Wells Carolyn

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
THROUGH THE GREEN CORD

Judge Hoyt's strong, keen face took on a kindlier aspect and his curt "Hello!" was followed by gentler tones, as he heard the voice of the girl he loved, over the telephone.

"What is it, Avice?" he said, for her speech showed anxiety.

"Uncle Rowly, – he hasn't come home yet."

"He hasn't? Well, I hope he'll turn up soon. I want to see him. I was coming up this evening."

"Come now," said Avice; "come now, and dine here. I am so anxious about uncle."

"Why, Avice, don't worry. He is all right, of course."

"No he isn't. I feel a presentiment something has happened to him. He never was so late as this before, unless we knew where he was. Do come right up, won't you, Judge?"

"Certainly I will; I'm very glad to. But I'm sure your fears are groundless. What about Mrs. Black? Is she alarmed?"

"No, Eleanor laughs at me."

"Then I think you needn't disturb yourself. Surely she – "

"Yes, I know what you're going to say, but she isn't a bit fonder of Uncle Rowly than I am. Good-by."

Avice hung up the receiver with a little snap. She was willing that Mrs. Black should marry her uncle, but she did hate to be relegated to second place in the household. Already the handsome widow was asserting her supremacy, and while Avice acknowledged the justice of it, it hurt her pride a little.

"I've asked Judge Hoyt to dinner," she said, as she returned to her post at the window.

Mrs. Black glanced up from the evening paper she was reading and murmured an indistinct acquiescence.

It was late June, yet the city home of the Trowbridges was still occupied by the family. As Avice often said, the big town house was cooler than most summer resorts, with their small rooms and lack of shade. Here, the linen-swathed furniture, the white-draped chandeliers and pictures, the rugless floors, all contributed to an effect of coolness and comfort.

Avice, herself, in her pretty white gown, fluttered from one window to another, looking out for her uncle.

"Mrs. Black, why do you suppose Uncle Rowly doesn't come? He said he would be home early, and it's after six o'clock now!"

"I don't know Avice, I'm sure. Do be quiet! You fluster around so, you make me nervous."

"I'm nervous myself, Eleanor. I'm afraid something has happened to uncle. Do you suppose he has had a stroke, or anything?"

"Nonsense, child, of course, not. He has been detained at the office for something."

"No he hasn't; I telephoned there and the office is closed."

"Then he has gone somewhere else."

"But he said he would be home by five."

"Well, he isn't. Now, don't worry; that can do no good."

But Avice did worry. She continued to flit about, dividing her attention between the clock and the window.

The girl had been an orphan from childhood, and Rowland Trowbridge had been almost as a father to her. Avice loved him and watched over him as a daughter; at least, that had been the case until lately. A few weeks since, Mr. Trowbridge had succumbed to the rather florid charms of Mrs. Black, his housekeeper, and told Avice he would marry her in a month.

Though greatly surprised and not greatly pleased, Avice had accepted the situation and treated the housekeeper with the same pleasant courtesy she had always shown her. The two "got along" as the phrase is, though their natures were not in many ways congenial.

Avice remained at the window till she saw at last Leslie Hoyt's tall form approaching. She ran to open the door herself.

"Oh, Judge Hoyt," she cried, "Uncle hasn't come yet! There must be something wrong! What can we do?"

"I don't know, Avice, dear. Tell me all about it."

"There's nothing to tell, only that uncle said he would be home at five, and it's almost seven and he isn't here! Such a thing never

happened before."

"Good evening, Judge Hoyt," said Mrs. Black's cool, measured voice as they entered the drawing-room. "I think our Avice is unnecessarily alarmed. I'm sure Mr. Trowbridge can take care of himself."

"That is doubtless true," and for the first time a note of anxiety crept into Hoyt's tone; "but as Avice says, it is most unusual."

Mrs. Black smiled indifferently and returned to her paper.

Leslie Hoyt was so frequent a visitor at the house, that he was never treated formally. He seated himself in an easy chair, and took a cigarette case from his pocket, while Avice continued her nervous journeys between the clock and the window.

"We won't wait dinner after seven," said Mrs. Black, in a voice that might mean either command or suggestion, as her hearers preferred.

