

Wells Carolyn

The Deep Lake Mystery



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CHAPTER I

“A STATELY PLEASURE DOME ...”

As I look back on my life, eventful enough in spots, but placid, even monotonous in the long stretches between spots, I think the greatest thrill I ever experienced was when I saw the dead body of Sampson Tracy.

Imagine to yourself a man, dead in his own bed, with no sign of violence or maltreatment. Eyes partly closed, as he might be peacefully thinking, and no expression of fear or horror on his calm face.

Now add to your mental picture the fact that he had round his brow a few flowers arranged as a wreath. More flowers diagonally across his breast, like a garland. Clapsed in his right hand, against his heart, an ivory crucifix, and in his left hand an orange.

Sticking up from behind his head showed the plume of a red feather duster!

And draped round all this, like a frame, was a red chiffon scarf, a filmy but voluminous affair, deftly tucked in here and there, and encircling all the strange and bizarre details I have enumerated.

On a pillow, near the dead face, lay two small crackers and a clean, folded handkerchief.

As I stared, my imagination flew to the Indians or the ancient Egyptians, who provided their dead with food and toilet implements, which were buried with them.

But in this case —

I believe it was Abraham Lincoln who said: “If you have a story to tell, begin at the beginning, go through with the tale, and leave off at the ending.” So, as I most assuredly have a story to tell, I will begin at the beginning and follow the prescribed directions.

It all began, I suppose, the night Keeley Moore came to see me about fishing tackle. Kee is a wonderful detective and all that, but when it comes to fishing he’s mighty glad to ask my advice.

And Lord knows I’m glad to give it to him.

We used to go fishing together, every summer. Then Kee took it into his silly head to get married, and to a girl who cares nothing about fishing.

So from that you can see how things are.

But this time Kee seemed really excited about his prospects of fishing through the summer months.

“We’re going to Wisconsin,” he told me, with a note of joyousness in his voice, “and, Gray, do you know, there are more than two thousand lakes in one county out in that foolish old state?”

“I’d like to fish in all of ’em,” I said, with my usual lack of moderation.

“You can’t do that, but you can fish in a few, if you like. Lora sends you, and I back it up, an invitation to come out there as soon as we get settled and stay as long as you can.”

“That’s a tempting bid,” I told him, “but I can’t impose on newlyweds like that. I’ll go to the inn or lodge or whatever they have out there, and see you every day.”

“No, we want you with us. We’ve taken a fairly good-sized house for the season, and you must be our guest. Lora’s asking a few of her friends and I want you.”

Well, he had little trouble in persuading me, once I felt convinced that his wife’s invitation was in good faith, and I planned to go out there early in August.

They were going in July, which left them time enough to get settled and get their home in running order.

So I went to Wisconsin in August, glad enough to get away from the city's heat and noise and dirt.

Deep Lake, the choice of the Moores, was in Oneida County, which is designated among the Scenic Sections of Wisconsin as North Woods – Eastern.

And scenic it surely was. The last part of the train ride had shown me that, and when we were motoring from the railroad station to the Moore bungalow, I was impressed with the weird beauty all about.

It was dusk, and the tall trees looked black against the sky. Long shadows of hemlocks and poplars fell across the road, as the last glow of the sunset was fading, and the reflection in the lakes of surrounding scenery was clear, though dark and eerie-looking.

We passed several lakes before we reached the journey's end.

"Here we are!" Moore cried at last, as we turned in at the gates of a most attractive estate.

A short road led to the front door and Lora came out to greet us.

I liked Kee Moore's wife, though I never felt I knew her very well. She was of a reserved type and while amiable and cordial, she was not responsive and never seemed to offer or invite confidence.

But she greeted me heartily, and expressed real pleasure at having me there.

She was very good looking – a wholesome, bonny type, with an air of executive ability and absolute *savoir faire*.

Her hair was dead gold, bobbed and worn straight, I think they call it a Dutch bob. Anyway, she had a trace of Dutch effect and reminded me of that early picture of Queen Wilhelmina.

She sent me to my room to brush up but told me I needn't change as the bungalow was run informally.

The place rejoiced in the name of "Variable Winds," and though the Moores guyed the idea of having a name for such an unpretentious affair, they admitted it was at least appropriate.

I returned to the living room to find the group augmented by a few more people: one house guest and two or three neighbours.

Cocktails appeared and the cheery atmosphere dispelled the darksome and gloomy effects that had marked our drive from the station.

I found myself next my fellow guest, a pleasant-faced lady, who introduced herself.

"I'm Maud Merrill," she vouchsafed. "I'm staying here, so you must learn to like me."

"No trouble at all," I told her, and honestly, for I liked her at once.

She was a widow, perhaps thirty or so, with white hair and deep blue eyes. I judged her hair was prematurely grayed, for her face was young and attractive.

"I'm an old schoolmate of Lora Moore's," she disclosed further, "and I'm up here for a fortnight. Are you staying long?"

"I'm invited indefinitely," I returned. "I'll stay a month, I think, if they seem to want me."

"Oh, they will. They've both looked forward to your coming with real delight. And you'll like it here. There's no end of things to do. Fishing of course, and bathing and boating and golf and tennis and dancing and flirting – in fact, you can have just whatever sport you want."

"Sounds rather strenuous. I had hoped for a restful time."

"Yes, you can have that if you really want it. Let me give you a hint of the other guests. The beautiful woman is Katherine Dallas. She's about to be married to our next-door neighbour. He isn't here to-night. But one of his house guests is here. That tall, thin man, – he's Harper Ames."

I thanked her for her hints, though I wasn't terribly interested. But it's good to know a little about new acquaintances, and often prevents unfortunate speeches. Especially with me. For I've a shocking habit of saying the wrong thing and making enemies thereby.

At the table I found myself seated at my hostess's right hand and the beautiful Mrs. Dallas on my other side.

It was a comfortable sort of party. The conversation, while not specially brilliant, was unforced and gayly bantering. Two youngsters were present, who added their flapper slang to the general fund of amusement.

These two were Posy May and Dick Hardy, and though apparently about twenty they seemed to have world-wide knowledge and world-old wisdom.

"My canoe upset this afternoon," Posy told the company with an air of being a heroine.

"You upset it on purpose," declared Dick.

"Didn't, either. I turned around too quickly – "

"Yes, and if I hadn't been on the job you'd be turning around there yet."

"Posy," Keeley said, reproachfully, "you must be more careful. Deep Lake is one of the deepest and most treacherous lakes in all Wisconsin. Now, don't cut up silly tricks in a canoe."

"Oh, I know how to manage a canoe."

"You managed to upset," said Lora Moore, accusingly, and pretty Posy changed the subject.

After dinner there was a little bridge, but the youngsters were going to a dance, and Mrs. Dallas seemed to want to go home early, so Ames carried her off, and our own quartet was left alone.

I was glad of it, for I like a chat with a few better than the rattle of the crowd. And it was not very long before Lora and Mrs. Merrill left us, and Keeley and I had the porch to ourselves.

"Pleasant people," I said, by way of being decently gracious.

"Good enough," he agreed. "To-morrow, Gray, we'll fish. It's open season for everything now and the limits are generous. Except muskellonge. You may bag only one per day of those. But trout, all kinds, bass, all kinds, pickerel, rock sturgeon – oh, we'll have the biggest time!"

"Sounds good to me," I returned, heartily. "I'm happy to be here, old scout, and we'll fish and all that, but don't put yourself about to entertain me."

"I sha'n't; but you must fall in with Lora's plans, won't you? I mean, seem pleased to attend her kettledrums and whatnot, even if it bores you."

"Of course I will. Your lady's word is law. She's a brick, isn't she?"

"Yes," and Moore smiled happily at my somewhat crude compliment. "She's just that. And such a help in my work."

"Your detective work?"

"What else? She's more than a Watson, she's a real helpmate. Her insight and intuition are marvellous, and she sees through a bit of evidence and gets the very gist of it quicker than I can."

"Then you surely got the right one."

"I certainly did. But I hope to Heaven there'll be no cases this summer. I want a real vacation, that's why I came 'way off here, to get away from all crime calls."

"Don't crow before you're out of the woods. Crimes can happen even in Wisconsin. And to me, this whole country round looks like a perfect setting for a first-class criminal to work in."

"Hush! I'm not superstitious, but your suggestion of such a thing might bring it about. And I don't want it!"

"You think you don't," I smiled a little, "but deep in your heart you do. You can't fish all the time, and you're even now restively hankering to be back in harness."

"Shut up!" he growled. "Talk of something pleasanter. How do you like the Dallas queen?"

"Stunning, seductive, and serpentine," I summed up the lady in question.

Moore laughed outright. "I must tell Lora that," he said. "You see, she agrees with you. Now, I think the right words are stately, gracious, and charming."

"All right," I said, "you know her better than I do, She is very beautiful, I concede."

"What do you mean, concede? Are you against her?"

"How you do snap a fellow up! No, not exactly. But I wouldn't trust her as far as I could see her, – and I'm near-sighted."

“Sometimes I think I’m no detective after all,” Moore said, slowly. “Now she gives me no effect of hypocrisy or insincerity.”

“But she does hint those things to Lora?”

“Y – yes, in a way.”

“Then Lora’s more of a detective than you are. But after I see more of the siren, I may change my mind. I didn’t talk with her alone at all. What about the grumpy Mr. Ames? Is he in love with the Dallas?”

“Not at all. In the first place, he wouldn’t dare be, for she is engaged to Sampson Tracy, and Tracy is not one to take kindly to any poaching on his domain. Besides that, Ames is a woman hater, also a man hater, and I think, an animal hater.”

