policemen here, and it isn’t right to throw temptation in their way.”

“Besides,” and Anita’s voice spoke again as she reappeared in the doorway, “besides, Pauline, they are all yours now, and you should be careful of them!”

The tone more than the words conveyed a veiled insolence, and Pauline accepted it for such. With a sudden determined movement, she went swiftly to her aunt’s side, and unfastened the long rope of pearls, the wonderful glittering sunburst, and a large diamond and emerald crescent that held together the glistening silk folds. The rings and ear-rings she could not bring herself to touch.

“It is only *right*,” she contended, as if trying to persuade herself, “these are too valuable to risk; no one could fail to be tempted by them.”

“Why don’t you finish your task?” said Anita, smiling unpleasantly, “why leave so much?”

“No one would attempt to take the rings or ear-rings,” said Pauline, steadily, “and that scarab bracelet is not of great value.”

“I thought that was a most valuable antique that her nephew sent her.”

“She thought so, too,” said Pauline, carelessly, “but Carr told me it was an imitation. Not one expert in a hundred can tell the difference, anyway.”

As Pauline placed the mass of gems in the safe, the doctor came. “What does it mean?” cried the bewildered man, coming into the room. “Miss Carrington – ”

Words failed him as he saw the astounding sight. For surely, no one had ever before seen a murdered woman, sitting before her dressing-table, staring but smiling, and garbed as for a fancy-dress ball!

Doctor Stanton touched the icy-cold hand, felt for the silent heart, and then turned his attention to the disheveled hair and broken comb.

“Fractured skull,” he said, as his skilled fingers thriddled the auburn tresses. “Killed by a sudden, swift blow on the head with a heavy, blunt, – no, with a soft weapon; a black-jack or sandbag.”

“A burglar!” exclaimed Pauline.

“Of course; who else would deal such a blow? It was powerful, – dealt by a strong arm – it has driven bits of this broken shell stuff into the brain. But it was the force of the concussion that killed her. Here is a deep dent, – and yet. – Tell me the circumstances. Why is she rigged out like this?”

“I’ve no idea,” answered Pauline, taking the initiative. “When I left her last night, she had on an evening gown. But this negligée is not unusual; it is one of her favorites. Though why she has on that spangled scarf, I can’t imagine.”

“She seems to have been posing before the mirror, rather than engaged in making a toilette.” Dr. Stanton was a pompous middle-aged man of fussy manner. He did not again touch the body, but he stepped about, noting the strange conditions and commenting on them. “This paper snake, – tight round her neck! What does that mean?”

“What *can* it mean?” returned Pauline. “She had an intense hatred, – even *fear* of snakes; I’ve never seen it before. Could it have been placed there to frighten her to death?”

“No; she didn’t die of fright. See, her expression is placid, – even smiling. But the shattered comb and dented skull have but one explanation, – a stunning blow. Did she have on the comb last evening?”

“Yes; it is a favorite one with her. An heirloom, from a Colonial ancestor. It encircled the entire back of her head, when whole.”

“At what time was she killed?” asked Gray Haviland. He had stood, till now, a silent listener to the conversation between Pauline and the Doctor.

“Oh, many hours ago,” returned Stanton; “six or eight at least. Evidently she was preparing for bed, and trying the effect of some new finery.”

“Those things are not new,” put in Anita; “she has had them all a long time. But she must have been admiring herself, for when we found her she had on all her finest jewels.”

“What?” cried Dr. Stanton; “where are they?”

“I took most of them off,” replied Pauline, quietly, “and put them in the safe. If the police people must come, I am not willing to have a fortune in jewels here to tempt their cupidity. And I have a right. It is no secret that my cousin Carrington and I are her heirs. But that snake perplexes me beyond all else. If you knew her aversion to them, – even pictured ones – ”

“I do know it,” returned the doctor; “I have often heard her say so. Ah,” as he stepped carefully about, “she *was* adorning herself; see, here is powder scattered on the floor. She used this powder-puff, shaking it over the rug and floor.”

“I saw that the first thing!” cried Pauline, excitedly; “and there was a – ” she stopped, looking in amazement at the white dust on the floor. For where she had seen a distinct footprint, as of a stockinged foot, there was now merely a blurred whirl! Some one had obliterated that footprint!

“A what?” asked the doctor, sharply.

“Nothing. A – a lot of powder spilled, – I was going to say.”

Gray Haviland looked at her. “Tell the truth, Pauline,” he said.

“I have,” she replied, with a calm quite equalling his own. “Must we have the Coroner, Dr. Stanton?”

“Yes, yes, of course; I will telephone at once. There will be police and detectives, – oh, it is a terrible case! Nothing must be touched, nothing! If there is *any* clue to this mystery, do not let it be disturbed.”

“But you say it was without doubt a burglar who did it,” said Anita, her wide eyes gleaming blue.

“It must have been.”

“Then why were none of her jewels stolen?”

“Bless my soul!” and Dr. Stanton looked as if a bomb had exploded at his feet. “Sure enough! It cannot have been a burglar! Who, then? What other motive than robbery – ”

“It *was* a burglar,” declared Pauline, “and he was – he was frightened away by – by a noise – or something – ”

“Not likely!” said Anita, “with all those gems in easy reach!”

“The Coroner and the police must get here at once!” and the doctor wiped his perspiring brow. “Never have I seen such an inexplicable state of affairs! Was – was Miss Carrington indisposed at all last evening? Did she say or do anything unusual?”