"You may have it served now, if you like," returned Avice, "but I shan't go to the table until uncle comes."

Now, it had been nearly two hours before this that a telephone call had been received at police headquarters.

"Is dees polizia stazione?" Inspector Collins had heard, as he held the receiver to his ear.

Through the green cord the broken voice spoke in a halting way, as if uncertain how to word the message.

"Yes; who is speaking?" Collins replied.

"Meester Rowlan' Trowbridga, – he is dead-a."

"I can't hear you! What's all that racket where you are?"

"My bambini – my childaren. They have-a da whoopa-cough."

"It's more than children making all that noise! Who are you?"

"Not matter. I say, Meester Trowbridga – he dead-a."

"Rowland Trowbridge dead! Where – who are you?"

"You find-a heem. Bringa da bod' home."

"Where is he?"

"Van Cortaland' Park. By da gollif play. You go finda da man – Bringa da bod' home."

"See here, you tell me who you are!"

But a sudden click told that the message was finished, and after a few impatient hellos, Collins hung up the receiver.

"Rubbish!" he said to himself; "some Dago woman trying to be funny. But a queer thing, – Rowland Trowbridge! Phew, if it should be! I'll just call up his house."

Collins called up the Trowbridge house on Fifth Avenue. Not to alarm any one he merely inquired if Mr. Trowbridge was at home. The answer was no, and, glancing at the clock, Collins called up Mr. Trowbridge's office in the Equitable Building. There was no response, and as it was five o'clock, he assumed the office was already closed.

"I've got a hunch there's something in it," he mused, and acting on his conviction, he called up the Van Cortlandt Park Precinct Station, and told the story.

Captain Pearson, who took the message, shrugged his shoulders at its dubious authority, but he assembled several detectives and policemen, and set off with them in a patrol car

for the golf links.

Up to Van Cortlandt Park they went, past the gay-coated, gay-voiced golf players, on along the broad road to the woods beyond.

"By golly! There he is!" cried one of the detectives, whose expectant eyes noted a dark heap on the ground, well back among the trees.

Jumping from the car and running across the uneven, root-roughened ground, they found the dead body of Rowland Trowbridge.

Dressed in his business clothes, his hat on the ground near by, the body was contorted, the hands clenched, and the face showed an expression of rage, that betokened a violent death.

"He put up a fight," observed Pearson. "Poor man, he had no chance. Somebody stabbed him."

A gash in the blood-stained waistcoat proved that the aim at the victim's heart had been all too sure, and his frantic, convulsive struggles of no avail.

Eagerly the men looked for clues. But they found nothing save the dead man and his own belongings. The scene of the tragedy was not very far from the road, but it was well screened by the thick summer foliage, and the rocks and high tree roots hid the body on the ground from the sight of passers-by.

"Footprints?" said Lieutenant Pearson, musingly.

"Nothing doing," returned Detective Groot. "Some few depressions here and there – of course, made by human feet – but none clear enough to be called a footprint."

"And the ground is too stony and grassy to show them. Look well, though, boys. No broken cuff-links, or dropped gloves? It's a canny murderer who doesn't leave a shred of incriminating evidence."

"It's a fool murderer who does," returned Groot. "And this affair is not the work of a fool. Probably they've been spotting Mr. Trowbridge for months. These millionaires are fair game for the Dago slayers."

"Why Dago?"

"Didn't an Italian woman turn in the call? How could she know of it unless some of her own people did it?"

"But there seems to be no robbery. Here's his watch and scarfpin all right."

"And his roll?"

"Yes," said Pearson, after an investigation of the dead man's pockets. "Bills and change. Nothing taken, apparently."

"Valuable papers, maybe."

"Not a Dago, then. Your theories don't hang together. Well, this will create some stir in the Street! Biggest sensation in years. Rowland Trowbridge! Phew! Won't the papers go crazy!"

"What family has he? Wife?"

"No, nor child. Only a niece, but she's the apple of his eye. We'll get Collins to telephone to the house. It's an awful business."

The business was awful, and its awful details took so much time that it was seven o'clock before Inspector Collins called up

the Trowbridge home.

"Maybe that's uncle now!" cried Avice, and springing from her chair she went to the ringing telephone.