“Pleasant man!”

“Yes. He’s always in a fierce mood. I don’t know, but I imagine he had an affair once...”

“Oh, crossed in love and it made him queer.”

“Rather say, queered in love and it made him cross.”

“Yes, he looks cross. Does he always?”

“Always. He and Samp Tracy are old friends, and Samp can manage him, but nobody else can.”

“Pleasant guest for Mr. Tracy to have about.”

“He doesn’t mind. Pleasure Dome is usually full of guests and if any want to sulk they are at liberty to do so.”

“Pleasure Dome?”

“Yes, that’s the Tracy place. It’s next to this, but it’s some distance off. You see, Deep Lake has a most irregular boundary line. It has all sorts of coves and inlets, and there’s one that juts in behind the Tracy house. It’s so deep and black and so surrounded by trees that it’s called the Sunless Sea.”

“Why, that’s from Coleridge’s ‘Kubla Khan,’ too.”

“Yes, these are the lines:

“In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately Pleasure Dome decree;
Where Alph, the sacred river ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.

“You know it, of course, but that will refresh your memory. Well, old Tracy –”

“Is he old?”

“Oh, no, he’s forty-five, but he seems older, somehow. Well, anyway, he’s romantic and poetic and imaginative. And he has a fad for Coleridge. Collects editions of him and all that. So he built his enormous and gorgeous house and called it Pleasure Dome. And the deep arm of the lake, which is right beneath his own window, he calls the Sunless Sea. And it is. It’s on the north side of the house, and so hemmed in with great firs and cypresses that the sun never gets a look-in.”

“Must make a delightful sleeping room!”

“Oh, there’s plenty of sunlight from the east and west. His rooms are in a wing, a long L, and you bet they have sunlight and all other modern improvements. The house is a palace.”

“That all sounds nice for Mrs. Dallas.”

“It is. And Samp is so drivellingly, so besottedly in love with her, that she will have everything her own way when she takes up the sceptre.”

“Nobody else in the family? The Tracy family, I mean.”

“No. Not now. There was. You see, Tracy’s sister, Mrs. Remsen, and her daughter used to live with him. Then Mrs. Remsen died, about a year ago, or a little more, and then Mrs. Dallas came into the picture, and some think it was at her request Tracy put his niece out –”

“The brute!”

“Oh, come now, you don’t know anything about it. Alma is a lovely girl, but she’s a high-handed sort – all the Tracys are – and her uncle gave her a beautiful home on a near-by island – ”

“On an island? A girl, alone!”

“She has with her an old family nurse, who took care of her as a baby, and old nurse’s husband is her gardener and houseman, and old nurse’s daughter is her waitress, and oh, Lord, Alma Remsen is fixed all right.”

“But on an island!”

“But she likes being on an island. It was her own choice. She didn’t want to stay with the new wife any more than the new wife wanted to have her. You always fly off half-cocked!”

“All right, all right,” I soothed him. “Tell me more.”

“Well, that’s all about Alma. She’s a general favourite, has lots of friends, and all that, but of course, when the new mistress of Pleasure Dome comes in at the door, Alma’s prospects will fly out of the window.”

“Cut off entirely?”

“I’m not sure, but I’ve heard so. I suppose her uncle will always take care of her, but she will no longer be the Tracy heiress.”

“And how does Miss Alma take that?”

“Not so good. She has had several talks with the family lawyer, and she has tried to wheedle her uncle, but he’s a queer dick, is Samp Tracy, and he obstinately refuses to make a new will or even consider its terms until after he’s married.”

“And his present will?”

“Leaves everything to Alma. She’s his only living relative. But his marriage will automatically cancel that will, and his wife will be sole inheritor unless he fixes the matter up.”

“Which he will doubtless do.”

“Oh, I hope so. I hope the new wife will see to it that he does. But there’s where Lora has her doubts. She doesn’t like Katherine Dallas, somehow.”

“Lora is of great perspicacity,” I said. “Where does Ames come in?”

“Regarding the fortune? Nowhere, that I know of. He is an old friend of Tracy’s, both socially and in a business way. They’re as different as day and night. Ames is surly, sulky, and blunt. Tracy is suave, gentle, and of the pleasantest manners.”

“Miss Remsen’s parents both dead?”

“Oh, yes. Her father died about fifteen years ago. Her mother recently. Had her mother lived, I suppose Tracy would have put them both out of the house, just the same. But Mrs. Remsen being gone, he sent Alma and the servants to the island house.”

“Then the girl is utterly alone in the world except for the suave uncle and her faithful servants.”

“Just that. There was a sister. Alma had a twin. But she died as a baby, or as a small child. Her little grave is in a small God’s Acre on the Pleasure Dome grounds. The mother and father are buried there too. And some other relatives.”

“I didn’t know they had homestead cemeteries in Wisconsin. I thought they were confined to the New England states.”

“It isn’t usual, I believe. But the Tracys are New England stock, and, anyway, the graves are there. And beautifully kept and tended, as everything about the place has to be.”

“Sounds interesting. Shall I see the high-strung Alma?”

“I didn’t say high-strung. She is a normal, lovely nature. But I did say high-handed, for she is a determined sort, and if she sets her mind to a thing it has to go through.”

“She has admirers?”

“Oh, of course. But she rather flouts them. One of Tracy’s secretaries is frightfully in love with her. But she scarcely notices him.”

“Our friend has a multiplicity of secretaries, then?”

“Two, that’s all. But Sampson Tracy is a man of large interests, and I fancy he keeps the two busy. Billy Dean is the one in love with Alma, but the other, Charles Everett, is his superior.”

“He’s the chap who, they tell me, craves the Dallas lady.”

“Yes, though of course Tracy doesn’t know it. Everett wouldn’t be there if he did.”

“And Mrs. Dallas? What is her attitude toward the presumptuous secretary?”

“Hard to say. I think she favours him, but she is too good a financier to throw over her millionaire for his underling.”

“Well, I think I’ve had about all the local history I can stand for one night. Let’s go in the house.”

To my surprise, Lora Moore and Mrs. Merrill were in the lounge, waiting for us.

The house was admirably arranged. The great central room, with doors back and front, was called the lounge, and served as both hall and living room. Off this were two smaller rooms: the card room and the music room. To one side of these rooms were the bedrooms, and on the other side, the dining room and kitchen quarters.

The furnishings were simple and attractive, with no “Mission” pieces or attempts at camping effects.

I sat down on a wide davenport beside Lora, and said, tentatively:

“I believe you and I agree in our estimate of the Dallas beauty.”

“Then you have real good sense,” exclaimed Lora, heartily. “Kee won’t see her as I do.”

“I won’t either,” put in Maud Merrill. “It’s disgraceful to knock a woman just because she’s going to marry a rich man. Rich men want wives as well as poor men. I’m all for Katherine Dallas. You’re jealous, Lora, because she is so beautiful.”

Lora only smiled at this, and said:

“I’ve really nothing against her, except that I believe she had Alma turned out of her uncle’s house.”

“And why not?” demanded Maud Merrill. “No house is big enough for two families; and though I don’t know Miss Remsen well at all, I do know that she is a girl of strong will and decided opinions. They’d never be happy if Alma stayed there.”

“I can’t say as to all that,” I put in, determined to have my word, “but I think, with Lora, that the Dallas is a lady of deep finesse and Machiavellian cleverness.”

“Yes, just that!” cried Keeley Moore’s wife.

“Well, then,” said Maud, “if she snared that millionaire by her cleverness, she deserves her reward. And she deserves a peaceful home, which I doubt she’d have with a young girl bossing around, too.”

“Oh, you women!” and Moore wrung his hands in mock despair, “you’re making up all this. You don’t know a thing about it, really.”

“We can see,” said Lora, sagely. “And there’s no use prolonging this futile discussion. Time will show you how right I am, and meantime, we’d better all go to bed.”

CHAPTER II

THE GIRL IN THE CANOE

My room at Variable Winds was cheery and comfortable. Bright-hued curtains, painted furniture and bowls full of exquisitely tinted California poppies gave the place a colourful effect that pleased my aesthetic tastes. A perfectly appointed bathroom added to my content and I concluded I would stay with the Moores as long as I could keep my welcome in good working order.

Keeley Moore was one of the best if not the best known detectives of the day, and while a quiet vacation would do him good, I was certain he was already itching to get back to his problems and mysteries, with which the city always supplied him.

I threw off my coat and put on a dressing gown, for the lake breezes were chill, and sat at a window for a final smoke.

I felt at peace with the world. Some houses give you that feeling, just as some others make you unreasonably nervous and irritable.

The moon had risen, a three-quarter or nearly full moon, and its shimmering light across the lake made me turn off my room lights and gaze out at the scene before me.

My room looked out on the lake, and the house itself was not more than a dozen yards from the water. The ground sloped gently down to a tiny bit of beach, a little crescent that had been selected for the site of the house. On the right of this placid little piece of shore was the boathouse, a large one, with canoes, rowboats and motor boats. Under the same roof was the bath house, and in front of that, out in the lake, were springboards, diving ladders and all the contrivances on which the bathers like to disport themselves.

To the left was a bit of wild, rocky shore, for the edge of the lake was greatly diversified and rocks abounded, both in and out of the water.

A line of light came across the lake, but was now and then blotted out as the swiftly drifting clouds obscured the moon.

I liked it better in the darkness, for the sight was impressive.

From my window I could see a great stretch of water, and as a background, dense black growth of trees, which came in many places down to the water's edge.