“Not at all,” began Pauline, but Anita interrupted; “Yes, she did! She said, ‘You little know what’s going to happen to me! To-morrow you may sing another tune!’”

“What did she mean by that?”

“I’ve no idea. Could it mean suicide?”

“No!” thundered the doctor; “her skull was fractured by some one bent on wilful murder! As there is no robbery, we must look for a deeper motive and a cleverer villain than any professional burglar!”

IV

A PAPER SNAKE

On the third floor was the bedroom of the maid, Estelle, and before its locked door stood Pauline and Anita, demanding admittance. There was no response from inside, until Pauline said sternly, "Unless you open this door at once, Estelle, the police will force it open."

The key turned, the door moved slowly ajar, and Estelle's face appeared, wearing an expression of amazement.

"What is it you say, Miss Pauline? The police? Why?"

The maid was making a very evident effort to appear composed, and was succeeding wonderfully well. Her eyes were reddened with weeping, – a condition which a hasty dabbing of powder had not concealed. She was nervously trembling, but her air of injured innocence, if assumed, was admirable.

"Estelle," and Pauline loomed tall and magnificent as an accusing angel, "what do you know of your mistress' death?"

Estelle gave a shriek and threw herself on her bed in apparent hysterics.

"Don't begin that!" ordered Pauline, "sit up here and tell the truth."

"But," and the maid sat up, sobbing, "I know nothing. How can I?"

"Nonsense! You took the tea-tray to her at eight o'clock. What did you see?"

Estelle shrugged her shoulders. "I saw Miss Carrington sitting before her mirror. She, I assumed, was engrossed in reverie, so I set down the tray on a tabouret and departed."

"You noticed nothing amiss?" said Anita, staring at the girl.

"No; I scarce looked at the lady. She reproved me harshly last night, and I had no wish to annoy her. I set down the tray with haste and silently departed."

"You set it down? Who, then, overturned it?"

"Overturned? Is it then upset?" Estelle's manner was the impersonal one of the trained servant, who must show surprise at nothing, but it was a trifle overdone.

"Estelle, stop posing. Wake up to realities. Miss Carrington is dead! Do you hear? Dead!"

"Ah! *Mon Dieu!* Did it then kill her?" and Estelle's calm gave way and she screamed and moaned in wild hysterics.

"What can we do with her?" asked Anita, helplessly; "she must know all about the – the –"

"The murder," said Pauline calmly. "But she will tell us nothing. It is useless to question her. The Coroner will attend to it, anyway."

"The Coroner," and Anita looked frightened. "Will he question all of us?"

"Of course he will. And, Anita," Pauline whirled on her suddenly, "what are you going to say was the errand that took you to Aunt Lucy's room after one o'clock last night?"

"I! Nothing of the sort! I was not in her room after we left it together."

"I saw you. Don't trouble to deny it," and Pauline dropped her eyelids as one bored by a conversation.

"You did!" and Anita's flower face turned rosy pink and her blue eyes blazed with an intensity that Pauline's dark ones could never match. "Be careful, Pauline Stuart, or I shall tell what *I* know! You *dare* to make up such a story! It was *I* who saw *you* come from your aunt's room at a late hour! What have you to say now?"

"Nothing – to you," and Pauline swept from the room and returned slowly down the stairway to the second floor.

The sight of two police officers in the hall gave her a sudden start. How had they appeared, so soon? And how dreadful to see them in the palatial home that had heretofore housed only gentle-

mannered aristocrats and obsequious liveried servants! The men looked ill at ease as they stood against the rich background of tapestry hangings and tropical palms, but their faces showed a stern appreciation of their duty, and they looked at Pauline with deferential but acute scrutiny.

Not noticing them in any way, the girl, her head held high, went straight to her aunt's room. Sergeant Flake was in charge, and he refused her admission.

"Coroner's orders, ma'am," he said; "he'll be here himself shortly, and then you can see him."

"Come away, Pauline," and Haviland appeared and took her by the arm; "where's Anita?"

"I left her in Estelle's room. Oh Gray, that girl –"

"Hush!" and gripping her firmly, Haviland led her to a small sitting room and shut the door. "Now listen, Pauline; mind what I say. Don't give the least bit of information or express the slightest notion of opinion except to the chief authorities. And not to them until they ask you. This is a terrible affair, and a mighty strange one."

"Who did it, Gray?"

"Never you mind. Don't even ask questions. The very walls have ears!"

"Who upset that breakfast tray?"

"Estelle, of course."

"She says she didn't."

"She lies. Everybody will lie; why, Pauline, you must lie yourself."

"I won't do it! I have no reason to!"

"You may find that you have. But, at least, Pauline, I beg of you, that you will keep your mouth shut. There will be developments soon, – there must be, – and then we will know what to do."

The two returned to the boudoir. At first glance it seemed to be full of men. The beautiful room, with its ornate but harmonious furnishings and appointments of the Marie Antoinette period, was occupied with eager representatives of the law and justice hunting for any indication of the ruthless hand that had felled the owner of all that elegance.

Coroner Scofield was receiving the report of Doctor Moore, who had arrived with him.

Dr. Moore agreed with Dr. Stanton that the deceased had been struck with a heavy weapon that had fractured the skull, but he admitted the wounds showed some strange conditions which could only be explained by further investigation.

The Coroner was deep in thought as he studied the face of the dead woman.