"Hello – yes – no, – oh, *tell* me! – I am Miss Trowbridge, – no, his niece, – please come here, Judge Hoyt!"

Leslie Hoyt took the receiver from the hand of the agitated girl, and received this message from the police station.

"Yes, sir; I couldn't tell the young lady, sir. Do you belong to the family? Well, then, there's no use beatin' round the bush. Mr. Trowbridge is dead. We found his body in Van Cortlandt Park woods. Will you come here to identify it?"

"Wait a minute! Let me think!" and Hoyt strove to control himself. "Avice, you were right. Something has happened."

"Oh, Uncle Rowly!"

"Yes, – " and Hoyt's voice faltered, "he has been – has been hurt. They – they have found him – "

"I know," said Avice, standing perfectly still, while her face went white. "You needn't tell me. I know. He is dead."

Hoyt looked at her dumbly, not contradicting. He had loved the girl for years, but though she liked him, she would give him no promise, and he still hoped and waited. He turned back to answer the insistent telephone. "Yes; of course, there is nothing else to do. Tell the coroner. I will go there at once. Are you sure of what you tell me?"

"There can be no doubt," he said gently, as he finally left the telephone. "There are letters in his pockets, and some of the

policemen know him. Avice, dear!"

But Avice had flung herself on a couch, her face buried in the pillows, and was sobbing her heart out.

"Let her cry," said Mrs. Black, softly, as she laid her long white hand gently upon the bowed head; "it will do her good. Tell me all, Judge Hoyt. I am the one in charge now."

The woman's handsome face showed dignity and authority rather than grief, but Leslie Hoyt was merely the dead man's lawyer, and had no right to intrude personal comment or sympathy. He had long been a close friend of Rowland Trowbridge and his niece, but with the housekeeper his acquaintance was but formal.

"I know very little, Mrs. Black," he said, his eyes wandering to the convulsed figure on the couch. "The inspector merely told me that Mr. Trowbridge has been killed and that some one must go to the police station to represent the family. As his lawyer, it is appropriate that I should go, and, indeed, it seems to me there is no one else who could – " his voice broke as he looked again at Avice, now sitting up and staring, wide-eyed at him.

"Yes, do go, Judge Hoyt," she cried; "you are the one – who else could? Not I, surely, – you don't want me to go, do you?"

"No, Avice, no, dear," said Mrs. Black, soothingly. "Nobody thought of your going. Judge Hoyt has kindly consented – "

"I will stop for Doctor Fulton, I think, and ask him to go with me," and Leslie Hoyt took up his hat. "You had better go to your room, Avice. It may be a long time before my return."

"I will look after her," and Mrs. Black nodded her head. "I will attend to everything."

She accompanied Hoyt to the door, saying in low tones, "When you come back, will you bring the the – will you bring Mr. Trowbridge with you?"

"I can't be sure. There are so many formalities to be looked after. Try to keep Avice as quiet as possible. It will be a trying scene at best, when we return."

"I will do all I can for her. How fortunate that you are here, Judge Hoyt."

"Indeed, yes. Had I not been, the girl might have insisted on going on this awful errand."

The judge walked the few blocks to Doctor Fulton's office, and luckily finding him in, they both went at once in the doctor's car to the scene of the tragedy.

"Let me give you some quieting draught, Avice dear," said Mrs. Black, as she returned to the girl, "and then I'm going to send you to bed."

"Indeed, you'll do nothing of the kind. I have quite as much right here as you have."

"Of course you have," and the lady's voice was as straightforward as her words. "I only want to spare you the shock."

"I don't want to be spared, I want to know all about everything that goes on. I won't be treated as a child or an imbecile! I want to help."

"But, my dear, there is nothing to do."

"There will be. If Uncle Rowly has been killed, some one has done the deed, and I shall never rest until I find out who did it, and bring him to justice! How can you sit there so calmly? Don't you care? You, who pretended to love him!"

"There, there, Avice, don't get so excited. I know how you must feel, but – "

"Don't talk to me, Eleanor! You drive me crazy!"

Offended, and a little frightened at the girl's vehemence, the older woman ceased all attempts at conversation, and busied herself about the rooms, with those futile, nervous little motions that most women indulge in under stress of great excitement.