Often these trees were on a slope and rose to a height almost to be called a hill, while again the ground stretched on a low-lying level.

As I looked, the details of the landscape became clearer and I discerned a few faint lights here and there in the houses.

The big house nearest us I took to be Pleasure Dome. Not only because it was the next house, but because I could dimly distinguish a large building surmounted by a gilded dome.

How could any man in his sober senses construct such a place to live in?

It seemed like a cross between the Boston State House and the Taj Mahal.

I was really anxious to go over there and see the thing at closer range. I decided to ask Moore to take me over the next day.

Suddenly the lights all went out and the house and its dome disappeared from view. Looking at my watch I saw it was just one o'clock and concluded that the master of the house had his home darkened at that hour.

But after I again accustomed my eyes to the darkness I could see the outlines of Pleasure Dome, and it looked infinitely more attractive in the half light than it had done in the brightness of its own illumination.

As a whole, though, the lake scene was depressing. It had a melancholy, dismal air that seemed to lay a damper on my spirits. It was like a cold, clammy hand resting on my forehead. I even shook

my head impatiently, as if to fling it off, and then smiled at my own foolishness. But it persisted. The lake was mournful, it even seemed menacing.

With an exclamation of disgust at my own impressionableness, I sprang up from my chair, flashed on the lights and prepared for bed.

The bright, pleasant room restored my equilibrium or equanimity or whatever it was that had been jarred, and I found myself all ready for bed, in a peaceful, happy frame of mind.

I turned off the lights, and then the lake lured me back to a last glimpse of its wild, eerie beauty.

Again I flung on my robe and sat at the window. It seemed as if I couldn't leave it. The black, sinister water, the dark shores, with deep hollows here and there, the waving, sighing trees, with thick underbrush beneath them, all seemed possessed of a spirit of evil, a frightful, uncanny spirit, that made me shiver with an unreasonable apprehension, that held me in thrall.

I have no use for premonitions, I have no faith in presentiments, but I had to admit to myself then a fear, a foreboding of some intangible, ghastly horror. Then would come the moonlight, pale and sickly now, and lasting but a moment before the clouds again blotted it out.

Yet I liked the darkness better, for the moon cast such horrendous shadows of those black trees into the lake that it seemed to people the lake with monstrous, maleficent beings, who leered and danced like devils.

Though I knew the hobgoblins were only the waving trees, distorted in the moonlight, I was none the less weak-minded enough to see portentous spectres that made my flesh creep.

With a half laugh and a half groan at my utter imbecility, I declared to myself that I would go to bed and go to sleep.

But as I started to rise from my chair, I saw something that made me sink back again.

The moon now was behind a light, translucent cloud, that caused a faint light on the lake.

Round a jutting corner I saw a canoe come into my line of vision.

A moment's attention convinced me that it was no ghostly craft, but an ordinary canoe, propelled by a pair of human arms.

This touch of human companionship put to rout all my feelings of fear and even my forebodings of tragedy.

Normally interested now, I watched to see who might be out at that time of night, and for what purpose.

The cloud dispersed itself, and the full clear moonlight shone down on the boat and its occupant. To my surprise it was a girl, a young-appearing girl, and she was paddling softly, but with a skilled stroke that told of long practice.

Her hair seemed to be silver in the moonlight, but I realized the light was deceptive and the curly bob might be either flaxen or gold.

She wore a white sweater and a white skirt – that much I could see plainly, but I could distinguish little more. She had no hat on, and I could see white stockings and shoes as the craft passed the house.

She seemed intent on her work, and her beautiful paddling aroused my intense admiration. She did not look up at our house at all; indeed, she seemed like an enchanted princess, doomed to paddle for her life, so earnestly did she bend to her occupation. She passed the house and kept on, in the direction of Pleasure Dome.

Could she be going there? I hardly thought so, yet I watched carefully, hanging out of my window to do so.

To my surprise she did steer her little craft straight to the great house next door, and turned as if to land there.

The Tracy house was on a line with the Moore bungalow, that is, on a curving line. They were both on the same large crescent of lake shore. Pleasure Dome had a cove or inlet behind it, Moore had told me, but that was not visible from my window. The front of the house was, however, and

I distinctly saw the girl beach her canoe, step lightly out and then disappear among the trees in the direction of the house.

I still sat staring at the point where she had been lost to my vision. I let the picture sink into my mind. I could see her as plainly in retrospect as I had in reality. That lissome, slender figure, that graceful springy walk – but she had limped, a very little. Not as if she were really lame, but as if she had hurt her foot or strained her ankle recently.

I speculated on who she might be. Kee had told me of no young girl living in the Tracy house now, since the niece had left there.

Ah, the niece. Could this be Sampson Tracy's niece, perhaps staying at her uncle's for a visit and coming home late from a party? But she would have had an escort or chaperon or maid – somebody would have been with her.

Yet, how could I tell that? Kee had said she was high-handed, and might she not elect to go about unescorted at any hour?

I concluded it must be the niece, for who else could it be? Then I remembered that there might be other guests at Pleasure Dome besides the morose and glum-looking Ames. This, then, might be another house guest, and perhaps the young people of the Deep Lake community were in the habit of running wild in this fashion.

Anyway, the whole episode had helped to dispel the gloom engendered by the oppressive and harrowing atmosphere of the lake scene, and I felt more cheerful. And as there was no sign of the girl's returning, I concluded she had reached the house in safety and had doubtless already gone to bed.

I tarried quite a while longer, listening to the quivering, whispering sounds of the poplars, and an occasional note from a bird or from some small animal scurrying through the woods, and finally, with a smile at my own thoughts, I snapped off the lights and got into bed.

I couldn't sleep at first, and then, just as I was about to fall asleep, I heard the light plash of a paddle.

As soon as I realized what the sound was, I sprang up and hurried to the window. But I saw no boat. Whether the same girl or some one else, the boat and whoever paddled it, were out of sight, and though I heard, or imagined I heard, a faint and diminishing sound as of paddling, I could see no craft of any sort.

I strained my eyes to see if her canoe was still beached in front of Pleasure Dome, but the moon was unfriendly now, and I could not distinguish objects on the beach.

Again I began to feel that sickening dread of calamity, that nameless horror of tragedy, and I resolutely went back to bed with a determination to stay there till morning, no matter what that God-forsaken lake did next.

I carried out this plan, and when the morning broke in a riot of sunshine, singing birds, blooming flowers and a smiling lake, I forgot all the night thoughts and their burdens and gave myself over to a joyous outlook.

Breakfast was at eight-thirty and was served on an enclosed porch looking out on the lake.

"You know, you don't have to get up at this ungodly hour," Lora said, as she smiled her greeting, "but we are wideawakes here."

"Suits me perfectly," I told her. "I've no love for the feathers after the day has really begun."

Twice during our cosy breakfast I was moved to tell about the girl in the canoe, but both times I suddenly decided not to do so. I couldn't tell why, but something forbade the telling of that tale, and I concluded to defer it, at any rate.

The chat was light and trifling. Somehow it drifted round to the subject of happiness.

"My idea of happiness," Lora said, "which I know full well I shall never attain, is to do something I want to do without feeling that I ought to be doing something else."

"Heavens and earth," exploded her husband, "any one would think you a veritable slave! What are these onerous duties you have to perform that keep you from doing your ruthers?"

Lora laughed. "Oh, not all the time, but there is much to do in a house where the servants are ill-trained and incompetent –"

"And where one has guests," Maud Merrill smiled at her, and I smiled, too.

"I'm out of it," I cried. "You ought to help your friend out, Mrs. Merrill, but, being a mere man, I can't do anything to help around the house."

Lora laughed gaily, and said, "Don't take it all too seriously. I do as I please most of the time, but – well, I suppose the truth is, I'm too conscientious."

"That's it," Kee agreed. "And you know, conscience is only a form of vanity. One wants to do right, so one can pat oneself on the back, and feel a glow of holy satisfaction."

"That's so, Kee," Lora quickly agreed, "and I oughtn't to pamper my vanity. So, I won't make that blackberry shortcake you're so fond of this morning, I'll read a novel, and bear with a smile the slings and arrows of my conscience as it reproves me."

"No," Kee told her, "that's carrying your vanity scourging too far. Make the shortcake, dear girl, not so much for me, as for Norris here. I want him to see what a bird of a cook you are."

Lora shook her head, but I somehow felt that the shortcake would materialize, and then Kee and I went out on the lake.

We went in a small motor launch, and he proposed that I should have a survey of the lake before we began to fish.

"It's one of the most beautiful and picturesque lakes in the county," he said, and I could easily believe that, as we continually came upon more and more rugged coves and strange rock formations.

"Those are dells," Kee said, pointing to weird and wonderful rocks that disclosed caves, grottoes, chasms, natural bridges and here and there cascades and waterfalls. "Please be duly impressed, Gray, for they are really wonderful. You know Wisconsin is the oldest state of all, I mean as to its birth. Geologists say that this whole continent was an ocean, and when the first island was thrust up above the surface of the waters, it was Wisconsin itself. Then the earth kindly threw up the other states, and so, here we are."

"I thought all these lakes were glacial."

"Oh, yes, so they are. But you don't know much, do you? The glacial period came along a lot later, and as the slow-moving fields of ice plowed down through this section they scooped out the Mississippi valley, the beds of the Great Lakes and also the beds of innumerable little lakes. There are seven thousand in Wisconsin, and two thousand in Oneida County alone."

"I am duly impressed, Kee, but quite as much by the way you rattle off this information as by the knowledge itself. Where'd you get it all?"