"It is most mysterious," he declared; "that face is almost smiling! it is the face of a happy woman. Clearly, she did not know of her approaching fate."

"The blow was struck from behind," informed Dr. Moore.

"Even so, why didn't she see the approach of the assailant in the mirror? She is looking straight into the large glass, – must have been looking in it at the moment of her death. *Why* receive that death blow without a tremor of fear or even a glance of startled inquiry?"

Inspector Brunt stood by, gravely, and for the most part silently, watching and listening.

"That might imply," he said, slowly, "that if she did see the assailant, it was some one she knew, and of whom she had no fear."

Gray Haviland looked up suddenly. A deep red spread over his face and then, seeing himself narrowly watched by the detectives present, he set his lips firmly together and said no word.

Pauline turned white and trembled, but she too said nothing.

"Why is she sitting in this large easy chair?" went on the Coroner; "Is it not customary for ladies at their dressing tables to use a light side-chair?"

This showed decidedly astute perception, and the Inspector looked interestedly at the chair in question, which he had not especially noticed before.

Being tacitly appealed to by the Coroner's inquiring eyes, Pauline replied: "It is true that my aunt usually sat at her dressing-table in a small chair, – that one, in fact," and she pointed to a dainty chair of gilded cane. "I have no idea why she should choose the heavy, cushioned one."

"It would seem," the Coroner mused, "as if she might have sat down there to admire the effect of her belongings rather than to arrange her hair or toilette."

Absorbedly, all present watched Coroner Scofield's movements.

It was true, the quietly reposeful attitude of the still figure leaning back against the brocaded upholstery, and so evidently looking in the great gold-framed mirror, was that of one admiring or criticising her own appearance. Added to this, the fact of her bizarre costume and strange adornments, it seemed certain that Miss Carrington had come to her death while innocently happy in the feminine employment of dressing up in the elaborate finery that she loved.

But the snake!

Carefully Coroner Scofield removed the inexplicable thing. He held it up that all might see. A Japanese paper snake, a cheap toy, such as is found together with fans and lanterns in the Oriental department of large shops.

"Could this have been placed round her neck after death?" Scofield inquired of the doctors.

The two physicians agreed, that though that was possible, yet the appearance of the flesh beneath it seemed to indicate its having encircled the throat during life.

"Never!" cried Pauline, excitedly. "Aunt Lucy *couldn't* have sat there and *smiled*, with a snake anywhere near her!"

"That would seem so," and Dr. Stanton nodded his head. "I well know of my late patient's aversion to snakes. It amounted almost to a mania! It is not an uncommon one, many women feel the same, though seldom to so great an extent."

"That deepens the mystery," said Coroner Scofield; "unless, indeed, the snake was put on after the crime. But that is even more mysterious. I shall now remove these valuable jewels, and give them to –"

He looked inquiringly at Haviland and Pauline, and the latter immediately responded: "Give them to me, Mr. Scofield. I am now mistress here."

Haviland said nothing, but he looked at Pauline as if in disapproval.

"Is this of great worth?" inquired Scofield, as he carefully removed the scarf from the shoulders it surrounded.

"Only moderately so," returned Pauline. "It is a Syrian scarf and was sent to her by her nephew who lives in Egypt. It is not new, he sent several to us about a year ago."

She took the long, heavy, white and silver drapery, and laid it in a nearby wardrobe. Then the Coroner unfastened the large pearls from their place as eardrops, and taking up one lifeless hand removed its rings. All these he handed to Pauline without a word.

"What is this?" he exclaimed suddenly; and opening the curled-up fingers of the other hand he drew forth a crumpled gray object. It was a glove, of soft suède, and so tightly had it been held that it was deeply creased.

"A man's glove!" said the Coroner, smoothing it out. "Will the wonders of this case never cease?"

He scrutinized it, but remarking only that it was of medium size and superior quality, he laid it carefully aside for the time.

From the same arm he removed the scarab bracelet, also handing that to Pauline.

"The lady was fond of Oriental jewelry," he observed.

"Yes," returned Haviland, before Pauline could speak. "Her nephew sent or brought home much of it. But, as we informed you, Miss Carrington was also wearing pearls and diamonds of enormous value, compared to which these trinkets are as nothing."

"But scarabs, I am told, are of great price."

"Some are," returned Haviland. "That bracelet, however, is not genuine, nor of great value."

Then the Coroner, with delicate touch, removed the bits of broken tortoise-shell from the puffs of hair, and carefully laid them together on a small silver tray he appropriated from the dressing-table litter.

"I think," said Inspector Brunt, in his grave, slow way, "that it will be wise to photograph the whole picture from several points of view before the autopsy is performed."

Arrangements had been made for this, and Detective Hardy, a young man from Headquarters, stepped forward with his camera.

As those who were asked to left the room, Pauline and Gray went out together, and met Anita just outside in the hall.

"Oh, tell me, Gray! Who did it? What does it all mean?" she cried, and grasped him by the arm.

"Tell her about it, Gray," said Pauline, and leaving the two together, she went swiftly along the hall to her own room.

The alert eyes of the guarding policemen followed her, but also they followed the movements of every one else, and if they had, as yet, any suspicions, no one knew of them.

Meantime, the gruesome work of photography went on.

Surely never was such a strange subject for the camera! Denuded of her jewels, but still robed in her gorgeous dressing-gown, and still leaning back in her luxurious arm-chair, with that strange smile of happy expectancy, Miss Lucy Carrington presented the same air of regal authority she had always worn in life. Her eyes were widely staring, but there was no trace or hint of fear in her peaceful attitude of repose.