"I think, Avice, dear, you ought to try to eat some dinner," she suggested. "Shall we go out together?"

But Avice only looked at her in dumb reproach, and closed her eyes as if to dismiss the subject.

Mrs. Black went into the dining-room alone.

"There has been an accident, Stryker," she said to the butler, thinking it unwise to say more at the present. "They will bring Mr. Trowbridge home after a time. Meantime, say nothing to the other servants, and give me my dinner, for I feel I must try to eat something."

Mrs. Black's face was inscrutable as she sat at the well-appointed table. She ate a little of the dishes Stryker brought, but her thoughts were evidently far away. She frowned now and then, and once she smiled, but mostly she seemed in a brown study,

and as if she had weighty affairs on her mind. Not a tear did she shed, nor did she look bowed with sorrow; indeed, her fine, well-poised head held itself a little higher than usual as she gave low-voiced orders to the butler now and then.

She returned to the drawing-room and the weary hours dragged by. Occasionally the two women spoke to each other, but only of trivialities, or necessary details of arrangement. No word of sympathy or common grief passed between them.

At last they heard steps outside, and they knew Rowland Trowbridge was being brought into his house for the last time.

Judge Hoyt came in first and kept the two women in the drawing-room while the bearers took their tragic burden up to Mr. Trowbridge's own room. Shortly afterward Doctor Fulton came down.

"Mr. Trowbridge was murdered," he said briefly. "Stabbed with a dagger. He has been dead five or six hours now. Perhaps more."

"Who did it?" cried Avice, looking more like an avenging angel than a grief-stricken girl.

"They have no idea. The coroner must try to determine that."

"The coroner!" exclaimed Mrs. Black in horror.

Avice turned on her. "Yes, coroner," she said; "how else can we find out who killed Uncle Rowly, and punish him, – and kill *him*!"

Every one stared at Avice. The policeman in the hall looked in at the doorway, as her ringing tones reached him. The girl

was greatly excited and her eyes blazed like stars. But she stood quietly, and spoke with repressed force.

"What is the first thing to do?" she said, turning to Doctor Fulton, and then glancing past him to the policeman in the doorway.

"Wait, Avice, wait," put in Leslie Hoyt; "let us consider a moment."

"There is nothing to be considered, Leslie. Uncle is dead. We must discover who killed him. We must get the best detectives, and we must never rest until we have brought the villain to justice."

"Of course, of course, Avice," said Mrs. Black, soothingly, "but we can't hurry so, child."

"We *must* hurry! It is only by beginning at once that we can find clues and things. Delay means opportunity for the criminal to escape!"

Hoyt and Doctor Fulton looked at the girl in amazement. Where had she learned these terms that fell so readily from her tongue?

"She is right," said Judge Hoyt, sadly. "There must be no unnecessary delay in these matters. But the law moves slowly, at best. Everything possible will be done, Avice; you may rest assured of that. The coroner is upstairs now, and when he comes down he will want to talk with you. You won't object?"

"Indeed, no. I want to see him. Why, only think, I know nothing, —*nothing*, as yet, as to how Uncle Rowly met his death!"

CHAPTER II
WHO COULD HAVE DONE IT?

Coroner Berg came down stairs and joined the group in the drawing-room. He was a bristling, fussy little man, with a decided sense of his own importance and evidently inclined to make much of his office. His sparse, sandy hair stood out straight from his head, and his light blue eyes darted from one to another of the impatient people awaiting his report.

"Sad case," he said, wringing his hands; "very sad case. Fine man like that, struck down in the prime of life. Awful!"

"We know that," and Avice looked annoyed at what she thought intrusive sympathy. "But who did it? What have you found out?"

"Very little, Miss," answered Berg. "Your uncle was killed by a dagger thrust, while up in Van Cortlandt Park woods. His body was found in a lonely spot up there, and there is no trace of the murderer. The police were informed of the murder by telephone, which is a mighty queer performance if you ask me! They say a Dago woman called up headquarters and told the story."

"Extraordinary!" said Hoyt; "an Italian?"

"Yes, sir; they say she sounded like one, anyhow."

"And a dagger or stiletto was used," said Doctor Fulton, thoughtfully; "that looks like Italian work. Had your uncle any

Italian enemies, Miss Trowbridge?"