"Out of the Automobile Book," he returned, unabashed. "Most interesting reading. Better have a shy at it some time."

"I will. Now is this Pleasure Dome we're coming to?"

"Yes. Thought you'd like to see it. It's really a wonder house, you know. We'll be invited there to dine or something, but I want you to see it now as a picture."

It was impressive, the great pile rising against the background of dark trees, and with a foreground of brilliant flower beds, fountains, and arbours.

A critic might call it too ornate, too elaborate, but he would have to admit it was beautiful.

A building of pure white marble, its lines were simple and true, its proportions vast and noble, and save for the gilded dome, all its effects were of the utmost dignity and perfection.

And the dome, to my way of thinking, was in keeping with the majesty of it all. No lesser type of architecture could have stood it, but this semi-barbaric pile proudly upheld its glittering crown with a sublime daring that justified the whole.

There were numerous and involved terraces, all of white marble, that disappeared and reappeared among the trees in a fascinating way. White pergolas bore masses of beautiful flowers or vines, and back of it all rose the black, wooded slopes that surrounded most of the lake.

“We’ll slip around for a glimpse of the Sunless Sea,” Kee said, and I almost cried out as we came upon the place.

A strange chance had made a huge pool of water, almost square, as an arm of the lake, and this, stretched behind the house, was like a midnight sea.

Dark, even in broad daytime, because of the dense woods all round it, it also looked deep and treacherous. A slight breeze was blowing but this proved enough to ruffle the waters of the Sunless Sea in a dangerous-looking way.

“Don’t go in there!” I cried, and Kee turned aside.

“I didn’t intend to,” he said, “I was just throwing a scare into you. It’s really devilish. A sudden wave can suck you down to interminable depths. You’re not afraid, really?”

“Oh, no,” I assured him, “but it’s pesky frightensome to look at, especially – ”

Again I was on the verge of telling him of the scene on the lake the night before, and again I stopped, held back by some force outside myself.

“Especially why?” he asked, curiously, but I evaded the issue by saying, “Especially when one is on a holiday.”

He laughed and we turned away from Pleasure Dome.

“Now I’ll show you the island,” he said, “and then we’ll tackle the tackle.”

We went rapidly back past Pleasure Dome, on down the lake, past Moore’s own place, and then on a bit farther to the Island.

“They call it ‘Whistling Reeds’, and it’s a good name,” he said. “When the wind’s a certain way, and it’s quiet otherwise, you can hear the reeds whistle like birds.”

“You do have most interesting places,” I said. “And who lives here? And where’s the house?”

“Alma Remsen lives here, the niece of Sampson Tracy I told you about last night. You can’t see the house, the trees are so thick.”

“I should say they were!” and I stared at the dense black mass. “Why doesn’t she cut a vista, at least?”

“She doesn’t want it, I believe. Thinks it’s more picturesque like this.”

“I’d be scared to death to live there!”

“No reason to be. Nothing untoward ever happens up here. All peaceable citizens.”

“But fancy living in such a place. How do they get provisions and all that?”

“Oh, that’s easy. Lots of the dealers deliver their stuff in canoes or motor boats. See, there’s the boathouse. Some day we’ll call here. Alma likes my wife, she’ll be glad to see us.”

“I suppose she’s a canoeist.”

“Everybody’s that, around here. I mean the people who live all the year round. A good many people live on islands. They like it. This island, you see, is a big one. About two or three acres, say. That gives Miss Remsen room for tennis courts and gardens and pretty much anything she wants, and the house is very pleasant. Nothing like Pleasure Dome, but a bigger house than the one we’re in.”

We turned then, and started off toward the spot where Kee elected to do his fishing.

“Hello,” he said, as we moved on, “there’s Alma now. That’s Miss Remsen.”

We were now about midway between the Moore bungalow and the Island of Whistling Reeds. I looked, to see a girl come down to the floating dock of the boathouse, spring into a canoe and paddle away.

I said nothing aloud, but to myself I said it was the girl I had seen in a canoe the night before.

There was no mistaking that slim, lithe figure, that graceful capable way of managing the boat, and she even wore what seemed to me to be the same clothes, a white skirt and white sweater. She had on a small white felt hat, and I noticed that she did not limp at all. As I had surmised, the limp was occasioned by some slight and temporary strain or bruise.

“Well, don’t eat her up with your eyes!” exclaimed Moore, and I realized I had been staring.

Also I was just about to tell him of seeing her before, but the chaffing tone he used somehow shut me up on the subject.

So I only said, gaily: "Bowled over by the Lady of the Lake!" and laughed back at him.

"That's what she's called up here," he informed me. "She's in her canoe so much and manages it so perfectly, she seems like a part of it. Of course, wherever she goes, she has to go in that or in some boat. Can't get on and off an island in a motor car."

"Must be an awful nuisance."

"She doesn't find it so. Says she likes it better than a motor. Look at her paddle. Isn't she an expert?"

"She sure is." And I held my tongue tightly to refrain from saying that she seemed to me to have paddled even more beautifully the night before. But, I said to myself, that was doubtless the glamour loaned by the moonlight and the witchery of the night scene.

Miss Remsen soon reached Pleasure Dome, and we could see her beach her canoe and follow her with our eyes for a few steps until she disappeared behind a clump of tall trees.

We set to work then in good earnest and I saw in Keeley Moore for the time being an embodiment of perfect happiness.

He loved to fish, even alone, but better still, he loved to fish with a congenial companion. And we were that. Though not friends of such very long standing, we were similar in our likes and dislikes as well as in our dispositions.

We had an identical liking for silence at times, and as a rule we chose the same times. Often we would sit for half an hour in a sociable silence, and then break into the most animated conversation.

This morning, after we had begun to fish, such a spell fell upon us. I was glad, for I wanted to think things out; to learn, if possible, why I was so interested, or why, indeed, I was interested at all, in Alma Remsen.

Just because I saw her paddling over to her uncle's house the night before and again this morning, was that enough to make me feel that I must keep still about the first excursion? And, if so, why?

I didn't even know yet what she looked like. So it couldn't be that I had fallen for a pretty face – I didn't even know whether she had one.

I thought of asking Kee that, but decided not to. A strange, vague instinct held me back from mentioning Alma Remsen's name.

Suddenly he said, "Damn!" in a most explosive way, and not unnaturally I thought he had lost one of those biggest of all big fishes.

But as he began pulling in his empty line and making other evident preparations for bringing our fishing party to an end, I mildly asked for light on the subject.

"Got to go home," he said, like a sulky child.

"What for?"

"See that red flag in the bungalow window? That means come home at once. Lora only uses it in cases of real importance, so we've got to go."

CHAPTER III

THE TRAGEDY

As we went up the steps and crossed the porch of the Moore bungalow, we saw a man seated in the lounge, talking to Lora.

Both jumped up at our approach, and Lora cried out, "Oh, Kee, Mr. Tracy is dead!"

"Sampson Tracy! Dead?" exclaimed Moore, with a look of blank consternation.

"Yes," the man said, tersely, "and not only dead, but murdered. I'm Police Detective March. I've just come from the Tracy house. You see, everything is at sixes and sevens over there. Nobody authorized to take the helm, though plenty of them want to do so. In a way, Everett, the secretary, is head of the heap, but a guest there, Mr. Ames, refuses to acknowledge that Everett has any say at all. Claims he is Tracy's oldest and closest friend, and insists on taking charge himself."

"Why shouldn't he?" asked Keeley Moore, quietly.

"Well, why should he?" countered the policeman. "And, besides, I think he's the man who killed Tracy. But here's my errand here. It seems Mr. Ames was here last night to dinner?"

Lora nodded assent to his inquiring glance.

"Well, he formed a high opinion of Mr. Moore's detective ability, and he wants to engage his services, if possible."

Kee Moore was a tall, dark man, about thirty-five or so. But when he undertook a case, or even thought about undertaking a case, he seemed to change his personality. Rather, he intensified it. He seemed to be taller, darker and older.

I saw this change come over him at once, as he listened to the police detective's words.

There is a phrase about an old warhorse scenting the battle. I've never seen such a thing, but I am sure it implies the same attitude that Moore showed at the moment. His eyes took on a far-away look that was yet alert and receptive. His hands showed strained muscles as he grasped the back of a chair that stood in front of him. His lips lost their smiling curve and set in a straight line. I knew all these gestures well, and I knew that not only would he take up this case, but that he was anxious to get at it at once.

Lora knew it, too, and I heard her sigh as she resigned herself to the inevitable. It wasn't necessary for any of us to say we had hoped Kee was to have a rest from his work, an idle vacation. The two Moores and I knew that, and we all knew, too, that the vacation was broken in upon and there would be no rest for the busy, inquiring brain until the Tracy case was settled for all time.

"I don't know about accepting this offer of Mr. Ames to engage my services," Kee said, "but I will most certainly look into the matter and if I can be of help we can make definite arrangements. Tell me a little more of the circumstances, please, and then we will go over to Pleasure Dome."

"It seems the butler or housekeeper was in the habit of taking tea to Mr. Tracy's room of a morning, at nine o'clock. Well, this morning, the door was locked and nobody responded to knocks on it. So – you can get the connecting data later, sir – they broke in, and found Mr. Tracy dead in bed, with the strangest doings all about."

"What do you mean by strange doings?"

"Well, he was all dolled up with flowers and a long red scarf, and, if you please, a red feather duster sticking up behind his head – "

"Did you see all this?" demanded Moore, his eyes growing darker every minute.