"There's no solution!" said Inspector Brunt, deeply thoughtful. "No one could or would crack a skull like that, but an experienced and professional burglar and housebreaker. And such a one could have but one motive, robbery, and the jewels were not stolen!"

"Inside job," observed Scofield, briefly, his eyes on his work.

"Maybe the burglar was frightened away at the critical moment."

"No. Whatever frightened him would be known to some member of the family."

"Maybe it is."

"Hey? Have you a theory?" and the Coroner looked up suddenly.

"Anything but! There's no *possible* theory that will fit the facts."

"Except the truth."

"Yes, except the truth. But it will be long before we find that, I'm afraid. It strikes me it's at the bottom of an unusually deep well."

"Well, you'd *better* find it. It'd be a nice how d'y' do for you to fall down on *this* case!"

"There's no falling down been done yet. And it may well be that the very fact of there being such strange and irreconcilable conditions shall prove a help rather than a hindrance."

And then, all being in readiness, the lifeless form of Miss Carrington, once the proud domineering autocrat, now laid low, was borne to a distant room, for the autopsy that might cast a further light on the mystery of her tragic death.

V A MAN'S GLOVE

Inspector Brunt and the young detective, Hardy, were interviewing the members of the household in the library, and the task was not an easy one. The two girls were distinctly at odds, and Gray Haviland, whether authoritatively or not, persisted in assuming a major rôle.

"It seems to me," Haviland said, "that it is the most remarkable mystery that has ever occurred in the experience of you police people. Now, I think the wisest plan is to call in a big detective, – no offence, Mr. Hardy, – but I mean a noted fellow, like Stone, say, and let him get at the root of the crime."

"I think, Gray," and Pauline looked very haughty, "that any such suggestion would come better from me. I am now mistress of the place, and it is for me to say what we shall do."

"I know it," and Haviland looked no whit abashed, "but you know Carr Loria is equally in authority, even if he isn't here, and you see –"

"I don't see that Carr's absence gives *you* any authority!"

"But it does, in a way. As Miss Lucy's man of affairs, I ought to look out for the interests of her heirs, at least, for the absent one. I'm sure Loria would want to do everything possible to find the murderer."

"Has this nephew been notified yet?" asked Inspector Brunt.

"Yes," returned Pauline; "we've telephoned a cablegram to the city to be sent to him in Egypt. But I don't know when he will get it, nor when we'll get a response."

"Where is he?"

"His permanent address is Cairo, but he is off in the desert, or somewhere, so much that sometimes he is away from communication for weeks at a time. Still I've sent it, that's all I can do."

"What did you tell him?"

"I made it rather long and circumstantial. I told him of Aunt Lucy's death, and that she was killed by a blow on the head by a burglar, which fractured her skull. I asked him if he would come home or if we should go there. You see, we were intending to sail for Egypt in February."

"Who were?"

"Myself, my aunt, Miss Frayne and Mr. Haviland. Carrington Loria has been begging us to make the trip, and at last Aunt Lucy decided to go. Our passage is engaged, and all plans made."

"And now –?"

"Now, I do not know. Everything is uncertain. But if the burglar can be found, and punished, I see no reason why I, at least, shouldn't go on and make the trip. The others must please themselves."

Pauline looked at Anita and at Haviland with a detached air, as if now they were no longer members of the household, and their plans did not concern her.

Not so Haviland. "Sure I'll go," he cried; "I fancy Carr will be mighty glad to keep me on in the same capacity I served Miss Carrington. He'll need a representative in this country. I doubt he'll come over, – there's no need, if I look after all business matters for him."

"What does he do in Egypt?" asked the Inspector, who was half engrossed looking over his memoranda, and really took slight interest in the absent heir.

"He's excavating wonderful temples and things," volunteered Anita, for Pauline and Gray were looking, amazed, at a man who came into the room. He was the detective who had been left in charge of the boudoir, and he carried a strange-looking object.

"What *is* it?" cried Pauline.

"It's a black-jack," replied the detective. "I found it, Inspector, just under the edge of the tassel trimmin' of the lounge. The fellow slung it away, and it hid under the fringe, out of sight."

Gravely, Inspector Brunt took the weapon. It was rudely made, of black cloth, a mere bag, long and narrow, and filled with bird shot.

"That's the weapon!" declared Brunt. "A man could hit a blow with that thing that would break the skull without cutting the skin. Yes, there is no further doubt that Miss Carrington was murdered by a burglar. This is a burglar's weapon; this it was that crushed the shell comb to fragments, and fractured the skull, leaving the body sitting upright, and unmutilated. Death was, of course, instantaneous."

"But the jewels!" said Detective Hardy, wonderingly; "why –"

"I don't *know* why!" said Brunt, a little testily; "that is for you detectives to find out. I have to go by what evidence I find. Can I find a broken skull and a black-jack in the same room and not deduce a burglarious assault that proved fatal? The thief may have been scared off or decided he didn't want the loot, but that doesn't affect the certainty that we have the weapon and therefore the case is a simple one. That burglar can be found, without a doubt. Then we shall learn *why* he didn't steal the jewels."

"But the snake?" said Pauline, looking wonderingly at the Inspector; "the burglar must have been a maniac or an eccentric to put that snake round my aunt's neck after he killed her, – and nothing will ever make me believe that she allowed it there while alive!"