"Not that I know of," and Avice spoke a little impatiently; "but uncle had no enemies that I know of. At least, none who would kill him."

"He had enemies, then?" spoke up the coroner, alertly.

"Uncle Rowly was not an easy-going man. He had many acquaintances with whom he was not on terms of friendship. But I'm sure none of his quarrels were grave enough to lead to this."

"But somebody committed the crime, Miss Trowbridge, and who so likely as a known enemy? Tell me any of your uncle's unfriendly acquaintances."

"Positively no one, Mr. Berg, who could be in the least suspected. I'm thinking of such men as Judge Greer, who holds political views opposed to those of my uncle. And Professor Meredith, who is an enthusiastic naturalist, but who disagrees with my uncle in some of their classifications. As you see, these are not sufficient grounds for killing a man."

"Of course, not," said Hoyt. "I know those men, and their relations with Mr. Trowbridge were really friendly, though differing opinions frequently led to quarrels. Mr. Trowbridge was quick-tempered and often said sharp things, which he forgot as quickly as he uttered them."

"Yes, he did," corroborated Avice. "Why, he sometimes scolded me, and soon after was sunny and sweet again. No, I'm sure Uncle Rowland had no real enemies, surely none that would seek his death. And the fact that an Italian woman gave the

message proves to my mind that he was struck down by some horrid Italian society, – Black Hand, or whatever they call it."

"That remains to be seen," said Berg, with an air of importance. "I shall conduct an inquest tomorrow morning. It is too late to get at it tonight, and too, I want to collect a little more evidence."

"Where do you get evidence, Mr. Berg?" asked Avice, eager interest and curiosity shining in her brown eyes.

"Wherever I may pick it up. I must question the police further and I must endeavor to trace that telephone call, though that is a hard matter usually. Then, also, I must question all members of this household. As to his habits, I mean, and his whereabouts today. He left home this morning, as usual?"

"Quite as usual," broke in Mrs. Black, before Avice could reply. "I was probably the one who saw him last as he departed. I went to the door with him, and he, – he kissed me good-by." Mrs. Black's handkerchief was pressed into service, but she went on, clearly; "we were to have been married next month. Our engagement had been announced."

"And you heard nothing from Mr. Trowbridge during the day?"

"No," said Avice, taking up the tale again; "uncle told me before he left he would be home by five, as I was to help him with his work. He is a naturalist, out of office hours, and I assist with his cataloguing. Then, when he didn't come at five, I was worried, and I kept on being worried until – until – " and here

the girl broke down and buried her face again in the sofa pillows.

"And you weren't worried?" asked Coroner Berg, turning his pale blue eyes on the housekeeper.

"No," and Mrs. Black's voice was cool and composed; "I supposed he was merely detained by some business matter. I had no reason to fear any harm had come to him."

"When did *you* last see him?" went on the coroner, turning to Judge Hoyt.

"Let me see; it was – yes, it was last Friday. I was at his office consulting with him about some business, and promised to report today. But as I was called to Philadelphia today on an important matter, I wrote him that I would come here to this house to see him this evening, and give him the report he wanted."

"And you went to Philadelphia today?"

"Yes, I left there at three and reached New York at five. I intended coming here this evening, but when Miss Trowbridge telephoned me soon after six, I came right up at once."

"Well, I think I'll go now, for I may dig up something of importance at the police station, and I'll be here tomorrow for the inquest at ten or thereabouts."

As Coroner Berg left, the men from the undertaker's arrived, and the trying session with them had to be gone through.

"But I can't make arrangements about the funeral now," said poor Avice, breaking down again. "Why, I can't even realize Uncle Rowly is dead, and – "

"Never mind, my dear," said Mrs. Black, "don't try to. Go

to your room now, and leave the funeral matters to me. I will arrange everything, and Judge Hoyt will assist me with his advice."

"Indeed you won't," said Avice, spiritedly: "I suppose I am still my uncle's niece. And I prefer to be consulted about the last rites for him."

"Then stay by all means," and Mrs. Black's voice was honey-sweet. "I only meant to save you a harrowing experience." She turned to the suave young man who had with him a book of pictured caskets, and was soon deeply interested in the choice of shape, style and number of handles that seemed to her most desirable.