"Yes, and that's not half! There was an orange in his hand and crackers on his pillow and a crucifix against his breast – "

"Come on," said Moore, quietly, but in a tone of suppressed excitement. "Let's get over there before they disturb all that scenery! I never heard of such astounding conditions."

"No, sir, I'll say you didn't," March agreed. "I felt a bit miffed when they told me to come and get you; any detective would, you know, but when I came to think over all that hodge-podge of evidence, I knew it was a case too big for me to tackle alone. I hope you'll let me help you, sir."

"Oh, of course," said Moore, a little impatiently, as he urged the detective to start. "Will your car hold us all?" His glance included me, and March answered; "Oh, yes. I've one of Mr. Tracy's big cars."

When we reached the great house, and stopped at the landing place under the porte-cochère, I was more than ever impressed by the beauty all about.

There was nothing glaring or ostentatious. The bit of verandah we traversed to reach the front door was brightened with a few railing flower-boxes and potted palms, but it was quietly dignified and stately.

Stately was the key word for the whole place, and I suddenly remembered that Kubla Khan's Pleasure Dome was described as stately. Surely, Sampson Tracy had sensed the real meaning of the phrase.

Inside, the house was the same. Marked everywhere by good taste, the appointments were of the finest and best.

There seemed to be a great many people about. Servants were coming and going and policemen were here and there.

March took Moore and myself directly to the library, where Inspector Farrell was awaiting us.

Also present were Ames, whom we already knew, and a young man, who proved to be Charles Everett, the confidential secretary of the dead man.

I took to Everett at once. He was the clean-cut type of so many of our efficient young American secretaries. He looked capable and wise, and being introduced, bowed gravely.

Ames took up the matter at once.

He looked perturbed rather than grumpy this morning, but his speaking voice had an unpleasant twang, and I saw Kee stiffen up as if he would certainly decline to be at this man's beck and call.

"I sent for you, Mr. Moore," Ames began, "to get your help in unravelling the mystery of Sampson Tracy's death. As you will soon learn, the conditions are startlingly unusual, even bizarre. But I have heard that the more bizarre the clues and evidence, the easier a case is to solve. So, I beg you to get at it at once and exert your most clever efforts."

"But I haven't yet said I would take the case for you," Moore told him.

"Why not?" cried Ames, his face lowering in a pettish frown. "I shall make no objection to your terms, whatever they may be – in reason. I shall not trammel you with any restrictions or annoy you with any advice. I am told you are a famous detective. I know you for a friend of Mr. Tracy. Why, then, would you hesitate to solve the problem of his death and learn the identity of his murderer?"

"Are you sure he was murdered?" asked Moore. "You see, I know little of the facts in the case."

"No," broke in Inspector Farrell, "no, we don't know that he was murdered. And the facts that we do know are seemingly contradictory. I trust, Mr. Moore, that you will look into the matter, at least, and give us the benefit of your findings, whether you officially take up the case or not."

"I cannot say," Moore told him, "until I am in possession of the details of the tragedy. Nor do I want it told me here. Let me see the body, let me inquire for myself concerning the facts, and let me draw my own conclusions. Only after that can I decide whether I take on the case or not."

"I think you very unreasonable, Mr. Moore," Ames grumbled. "I want you to be my agent in this matter, and so I want you to start in fully equipped with my sanction and authority."

"Just how much authority have you here, Mr. Ames?" asked Moore, looking at him thoughtfully.

"As the oldest and nearest friend of Sampson Tracy, and as his intimate confidant and adviser, I think I can claim more authority than any one else. In fact the man had no relatives in the world except a niece. He had no friends of a confidential nature except myself. I am not referring to financial

affairs, they are in the hands of his lawyer and his secretaries. But if he has been murdered, I propose to hound down the wretch who is responsible for his death. I know much about Tracy's life that nobody else knows. I know of those who might wish him dead, and my knowledge, combined with the skill of a canny detective, must bring out the truth."

This was straightforward talk, and Ames, though his face wore an aggrieved expression, spoke concisely and to the point. But after all, his manner was truculent, he didn't ask Moore's help so much as he demanded it, almost commandeered it. I was not surprised to see Kee stick to his first decision.

"I appreciate all you say, Mr. Ames," Kee said, "but I repeat I am not willing to take a case until I look into it. Do not delay further, but let us go at once to the scene of the tragedy."

Ames glowered, but without another word he led the way from the room and turned toward the staircase.

The broad steps, carpeted with red velvet, branched half way up, and turning to the right, Ames conducted us to Sampson Tracy's rooms. They were in a wing that had been flung out at the back of the house, probably as a later addition to the structure. Entrance was through a private hall, and then into a foyer or ante-room, from which led several doors.

"This is the bedroom," said the Inspector, taking a key from his pocket as he paused before one of the doors.

"I thought you had to break in," Moore said, looking at the unmarred door.

"Not exactly," Farrell told him. "The door was locked and the key inside, in the lock. But they got the garage mechanic up here, and he managed to dislodge the key and then get the door unlocked with his tools."

He opened the door, and we filed in, the Inspector first, then Moore and I, then Ames and Detective March.

Farrell closed and locked the door behind us, and it was then that I saw the strange, the grotesque spectacle of Sampson Tracy's deathbed.

The first thing that caught my attention and from which I found it well nigh impossible to detach my vision was the red-feather duster.

A full plume of bright red feathers seemed to crown the head on the pillow.

The handle of the duster had been thrust down behind and under the head, and only the red plume showed, of such fine, light feathers that a few fronds waved at a step across the room or a movement near the bed.

Then I looked at the rest of the strange picture.

Sampson Tracy was a large and heavy man. His head was large, and his face was of the conformation sometimes called pear-shaped. He had heavy jaws, pendulous jowls and a large mouth. Clean shaven as to face, his hair was thick and rather long. His eyebrows were bushy, and his half opened eyes of a glassy and yet dull blue.

His hair was iron-gray, and round his brow were wreathed some blossoms of blue larkspur. Across his chest, diagonally, was a garland of the same flowers. The blossoms were not tied or twined, they had merely been laid in a row in order to form a vinelike garland.

The right hand, bent to rest on his breast, held a crucifix, and in the left hand was, of all things, a small orange.

His head lay on one large pillow, and on the other pillow was a folded handkerchief and also two small sweet crackers. And encircling the head and shoulders, framing all these strange details, a long and wide scarf, of soft and filmy scarlet chiffon, a beautiful scarf, from a woman's point of view, but a peculiar adjunct to a man's taking-off.

I stared at all this, quite forgetting to look at Moore to see how he was taking it.

When I did glance up at him, hearing his voice, I saw he had evidently completed his scrutiny of the bed and had turned to Harper Ames.

"Why do you think Mr. Tracy was murdered?" Kee asked of the glum-faced one.

“What other theory is possible?” Ames returned. “A suicide would not place all that flumadiddle about himself. A natural death wouldn’t have such decorations, either. So, he was killed, either by some one with a most distorted sense of humour, or there is a meaning in each seeming bit of foolishness.”

“What did he die of, exactly?”

“That we don’t know yet, the doctor will be here any minute, and the coroner, too.”

Even as he spoke, Doctor Rogers arrived. He was the family physician, and as Farrell opened the door to his knock, he went straight to the bed.

“What’s all this rubbish?” he exclaimed, reaching for the scarf.

“Don’t touch it, If you can help it, Doctor,” March implored him. “It may be evidence – ”

“Evidence of what?”

“Crime – murder – or is it a natural death?”

Doctor Rogers was making his examination with as little disturbance as might be of the flowers and scarf.

But the feather duster he pulled from its place and flung across the room. The orange followed it, and the crackers.

“Pick them up if you want them for clues,” he said; “you know where they were found, and I won’t have my friend photographed with all those monkey tricks about him!”

March picked up the things, with a due regard for possible finger prints, and stored them away in a drawer of the chiffonier.

Finally, Doctor Rogers straightened up from his examining, and rose to his feet.

“Apoplexy,” he said. “What’s all this talk about murder? Sampson Tracy is dead of apoplexy, as I have often told him he would be, if he kept on with his plan of eating and drinking too much and taking little or no exercise. He had an apoplectic stroke last night which proved fatal. He died, as nearly as I can judge, about two o’clock. As to these foolish trinkets, they were brought in here later and placed round him after he was dead. You can see that though he seemed to hold the cross and the orange in his hands, they weren’t tightly held, the fingers were bent round them after death. It must have been the deed of some child or of some servant who is mentally lacking. Is there a girl of twelve or fourteen on the place? But I’ve no time to tarry now. I’m on my way to the train. I’m going for my vacation on a trip through Canada and down the Pacific coast. I’d throw it over, of course, if I could be of any use. But I can’t, and my wife is waiting for me. I’ve given my statement as to Tracy’s death, and I know I’m right. Here comes Coroner Hart now. I say, Hart, the Inspector and Mr. Ames here will tell you my findings, and I know you’ll corroborate me. It’s all a terrible pity, but I knew he was digging his grave with his teeth. No amount of advice did a bit of good. As to the flowers and rags, look for a twelve-year-old girl... There are the ones who kick up such bobberies. Maybe the housekeeper has a grandchild, or maybe there is a kiddy in the chauffeur’s or gardener’s cottage. Good-bye, I must run. Sorry, but to lose this local train means to upset our reservations all along the trip.”

The Doctor hurried away, yet so positive had been his diagnosis, and so logical his disinclination to linger when he could be of no possible use, that we all forgave him in our minds.

The Coroner gave a start at the masses of flowers, somewhat disarranged by Doctor Rogers’s manipulations, and drew nearer to the body.