"That's what I say," put in Haviland; "the whole affair is so inexplicable, – excuse me, Mr. Brunt, but I can't think it such a simple case as you do, – that I think we should engage expert skill to solve the mysteries of it all."

"That must come later," and Inspector Brunt resumed his usual gravity of manner which had been disturbed by the discovery of the black-jack. "Will you now please give me some detailed information as to the circumstances? Is the house always securely locked at night?"

"Very much so," answered Haviland; "Miss Carrington was not overly timid, but she always insisted on careful precautions against burglary. She had a house full of valuable furniture, curios, and art works besides her personal belongings. Yes, the house was always supposed to be carefully locked and bolted."

"Whose duty is it to look after it?"

"The butler Haskins, and his wife, who is the cook, had all such matters in charge."

"I will interview them later. Now please tell me, any of you, why Miss Carrington was arrayed in such peculiar fashion, last evening."

"I can't imagine," said Pauline. "My aunt was not a vain woman. I have never known her to sit before a mirror, except when necessary, to have her hair dressed. It is almost unbelievable that she should deliberately don those jewels and scarf and sit down there as if to admire the effect. Yet it had that appearance."

"But she wore the jewels during the evening, did she not?"

"Not all of them. She wore her pearls, because, as she told us, and as I have often heard her say, pearls must be worn occasionally to keep them in condition. But she added a large number of valuable gems – or, some one did, – after we left her last night."

"Whom do you mean by we?"

"Miss Frayne and myself. We were in her room, to say good-night to her, and we left at the same time."

"At what time?"

"About quarter past twelve, I should think, wasn't it, Anita? We went upstairs about midnight, and were with my aunt ten or fifteen minutes."

"Were your good-nights amicable?" asked the Inspector, and Pauline looked up in surprise. Then, recollecting the last words of her aunt, she shut her lips obstinately and made no reply.

"Indeed, they were not!" declared Miss Frayne; "Miss Carrington told both Miss Stuart and myself that it would be our last night beneath this roof! That to-day we must seek some other home, for she would harbor us no longer!"

"Ah! And why did she thus treat you?"

“There was no especial reason,” and Anita’s lovely blue eyes looked straight at the Inspector with a pathetic gaze, “she was in a tantrum, as she frequently was.”

“She didn’t mean it,” put in Pauline, hastily.

“She did!” asseverated Anita; “I’ve heard her threaten to send us away before, but never so earnestly. She meant it last night, I am sure. And, too, she knew something would happen to her last night, – she said so.”

“What? what’s that?”

“Do hush, Anita!” said Pauline; “those foolish words meant nothing!”

“Proceed, Miss Frayne,” and the Inspector spoke sternly.

“She did,” went on Anita. “I don’t remember the exact words, but she said I little knew what was going to happen to her, and she said ‘to-morrow you may sing another song!’ Surely such words meant something!”

“If they did,” said Pauline, angrily, “they merely meant that she was going to dismiss you to-day!”

“Not at all,” and Anita glanced at her, “she distinctly said something would happen to her, – not to me.”

“You know better than to take things she said in a temper, seriously! If we are to repeat idle conversations, suppose I say that I heard *you* say last evening that you’d like to kill her!”

“I didn’t!” shrieked Anita.

“You did,” declared Pauline, calmly; “and Gray said she ought to be killed, too. I know you didn’t mean to kill her, but I’ve just as much right to quote your foolish words as you have to quote hers.”

“Nonsense!” said Haviland; “let up, Polly! You two are always at each other! As there is no question as to who killed poor Miss Lucy, why rake up our foolish words spoken under the intense provocation of her exhibition of temper, – which was specially trying last night. Inspector, can we tell you anything more of importance?”

So far the Inspector had been almost silent, and appeared to be learning some points from the conversation not addressed to him. Now, he changed his manner, and began briskly to ask questions.

“This glove,” he said, holding it out, “was, as you know, found clasped in her hand. Is it yours, Mr. Haviland?”

“No,” said the young man, as, after a close examination of the glove he handed it back; “no, it is a size smaller than I wear, and it is of a different make from mine.”

“Have you any idea whose it can be? It is highly improbable the burglar left it.”

“I’ve no idea,” and Haviland shrugged his shoulders. “But if it was not left by the intruder, where could it possibly have come from? It is a man’s glove.”

“Could it be one of Cousin Carr’s?” said Pauline. “Aunt Lucy was awfully fond of anything of his. She kept one of his caps in her drawer for months, after he left the last time.”

“No,” replied Haviland; “it isn’t Loria’s. He wears larger gloves than I do. My theory points to a sort of gentleman burglar, a ‘Raffles,’ you know, and I think he talked with Miss Lucy, before he struck that blow, and disarmed her mind of fear.”

“What an extraordinary idea!” and Pauline looked thoughtful.

“But how else explain the glove?”

“And the snake? Did your gentleman burglar persuade her to wear that paper thing? Never! Gray, you’re absurd!”

“Another thing,” went on Inspector Brunt, returning the glove to his roomy pocket-book; “In the bedroom we noticed a glass of milk and beside it an empty plate. Was it the lady’s habit to have a night lunch?”

“Yes,” said Anita; “but she rarely ate it. In case of insomnia, she had ready a light repast, but she almost never touched it.”

“The glass of milk is still untouched,” said Brunt, “but the plate is empty. What did it contain?”