Farrell told him how things had been before Doctor Rogers removed the feather duster and threw out the orange and crackers.

“He ought to have let them alone!” Hart declared, angrily.

“It doesn’t really matter,” put in March, “I know exactly how they were lying, and anyway, Rogers says it’s a natural death.”

“Natural? With all that gimcrack show!”

“He says that’s the work of a mischievous child, for preference, a little girl of twelve or fourteen.”

“He’s thinking of Poltergeist – he’s got that sort of thing on the brain. Let me take a look at the body.”

So Doctor Hart sat on the side of the bed and made his examination of the dead millionaire.

“There is every symptom of apoplexy,” he said, at last, “and no symptom of anything else. Yet, I feel a little uncertainty. We’ll have to see what the autopsy says.”

“When can you have that?” Ames asked him.

“Very soon. This afternoon, probably. But it is important now to make inquiries as to conditions last night. You were here, Mr. Ames?”

“Yes, – that is, I am staying here, visiting, you know, – but last evening I was out to dinner, with our neighbour, Mr. Moore here.”

“What time did you get home?”

“Not late; about eleven, I think.”

“Had Mr. Tracy gone to bed then?”

“No, he was waiting up for me. We went into the smoking room and had a smoke and a chat.”

“What time did you retire?”

“We went upstairs about midnight, I should say. I said good night to him on this floor and then went on upstairs to my own room.”

“He seemed in his usual health and spirits?”

“So far as I noticed, yes.”

“You heard nothing unusual in the night?”

“Nothing at all.”

“What was the subject of your conversation last evening?”

“Nothing of serious moment. He asked me who were at the Moore party and I told him. He was lightly interested, but cared only to hear about Mrs. Dallas, who is his fiancée and who was at the party.”

“And Mr. Tracy was not there?”

“No. He had been invited, but – well, he had had a little tiff with the lady, and in a moment of anger had declined the invitation. He was sorry afterward and wished he had accepted it. I begged him to go in my place, I would have willingly stayed home, but he wouldn’t hear of such a thing. Then I wanted to telephone Mrs. Moore, the hostess, and ask her to make room for him, too, but he wouldn’t allow that, either. So I went to the dinner, and Mrs. Dallas went, but Mr. Tracy stayed at home.”

“Alone?”

“I think so, except for his two secretaries. When I came home, he was in a pleasant enough mood, and I concluded he had thought it all over and straightened it out in his mind one way or another. I didn’t refer to the matter at all, but he asked me many questions about Mrs. Dallas, such as how she looked, what mood she was in and whether she said anything about him. Just such questions as a man would naturally ask about his absent sweetheart.”

“All this properly belongs to the inquest,” Coroner Hart said. “But I want to get any side-lights I can while the matter is fresh in your mind. Do you know this room well, Mr. Ames?”

“Not at all. I’ve only been in here once or twice in my life.”

“Then you can’t tell me if anything is missing?”

“No, I think not,” Ames looked around. “No, I don’t know anything about the appointments here. Or do you mean valuables?”

“Anything at all. I think we can’t blink the fact that somebody came in here after the man was dead, and arranged all those weird decorations. Now maybe that somebody took away something as well.”

“That I don’t know,” Ames reiterated. “I know nothing of Tracy’s belongings.”

The man had been pleasant enough at first, but now he was resuming his irritable manner, and I wondered if he would get really angry.

Keeley Moore was saying almost nothing. But I knew he was losing no points of what was happening, and I rather expected him to break out soon. He did.

"Perhaps, Doctor Hart," he said, quietly, "it might be a good idea to get Mr. Tracy's manservant or housekeeper up here, and find out a little more about the appointments of this room. For instance, whether the orange and crackers were already here, or whether the mysterious visitor brought them."

"I was just about to do that, Mr. Moore," the Coroner said, with such haste that I had my doubts of his veracity.

But he rang a bell in the wall, and we waited for a response.

The butler himself answered it, a rather grandiose personage in the throes of excitement and grief at the terrible happenings to his master.

"Well, Griscom," Ames said, with his habitual frown, "these gentlemen want to ask you some questions. Answer them as fully as you can."

"Was it Mr. Tracy's habit to have a bit of fruit or a cracker in his room at night?" the Coroner inquired.

"Yes, sir," said the butler, and the sound of his own voice seemed to steady him. "He always had an orange or a few grapes and a cracker or two on the table by his bed, sir."

"And do you think this orange and these crackers are the ones put out for him last night?"

"I'm sure of it, sir. I put them out myself."

"Then where is the plate? Surely you had them on a plate."

"Of course, sir. They were on a small gilt-edged plate. I don't see it about."

"No, I don't either. Had Mr. Tracy a valet?"

"No, sir, he didn't like a man fussing about. I attended him, sir, and a footman helped me out now and then; and Mrs. Fenn, she's cook and housekeeper, sir, she looked after his clothes, saving what I did myself."

"Have you any reason to think your master would take his own life?"

"Oh, Lord, no, sir. Begging your pardon, but he was very fond of life, was Mr. Tracy. I thought he died of a fit, sir."

"Probably he did. A fit or stroke of apoplexy. I begin to think, Inspector, we have no murder mystery on our hands after all."

"No," said Farrell, shaking his head, "apparently not."

"Apparently yes," said Keeley Moore, quietly. He had been looking at the dead man, and though he had not moved, but had stood for a long time, with his hands in his pockets, staring down at the still figure on the bed, I knew, somehow, that he had made a discovery.

"Stand over here, please, Inspector," he said, in his calm, matter-of-fact way.

Farrell went and stood beside him, and Moore pointed to a very small circular object that shone like silver, though nearly hidden by the thick and rather long hair of Sampson Tracy.

It was the head of a nail that had been driven into the man's skull.

CHAPTER IV

THE NAIL

"My God!" Farrell exclaimed, stepping closer and pushing aside the gray hair, thus clearly revealing the awful truth.

A flat-headed nail, the head rather more than a quarter of an inch in diameter, had been driven into the skull with such force that it showed merely as a metal disk. Having been hidden by the dead man's hair, it had remained unnoticed until Moore's quick eyes espied it.

Farrell picked at it a little, but it was far too firmly fastened to be moved by his fingers.

"What shall we do?" the Inspector asked, helplessly. "Shall we try to get Doctor Rogers back?"

"No," returned the Coroner, "he's just starting on a long trip. Let him go. He could do nothing and it would be a pity to spoil his journey. His diagnosis of apoplexy was most natural in the circumstances, for the symptoms are the same. I, too, thought death was the result of an apoplectic stroke. But now we know it is black murder, the case comes directly within my jurisdiction, and there's no occasion to recall Doctor Rogers."

"You're right," Ames assented, "but who could have done this fearful thing? I can hardly believe a human being capable of such a horror! Mr. Moore, you simply must take up this case. It ought to be a problem after your own heart."

Every word the man uttered made me dislike him more. To refer to this terrible tragedy as a problem after Moore's own heart seemed to me to indicate a mind callous and almost ghoulish in its type.

I knew Kee well enough to feel sure that he would investigate the murder, but not at the behest of Harper Ames.

He only acknowledged Ames's speech by a noncommittal nod and turned to Detective March.

"We have our work cut out for us," he said, very gravely. "I have never seen a stranger case. The murderer must have been a man of brute passions and brute strength. That nail is almost imbedded in the bone, and, I fancy, needed more than one blow of the hammer that drove it in. But first, as to the doors and windows. You tell me they were locked this morning?"

"Yes, sir," answered Griscom, the butler, as Moore looked at him.

He was a smallish man, bald and with what are sometimes called pop-eyes. He stared in a frightened manner, but he controlled his voice as he went on to tell his story.

"Yes, sir, I brought the master's tea at nine o'clock, as always. The door was locked –"

"Is it usually locked in the morning?" Moore interrupted.

"Sometimes, not always. When it is locked, I knock and Mr. Tracy would get up and open the door. If unlocked, I walked right in."

"And this morning it was locked, and the key in the lock on the inside?"

"Yes, sir. So I knocked, but when there was no answer, I got scared –"

"Why were you scared?"

"Because Doctor Rogers had often told me that Mr. Tracy was in danger of an apoplectic stroke, and that I must do anything I could to make him eat less and take more exercise. I've been with the master a long time, sir, and I had the privilege of a bit of talk with him now and then. So I did try to persuade him to obey the doctor's orders, and he would laugh and promise to do so. But he forgot it as soon as he saw some dish he was fond of, and he'd eat his fill of it."

"Go on, Griscom," Moore said, "what happened next?"

"I went to Mr. Everett –"

"Yes, he went to Everett," broke in the aggrieved voice of Harper Ames. "Why did he do that, instead of coming to me, I'd like to know!"

“Go on,” Moore instructed the butler.

“I went to Mr. Everett, sir, he was up and dressed, and he said, at once, to get Louis – that’s the chauffeur – and tell him to bring some tools, I did that, and Louis first pushed the key out of the lock, and then poked around with a wire until he got the door open. Then we came in – ”

“Who came in?”

“Mr. Everett and Mr. Ames and me, sir. And Mrs. Fenn – she’s the housekeeper – she saw Louis running upstairs, so she came, too.”

“And you saw – ?”

“Mr. Tracy, just as he was when you first saw him, sir. Just as he is now, except for the things Doctor Rogers chucked out.”

“Is that door, the one that was locked, the entrance to the whole suite?”

“Yes, sir, that door is the only one connecting these rooms with the house.”

“I see. Now what about the windows?”

“They haven’t been touched, sir.”

Kee Moore turned his attention to the windows. There were many of them. The suite of Sampson Tracy’s was a rectangular wing, built out from the main house, and having windows on three sides. But all of these windows overlooked the deep, black waters of the Sunless Sea. It had been the whim of the man to have his quarters thus, to be surrounded on all sides by the water of the lake that he loved, and he usually had all the windows wide open, doubtless enjoying the lake breezes that played through the rooms, and listening to the birds, whose notes broke the stillness of the night.

“What is below these rooms?” Moore asked.

“The big ballroom, sir. Nothing else.”

After scrutinizing every window in the bedroom, dressing room, bathroom and sitting room, Moore said, slowly: “These windows seem to me to be inaccessible from below.”

It was characteristic of the man that he didn’t say they were inaccessible but merely that they seemed so to him.

As they certainly did to the rest of us. We all looked out, and in every instance, the sheer drop to the lake was about fifteen or more feet. The outer walls of marble presented no foothold for even the most daring of climbers. They were smooth, plain, and absolutely unscalable.

“It is certain no one entered by the windows,” Moore said, at last, having looked out of every one. “I suppose the house is always carefully secured at night?”

“Yes, sir,” Griscom assured him. “Mr. Tracy was very particular about that. He and all the household had latchkeys, and the front door – indeed, all the doors and windows were carefully seen to.”

“Who has latchkeys?”

“Mr. Everett, Mr. Dean, myself and the housekeeper. Then there are others which are given to guests. Mr. Ames had one – ”

“With so many latchkeys about, one may have been abstracted by some evil-minded person.”

“Not likely, sir. We keep strict watch on them.”

“Well, that would only give entrance to the house. How could anyone get into and out of Mr. Tracy’s room, leaving the door locked on the inside?”

I knew Moore purposely voiced this problem himself, to head off those who would ask it of him. He had often said to me, “if you don’t want a question asked of you, ask it yourself of somebody else.” And so, as he flung this at them each felt derelict in not being able to reply.

But Ames’s querulous voice volleyed the question back.

“That’s why I want you to do up this business, Moore,” he said. “That’s what makes it such a pretty problem – ”

Moore could stand this no longer.

“For an intimate friend of a martyred man, I should think you would see the matter in a more personal light than a pretty problem!”

“Oh, I do. I’m sad and sorry enough, but I don’t wear my heart on my sleeve. And first of all, I’m keen to avenge my friend. And I know that what’s to be done must be done quickly. So, get busy, I beg.”

The more Ames said, the less I liked him, and I knew Kee felt the same way about it. But the man was right as to haste being advisable. The circumstances were so peculiar, the conditions so fantastic, that search for the criminal must be made quickly, or a man of such diabolical cleverness would put himself beyond our reach.

The Inspector, the police detective and Keeley Moore consulted a few moments and then Inspector Farrell said:

“The case is altered. Now that we know it is wilful murder, and not a stroke of illness, we must act accordingly. Coroner Hart will conduct an immediate inquiry, preliminary to his formal inquest. No one may leave the house; you, Griscom, will tell the servants this, and I shall call in more help from the police station to guard the place. We will go downstairs, and the Coroner will choose a suitable room, and begin his investigation.”

Farrell was an efficient director, though in no way a detective. He locked the door that commanded the whole apartment after he had herded us all out.

We filed downstairs, and I could hear women’s voices in a small reception room as we passed it.

The Coroner chose a room which was fitted up as a sort of writing room. It was of moderate size and contained several desks or writing tables, evidently a writing room for guests. There was a bookcase of books and a table of periodicals and newspapers.

Clearly, the house had every provision for comfort and pleasure. Save for the sinister atmosphere now pervading it, I felt I should have liked to visit there.

The Coroner settled himself at a table, and instructed Griscom to send in the house servants one at a time. He also told the butler to serve breakfast as usual, and advised Harper Ames to go to the dining room, as he would be called on later for testimony.

Hart’s manner now was crisp and business-like. The realization of the awful facts of the case had spurred him to definite and immediate action.

Mrs. Fenn, the cook-housekeeper, threw no new light on the situation. She corroborated Griscom’s story of the locked door and the subsequent opening of it by Louis, but she could add no new information.

“You were fond of Mr. Tracy?” asked Moore, kindly, for the poor woman was vainly trying to control her grief.

“Oh, yes, sir. He was a good master and a truly great man.”

“You’ve never known, among the guests of the house, any one who was his enemy?”

“No, sir. But I almost never see the guests. I’m housekeeper, to be sure, but the maids do all the housework. I superintend the cooking.”

“And you’ve heard no gossip about any one who had an enmity or a grudge toward Mr. Tracy?”

“Ah, who could have? He was a gentle, peaceable man, was Mr. Tracy. Who could wish him harm?”

“Yet somebody did,” the Coroner put in, and then he dismissed Mrs. Fenn, feeling she could be of no use.

The other house servants were similarly ignorant of any guest or neighbour who was unfriendly to Mr. Tracy, and then Hart called for the chauffeur.

Louis, a Frenchman, was different in manner and disinclined to talk. In fact, he refused to do so unless all members of the household were sent from the room.

So the Coroner ordered everybody out except Farrell and Detective March, Moore and myself.

Then Louis waxed confidential and declared that Mr. Ames and Mr. Tracy were deadly enemies.

I thought the man was exaggerating, and that he had some grudge of his own against Ames. But Hart listened avidly to the chauffeur's arraignment, and I was forced to the conclusion that Louis knew a lot.

Yet it was all hints and innuendoes. He stated that the two men were continually quarrelling. Asked what about, he replied "Money matters."

"What sort of money matters?" Hart asked him.

"Stocks and bonds and mortgages. I think Mr. Ames owed Mr. Tracy a great deal of money and he couldn't or wouldn't pay it, and so they wrangled over it."

"There was no quarrelling on other subjects?"

"No, sir, except now and then about Mrs. Dallas."

"And what about her?"

"Well, Mr. Ames didn't want Mr. Tracy to marry her."

"Did Mr. Ames favour the lady himself?"

"Oh, no, sir. He's a woman hater. Or at least he says so. No, but he didn't want Mr. Tracy to marry anybody for fear he might cut him, Mr. Ames, out of his will."

"How do you know all these things?"

"Well, I drive the car, you see, and they talk these matters over, and I can't help hearing them. They make no bones of it, they talk right out. I never repeat anything I hear, in an ordinary way, but as you ask me, sir – "

"Yes, Louis, tell all you know. So Mr. Ames would suffer financially if Mr. Tracy married?"

"I don't know that, sir, but I know he thought he would. And I suppose he knew."

"It seems to me," Farrell said, "we ought to know the terms of Mr. Tracy's will as it might help us to get at the truth."

"We can't do that at the moment," Hart said, "and anyway, this is merely a preliminary inquiry to get the main facts of the situation."

But the other servants had no more information to impart than those hitherto questioned. A chambermaid, one Sally Bray, convinced us that all the queer decorations spread on the bed had been already in the room and were, therefore, not brought in by the murderer.

The red feather duster belonged in a small cupboard that held polishing cloths and dusters. The larkspur flowers had been in a vase on a side table, and the whole bunch had been removed from the vase and laid around the dead man. The orange and crackers had been on a plate on the bedside table, but where the plate was, Sally had no idea. The crucifix was Mr. Tracy's property and belonged on a small hook above the head of his bed.

"And the scarf," suggested Hart. "The red chiffon scarf, where did that come from?"

Sally blushed and looked down, but finally being urged to tell, said that she knew it to be a scarf belonging to Mrs. Dallas, and the lady had left it there one evening not long ago, when she had been there to dinner.

"Why had it not been returned to her?" Hart wanted to know.

"Because Mr. Tracy took a notion to it. It was a sort of keepsake of the lady, sir, and, too, Mr. Tracy was that fond of beautiful things. Any pretty piece of silk or brocade would please him tremendous."

"Then, whoever arranged all those decorations round him knew of his love for beautiful things, and that would explain the flowers and the scarf. Is there anything missing from his room, Sally?"

"I don't know, sir. I've not been allowed in there this morning."

"Well, go up there now. Tell the guard he's to let you in. Here's the key."

"Oh, sir, I – I daren't! Don't make me go in there!"

The girl shivered with real fear, but Hart had to know.

"You must go," he said, not unkindly. "Get Griscom to go with you, or Mrs. Fenn, if you like. But it is important for me to know if anything has been taken away that you know of. I don't mean papers or letters from his desk. I mean any of his appointments or small belongings."

The girl went off, still shuddering, and Hart finished up the rest of the servants in short order.

Next he interviewed Charlie Everett. I had taken a fancy to Everett, and somehow, from the way Kee looked at him, I thought he liked him, too.

He was not a distinguished-looking man, but he seemed a well-balanced sort, and his eyes were alert and showed a sense of humour. Not that the occasion called for humour, but you can always tell by a man's eyes if he has that desirable trait.

Very quiet and self-possessed was Everett, his manner polite but a little detached. He was quite ready to answer questions but he gave only the answer, no additional information.

Yes, he said, he had spent an hour or so with Mr. Tracy the night before. They had played a game of billiards and had then sat for a short time over a cigar and a whisky and soda. Then, perhaps about ten o'clock, he had said good night to his employer and had gone to his own room. No, he could form no idea whatever as to who could have killed Sampson Tracy, or how he could have got into the room.

"That is," he amended his speech, "he could get in easy enough, but I don't see how he could get out and leave the door locked behind him."