“A sandwich, I think,” said Anita. “That is what Estelle usually prepared for her. She will know, – Estelle, the maid.”

“Miss Carrington’s lady’s maid?”

“Yes; though not hers exclusively. She was expected to act as maid for Miss Stuart and myself also, at such times as Miss Carrington didn’t require her services.”

“And she, then, brought the breakfast tray, that is upset on the floor?”

“Yes; Miss Lucy always had an early cup of tea, before she dressed for breakfast with the family.”

“And the maid took it to her this morning? Did she not then discover the – the tragedy?”

“She says not!” cried Pauline; “but I’m sure she did! She says she saw Miss Lucy at the mirror, and thinking her engrossed, merely left the tray on the tabouret and went away.”

“Ridiculous!” exclaimed Haviland; “What does Estelle mean by such lies? Of course she saw Miss Carrington’s strange appearance, of course she was frightened out of her wits, and of course she dropped the tray and ran. But why not say so? And why not give an immediate alarm? She took that tray, probably, about eight. Pauline went up at nine. What was Estelle doing all that time? Why didn’t she go in to dress Miss Carrington? I tell you, Mr. Inspector, there’s a lot of queer work to be explained, and with all due respect to the force, I’m pretty sure you’ll need expert service if you’re going to get anywhere. And I’m sure, too, that if we can get word to Carrington Loria and back, he’ll say spare no trouble or expense to avenge his aunt’s murder. He is equally heir with you, Pauline, and he ought to be consulted.”

“The will hasn’t been read yet,” said Miss Stuart; “we can’t assume anything until that is done.”

“Pshaw! you know perfectly well half of the bulk of the estate is yours and half Carr’s. I have a small slice and Miss Frayne a bit. The older servants have small legacies, and there are a few charities. That, Mr. Brunt, is the gist of the will. Do you not agree with me, that as I was the man of business for the late Miss Carrington, I am justified, in the absence of Mr. Loria, in continuing my services, at least, until we can get definite directions from him?”

“Those matters are outside my province, Mr. Haviland. Miss Carrington’s legal advisers will doubtless come here soon, and such things will be decided by them. Now, here’s another point. I noted in the course of our investigation in the boudoir a quantity of powder fallen on the floor near the dressing table, in such relation to it that it would seem Miss Carrington was using the face powder as she sat there. Was this her habit?”

“Her habit? Yes;” said Anita, “Miss Carrington was in the habit of using face powder, – even cosmetics. It is not strange then, that such a proceeding was part of her night toilette.”

“No, not at all,” agreed Mr. Brunt. “But where the powder was thickest, on the hard floor, near the rug, was a muddled spot, as if some one had wiped out or swept up a mark or print. Can any of you explain this?”

No one spoke, and the stern voice went on. “I remember, Miss Stuart, that you began to say something bearing on this while we were in that room, and you suddenly stopped, appearing confused. I ask you why?”

Pauline hesitated, bit her lip, looked at Gray and then at Anita, and finally said, “I may as well tell. It is nothing. When I went to my aunt’s room, and found what I did find, – I was so excited and nervous I scarce knew what I did. But I remember seeing a footprint in that powder, and in obedience to an impulsive instinct I – I obliterated it.”

“With what?”

“With my handkerchief. I merely slapped at it, and the light powder flew about it.”

“Why did you do this?”

“I don’t know. I had no real reason. I was not thinking of what I was doing.”

“Then you did not have a desire to shield some one from possible suspicion?” The words were shot at her so swiftly that Pauline gasped.

“Suspicion! What do you mean? Was it not the work of a burglar?”

“Was the impression of a foot that you saw, the foot of a man or a woman?”

“How can I tell? It was large, but as it was a bare or stockinged foot I could not judge. Might not the burglar have removed his boots, before entering the room?”

“He might, indeed, and that is just what he did do. For more prints of that stockinged foot have been discovered on the stairs, and there is no doubt that the tracks are those of the assailant of Miss Carrington. With your permission, Miss Stuart, I will now go to interview the servants. May I ask you to await me here, all of you? I shall not be very long.”

As the Inspector and the detectives left the room, Haskins appeared to announce Mrs. Frothingham and Count Henri Charlier.

VI

A NEIGHBOR'S CALL

"Oh, is it not terrible? What *can* I say to comfort you!"

Mrs. Frothingham's distressed tones and her air of eager, intense sympathy met with little response from Pauline.

Haviland had been called from the room on an errand and Anita's willingness to receive the neighbor's condolences did not seem acceptable. The overdressed, forward-mannered widow continued to direct her attention entirely to Pauline, and that young woman merely surveyed her visitor coolly and replied in monosyllables.

"Thanks," she said, and her icy air would have deterred a less determined intruder.

"I simply couldn't help running over as soon as I heard the dreadful news. For we are neighbors after all, though not so very well acquainted; and neighbors have a camaraderie of their own, I think."

"Yes?" said Pauline, and her eyelids fell slightly, with an expression of boredom.

"Yes, indeed," Mrs. Frothingham rattled on; "and I said to our dear Count, we must run over at once, there may be something we can do for the saddened ones."

"Thank you;" and had a marble statue been given vocal powers the effect would have been much the same.

"Dear friend," continued the unabashed visitor, "I know how overcome you must be – "

"I am not overcome at all," said Pauline, rising, and determined to hear no more; "and I must beg to be excused, Mrs. Frothingham, as I have many matters to attend to this morning."