"It is one of those cases," Hart said, a little sententiously, "where there has been a murder committed in a sealed room."

Keeley Moore spoke up then.

"A murder cannot be committed in a sealed room," he said, "unless the murderer stays there. If the murderer left the room, the room was not a sealed room."

"How did he get out?" demanded Hart.

"That we have yet to learn. But he did get out, not through the door to the hall. Remains the possibility of a secret passage and the windows."

"I'm sure there is no secret passage," Everett said, with an unusual burst of unasked information. "I've been here three years and if there was such a thing I'm sure I'd know of it."

"You might and you might not," said Moore, looking at him. "If Mr. Tracy wanted a private entrance to his suite for any reason, he would have had it built and kept the matter quiet."

"Not Sampson Tracy," exclaimed Everett. "He was not a secretive man. I think I may say I knew all about his affairs, both business matters and private dealings, and he trusted me absolutely."

"Even so," Moore told him. "But in the lives of most men there is some secret, something that they don't talk over with anybody."

"Not Mr. Tracy," Everett reiterated. "Even his engagement to Mrs. Dallas was freely talked over with me, both before it occurred and since. I know all about his habits and his fads and whims. And in no case was there ever an occasion for a secret passage to or from his rooms."

"Yet it may be there," Kee insisted. "But if none can be found, then the murderer either escaped by the windows or –"

"Or what?" asked Hart.

"Or he had a steel wire contraption to turn the key from the outside. But this I don't think likely, for the door has a rather complicated lock, and is far from being an easy thing to manipulate."

"You know the terms of his will, then?" the Coroner inquired.

"Oh, yes," Everett said. "At present his niece, Miss Remsen, is his principal heir. There are many bequests to friends and to servants, but the bulk of the estate goes to Miss Remsen. Mr. Tracy knew that his marriage would invalidate this will, which was why he had not changed it. He said that after his wedding with Mrs. Dallas, he would revise the will to suite his changed estate."

"Then, under his existing will, Mrs. Dallas has no legacy?"

“Not unless Mr. Tracy made a change without telling me. He may have done that, but I think it very unlikely.”

“You know of no one then, who had sufficient enmity toward Mr. Tracy to desire his death?”

“Absolutely no one. So far as I am aware, he hadn’t an acquaintance in the world who was anything but friendly toward him.”

Everett was dismissed and Billy Dean was called in.

He was a pleasant-faced chap of twenty-three or thereabouts. His work was far from being as important as Everett’s. In fact he was really a high-class stenographer and office boy.

He was good looking with big brown eyes and a curly mop of brown hair. He too, scoffed at the idea of a secret passage in the house.

“Pleasure Dome has all the modern improvements,” he said, “but nothing like that. If there was such a thing, I’d have been through it in no time. I can ferret out anything queer of that sort by instinct, and there’s nothing doing. There’s no way in and out of Mr. Tracy’s suite but by that one hall door. I know that. And it has a special lock. He had that put on about six months ago.”

“Why? Was he afraid of intruders?”

“Don’t think so. But there had been some robberies down in the village and he said it was as well to be on the safe side.”

“Then, Mr. Dean, in your opinion, how did the man who killed Mr. Tracy get out of his rooms?”

“That’s where you get me. I’m positively kerflummixed. I can’t see anybody twisting that peculiar key with a bit of wire. Though that’s easier to swallow than to imagine any one jumping out of the window.”

“Why? The windows are not so very high.”

“No. But the lake there is mighty deep and dangerous.”

“Why specially dangerous?”

“Because there are swirling undercurrents, you see, it’s almost like a caldron. That Sunless Sea, as Mr. Tracy named it, is in a cove and the winds make the water eddy about, and – well, I’m a pretty fair diver, but I wouldn’t dive out of a second story window into that cove!”

“Then, we have to look for either a clever mechanic or an expert diver,” said Keeley Moore. “How about the chauffeur?”

“He’s an expert mechanic all right, but he wouldn’t harm a hair of Mr. Tracy’s head. He loved him, as, indeed, we all did. Nobody could help loving that man. He was always genial, courteous and kindly to everybody.”

“And his niece, Miss Remsen?” asked the Coroner. “She, too, is gentle and lovely?”

Young Dean blushed fiery red.

“Yes, she is,” was all he said, but no clairvoyance was needed to read his thoughts of her.

“Is she here?” asked Moore, knowing we had seen her arrive.

“Yes,” Billy Dean said. “We telephoned her so soon as we knew what had happened, and she came right over.”

“You may go now,” said the Coroner, “and please send Miss Remsen in here.”

CHAPTER V

THE LADY OF THE LAKE

“And so,” I thought to myself, “I shall see again the Lady of the Lake.”

As Alma Remsen entered the room, I realized the aptness of Kee’s term, high-handed. Without any effect of strong-mindedness, the girl showed in face and demeanour a certain self-reliance, an air of determination, that made even a casual observer feel sure she could hold her own against all comers.

Yet she was a gentle sort. Slender, of medium height, with appealing brown eyes, she nodded a sort of greeting that included us all, and addressed herself to the coroner.

“You sent for me, Doctor Hart?” she said, in a low, musical voice.

“Yes, Miss Remsen. Will you answer a few direct questions?”

“Certainly. To the best of my ability.”

“First of all, then, when did you last see your uncle alive?”

“I was over here day before yesterday, Tuesday, that would be. I have not been here since, until this morning.”

My heart almost stopped beating. I had seen her come in her canoe – but stay, that was at one-thirty or thereabouts. Perhaps she salved her conscience for the lie by telling herself that was this morning.

“You mean, when you came over here perhaps half an hour ago?”

“Yes.” Alma looked at him in some surprise. “What else could I mean?”

A finished actress, surely. I was amazed at her coolness and her pretty air of inquiry.

“Who summoned you?”

“Mrs. Fenn. She had been asked to do so by Mr. Ames.”

“What was her message?”

“That Uncle Sampson had died of apoplexy and I’d better come right over.”

“So you came?”

“Yes, as soon as I could get here.”

“Have you seen – er – Mr. Tracy?”

“No; Mr. Ames advised against it.”

“Well, Miss Remsen, I think we want no information from you, except a formal statement of your relationship to the dead man and your standing with him.”

“Standing?”

“Yes. Were you good friends?”

“The best. I loved Uncle Sampson and he loved me, I know. I am his only living relative, except some distant cousins. I am the daughter of his sister, of whom he was very fond.”

The girl was a bit of an enigma. She seemed straightforward and sincere, yet I was somehow conscious of a reservation in her talk, a glibness of speech that carried the idea of a prearranged story.

Why I should mistrust her I couldn’t say, at first. Then I remembered that I had seen her canoeing over to Pleasure Dome in the night, and now she was saying she had not done so.

“Are you his heiress?” The question came sharply.

“So far as I know,” she replied with perfect equanimity. “My uncle has told me that his will leaves the bulk of his estate to me, but he also told me that when he married Mrs. Dallas, he would revise that will, and make different arrangements.”

“Did you resent this?”

“Not at all. I knew my uncle would leave me a proper portion of his wealth, and that as long as he lived he would take care of his sister’s child.”

“You are an only child of your parents?”

"I had a twin sister. She died fourteen years ago."

"And she is buried on this estate?"

"Her grave is in a small cemetery which also contains the graves of my parents and five or six other relatives of my uncle's family."

"How did it come about that the cemetery is on the grounds of the estate? It is, I believe, a New England custom."

"It was my mother's wish. She was devoted to the little girl who died and wanted to have the grave where she could visit it often. My uncle humoured her and also had the remains of my father sent here to be buried beside the child. Then, when my mother died, about a year ago, naturally she was buried there, too."

"I see. What did your sister die of?"

"Scarlet fever. There was an epidemic of it. We both had it, but I pulled through, though it left me with a slight deafness in one ear."

"Then, after your mother's death, you went to live by yourself on the island. Why did you do this?"

"Because my uncle was to marry Mrs. Dallas."

"And you don't like Mrs. Dallas?"

"I don't dislike her at all, but I am not of an easy-going disposition. I felt sure there would be clashes, and I told uncle I'd rather live by myself. He understood and agreed. So after some looking about, we decided on the island of Whistling Reeds as the most attractive site for a home."

"And he built a house for you there?"

"Oh, no, the house was already there. He bought the whole island, house and all."

"You like it as a home?"

"I love it. I am happier there than I could be anywhere else."

"Are you not lonely?"

"No more than I would be anywhere. I have capable and devoted servants, and I have tennis courts and an archery field and I have many boats and can get any place I wish to go in them. No, I am not so lonely as I sometimes was here in this great house. Of course, since my mother's death, I haven't gone much in society but I am thinking of going out more in the future."

Keeley Moore listened to the girl with the deepest interest. I wondered what he would say if he knew what I knew of her midnight canoe trip!

But I vowed to myself then and there that I should never tell of that. I knew I might be doing wrong, withholding such an important bit of information, but I was determined to keep my secret.

I tried to make myself think it was some other girl I had seen, but the alert figure before me and the white costume said plainly that I was making no mistake in recognizing the girl of the canoe.

From beneath her little white felt hat strayed a few golden curls, and I well remembered the bare head that had looked silvery in the moonlight.

I said to myself, by way of placating my conscience, that when the time came I would tell Kee about it, but I certainly did not propose to give the Coroner a chance to suspect this lovely girl of crime.

Apparently, the Coroner had no slightest suspicion of Alma, but you can't tell. He may have been drawing her out in order to prove her complete innocence or he may have felt that she had motive and must be closely questioned.

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