"Ah, yes, of course, you have. We will not detain you. The Count and I merely called for a moment to inquire – "

"Yes, I quite understand. Miss Frayne will be pleased to answer your inquiries. Thank you both, and – good-morning."

With a polite but distant bow, Pauline left the room, and as Count Charlier sprang to hold the door open for her, he, after a moment's hesitation, followed her out.

"A moment, I beg, Miss Stuart," he said as they reached the hall; "You are offended at Mrs. Frothingham's intrusion, but have I not a right to call? Was I not such a friend of Miss Carrington as to justify this tribute of respect to her memory?"

"Certainly, Count," and Pauline grew a shade kinder, "but I am not sufficiently acquainted with your friend to receive her visits."

"Ah, no. That is conceded. But, I pray you, tell me of the sad affair. I have heard no details, – that is, unless you would rather not."

"No, I am not unwilling. You were a good friend of Aunt Lucy's – she was fond of you, and I am glad to talk to some one. Let us sit here." Pauline indicated a recessed seat in the hall and the pair sat there. She recounted briefly the story of the tragedy and the Count was duly sympathetic. Pauline watched him closely, and discerned great interest but little grief or sorrow.

"A burglar, of course," said the Count hearing of the cruel weapon. "How *could* any one attack the charming lady! And the marvelous jewels she wore! They were, of course, stolen?"

"No; that's the strange part. They were not."

"Ah, how splendid!" and his absorbed air of satisfaction gave Pauline a thrill of disgust at his cold-bloodedness. "And now they are all yours? Those magnificent gems?"

"The property, most of it, is divided between my cousin and myself."

"Your cousin? Mr. Haviland?"

"No; he is but a distant connection. I mean my first cousin, Mr. Loria, now in Egypt."

"Ah, yes, I have heard Miss Carrington refer to him. He will come home?"

"I do not know. We have cabled of course. Count Charlier, do you remember hearing my aunt say, last evening, that she expected something to happen to her?"

"I remember, Miss Stuart."

"Have you any idea what she meant?"

"I? But how could I know?"

"Answer my question, please."

The Count's eyes fell, and he shifted his feet about uneasily. At last he said: "It is not pleasant to say such things, but since you ask, I may be permitted to assume that the late Miss Carrington had a regard for my humble self."

"And she expected, she – hoped that her regard might be returned?"

"It may be so."

"And that last night you might tell her so?"

"You honor me."

"Did you tell her so?"

"I did not, Miss Stuart. What might have happened had she lived I cannot say, but I did not, last evening, say any word to Miss Carrington of my aspiration to her hand."

"Did you say anything that could have been taken as a hint that some time, say, in the near future, you might express such an aspiration?"

"I may have done so."

"Thank you, Count Charlier. I had perhaps no right to ask, but you have answered my rather impertinent questions straightforwardly, and I thank you."

Pauline rose, as if to end the interview. In the doorway appeared Anita. "Pauline," she said, "I wish you would come back and listen to Mrs. Frothingham's story. It seems to me of decided importance."

"You have something to tell me?" asked Pauline, returning to the library and looking at the unwelcome neighbor with patient tolerance.

"Yes, Miss Stuart. Now, it may be nothing, – nothing, I mean, of consequence, that is, you may not think so, but I – "

"Suppose you let me hear it and judge for myself."

"Yes. Well, it's only this. I was wakeful last night, or rather early this morning, and looking from my bedroom window, which faces this house, I saw a man climb out of a window on the first floor and skulk away among the shrubbery."

"At what time was this?" and Pauline looked interested at last.

"About four o'clock. He was to all appearances a burglar – "

"How could you tell? Was it not dark at that hour in the morning?"

"No; the moon is past full, you know, and it shone brightly in the western sky."

"Enough for you to discern the man clearly?"

"I took a field-glass to assist my vision. He stealthily climbed out and skirting the bushes made his way swiftly toward the great gates."

"This is indeed an important bit of information, Mrs. Frothingham; I dare say you ought to tell it to the police who are here."

"Oh, I couldn't! I'm so timid about such things! But, – if you would go with me, Miss Stuart – "

"Miss Frayne will go with you," said Pauline, coolly; "You will find a policeman in the hall who will direct you where to find the Inspector."

Without another word Pauline bowed in a way to include the lady and the Count also, and went away to her own room.

"Stuck-up thing!" exclaimed Mrs. Frothingham, and Anita nodded her golden head in agreement.

Inspector Brunt instructed Hardy to hear the story of Mrs. Frothingham, and he devoted his own attention to Count Charlier, of whom he had heard as being a friend of Miss Carrington's.

He quizzed the Frenchman rather pointedly as to his friendship with the unfortunate lady and the Count became decidedly ill at ease.

"Why do you ask me so much?" he objected; "I was a friend, yes; I may have aspired to a nearer relation, yes? That is no crime?"

"Not at all, Count," said Mr. Brunt; "I only want to find out if Miss Carrington's strange reference to something about to happen to her could have had any reference to you."

"It might be so; I cannot say. But all that has no bearing on the poor lady's death."

"No. At what time did you go away from here, Count Charlier?"

"At about midnight."

"You went directly home?"

"To Mrs. Frothingham's, where I am a house guest, yes."

"And you retired?"

"Yes."

"And remained in your bed till morning?"

"But of a certainty, yes! What are you implying? That I had a hand in this affair?"

"No, no; be calm, my dear sir. I ask you but one question. Is this your glove?"

The Inspector took the glove from his pocket and offered it to the Count.

The Frenchman took it, examined it minutely and without haste.

"No, sir," he said, returning it; "that is not my property."

"Thank you, that is all," and the Inspector put the glove back in his pocket.

"There is no doubt as to the main facts," said the Inspector, a half hour later, as, with the members of the family he summed up what had been found out from all known sources. "The assailant was most certainly a burglarious intruder; the weapon, this 'black-jack'; the motive, robbery. Why the robbery was not achieved and what is the meaning of the unexplained circumstances of the whole affair, we do not yet know. They are matters to be investigated, but they cannot greatly affect the principal conditions. You may be thankful, Miss Stuart, that the sad death of your aunt was undoubtedly painless; and also that the thief did not succeed in his attempt to purloin the valuable gems."

The Inspector's speech might seem cold-hearted, but Brunt was a practical man, and he was truly glad for himself that in addition to finding the murderer he did not also have to recover a fortune of rare jewels.

"Now," he went on, "as to the maid, Estelle. I have talked with her, but she is so hysterical and her stories so contradictory, that I am inclined to the opinion that she has some sort of guilty knowledge or at least suspicion of the intruder. The man was stocking-footed, and it is a pity, Miss Stuart, that you erased that footprint on the floor! But it would have been of doubtful use, I dare say. We have found faint tracks of the powder on the steps of the staircase, and though the last ones are almost indiscernible they seem to lead through the butler's pantry, and to an exit by that window. But the window was found fastened this morning, so, if it was used as a means for the burglar's getaway, it must have been fastened afterward by some person inside. Could this person have been the maid, Estelle?"

"Sure it could!" exclaimed Haviland, who was an interested listener. "That girl is a sly one! I caught her this morning, trying to take away that glass of milk. I told her to let it alone."

"Why?" asked the Inspector.

"Because I thought if she wanted to get it away, there must be some reason for her to want it! What was it?"

"Nonsense!" and Anita looked scornfully at Gray; "naturally, Estelle would do up the rooms, and would, of course, remove the remains of Miss Lucy's night luncheon."

“But that’s just it!” said Haviland, triumphantly: “she didn’t take the plate that had had sandwiches on it! If she had, I should have thought nothing of it. But she took the glass of milk, in a furtive, stealthy way, that made me look at her. She turned red, and trembled, and I told her to set the glass down. She pretended not to hear, so I told her again. Then she obeyed. But she glared at me like a tigress.”

“Oh, rubbish!” said Anita. “She was annoyed at being interfered with in her work, and perhaps fearful of being censured.”

“All right,” said Haviland, “then there’s no harm done. If that girl is entirely innocent, what I said won’t hurt her. But she looked to me as if on a secret errand and a desperate one.”

“What puzzles me is,” mused the Inspector, “why she persists in saying that she left the tray in good order in the room, – though it was discovered an hour later, upset, – when we know that Miss Carrington had been dead since, at least, two or three o’clock.”

“Look here, Inspector,” and Haviland frowned, “if the murder was committed at two or three o’clock, how is it that Mrs. Frothingham saw the intruder escaping at four or later?”

“There is a discrepancy there,” admitted Brunt, “but it may be explained away. The doctors cannot be sure until the autopsy is completed of the exact hour of death, and, too, the lady next door may have made an error in time.”

“Well, I’ll inform you that Estelle did upset that tray herself,” said Pauline with an air of finality.

“How do you know?” and Inspector Brunt peered at her over his glasses.

“It was while Gray was telephoning for the doctor,” said Pauline, reminiscently, “that I looked carefully at that overturned tray.”

“I know it,” said Haviland, “I told you not to touch anything.”

“I know that, but I did. I picked up from the *débris*, this,” and Pauline held up to view a tiny hairpin of the sort called ‘invisible.’

“It is Estelle’s,” she said; “see, it is the glistening bronze color of her hair. Anita has gold-colored ones, and I do not use these fine wire ones. I use only shell. Moreover, I know this is Estelle’s, – don’t you, Anita?”

“It may be.”

“It is. And its presence there, on the tray, proves that she let the tray fall in her surprise at seeing Aunt Lucy, and in her trembling excitement loosened and dropped this hairpin. Doubtless, she flung her hand up to her head – a not unusual gesture of hers – and so dislodged it.”

Brunt looked closely at the speaker. “You’ve got it all fixed up, haven’t you, Miss Stuart?”

Pauline flushed slightly. “I didn’t ‘fix it up,’ as you call it, but I did gather, from what I saw, that the truth must be as I have stated; and in my anxiety to learn anything possible as to the mystery of this crime, I secured what may or may not be a bit of evidence. As Mr. Haviland has said, if Estelle is entirely innocent of any complicity in the matter, these things can’t hurt her. But it would scarcely be possible for her to have been so careless as to drop a hairpin on the tray without noticing it, if she were not startled and flurried by something that took her mind and eyes entirely away from her duties.”

“I think you are purposely making a great deal out of nothing,” remarked Anita; “it seems unfair, to say the least, to condemn the poor girl on such trifling evidence.”

The talk was interrupted by the entrance of the Coroner and the two doctors.

“It is found,” said Coroner Scofield, “that the cause of Miss Carrington’s death was not the blow on the head.”

The Inspector looked his amazement, and the others sat with receptively blank countenances waiting further disclosures.

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