Avice looked at her with aversion. It seemed to the girl almost ghoulish to show such absorption in a question of the quality of black cloth, or the lettering on the name-plate.

"But it must be decided," said Mrs. Black. "Of course, we want the best of everything, and it is the last honor we can pay to dear Mr. Trowbridge. You should be very thankful, Avice, that you have me here to assist and advise you. You are too young and inexperienced to attend to these matters. Isn't that so, Judge Hoyt?"

"It seems so to me, Mrs. Black. These selections must be made, and surely you are showing good taste and judgment."

"Very well," returned Avice. "Go on, and get whatever you like. As for me, I'm far more concerned in hunting down my uncle's murderer. And I doubt if that coroner man will do it. He's

a perfect lump! He'll never find out anything!"

"Why, Avice," remonstrated Hoyt, "what could he find out tonight? It is a mysterious affair, and as we here know nothing of the crime, how could Mr. Berg discover anything from us?"

"But he has no brains, no intelligence, no ingenuity!"

"Coroners rarely have. It is their province only to question and learn the circumstances. 'Sleuthing' is what you have in mind, and that must be done by detectives."

"I know it," cried Avice, eagerly; "that's what I said at first. Oh, Leslie, won't you get the very best detectives there are and put them on the case at once?"

"Wait a moment, Avice," said Mrs. Black, coldly. "I am not sure you are in absolute authority here. I have something to say in the decisions."

"But surely, Mrs. Black, you want to spare no pains and no expense to learn who killed Uncle Rowly!"

"You talk very glibly of expense, my dear Avice. Until your uncle's will is read, how do you know who will be in a position to bear these expenses you are so ready to incur?"

Avice looked at the older woman with scorn. "I don't quite follow you," she said, slowly; "but surely, whoever inherits my uncle's fortune, owes first the duty of bringing his murderer to justice!"

Leslie Hoyt looked very grave. "As Mr. Trowbridge's lawyer," he said, "I know the contents of the will. It will be read after the funeral. Until then, I am not at liberty to disclose it. I must

go now, as I have some investigations to make myself. By the way, Avice, I brought home a Philadelphia afternoon paper, and it contains a glowing account of the début of your friend, Rosalie Banks. But, perhaps, you don't care to see it, now?"

"Yes, leave it," said Avice, apathetically; "I am fond of Rosalie and I'd like to look it over."

Hoyt found the paper where he had left it on the hall table, and gave it to her, and then with a sympathetic, but unobtrusive pressure of her hand, the lawyer went away and the doctor also.

"May I look at that Philadelphia paper a moment?" asked Mrs. Black, "I want to see an advertisement."

"Certainly, here it is," and Avice passed it over. "Just think of Rosalie having her coming-out party just now while I'm in such sadness. We were at school together, and though younger than I, she was always one of my favorites."

"You didn't care to go to the party?"

"No it was yesterday, and I had that luncheon engagement here, you know. And oh, Eleanor, isn't it fortunate I am here and not in Philadelphia!"

"Why? You can't do anything."

"I know it. But it would have been awful to be away making merry when uncle was – was breathing his last! Who *do* you suppose did it?"

"Some highway robber, of course. I always told your uncle he ought not to go off, in those lonely woods all by himself. He ran a risk every time. And now the tragedy has occurred."

"It doesn't seem like a highway robber to use a dagger. They always have a club or a – what do they call it? a blackjack."

"You seem to know a lot about such things, Avice. Well, I'm going to my room, and you'd better do the same. We've a hard day before us tomorrow. I think it's dreadful to have an inquest here. I thought they always held them in the court-room or some such place."

"They do, sometimes. Inquests are informal affairs. The coroner just asks anybody, hit or miss, anything he can think of. That's why I wish we had a cleverer coroner than that Berg person. I can't bear him."

"I don't care what he's like, if he'll only get the scene over. Shall we have to be present?"

"Gracious! You couldn't keep me away. I want to hear every word and see if there's any clue to the truth."

The two went up to their rooms, but neither could sleep. Avice sat in an easy chair by her open window, wondering and pondering as to who could have been the criminal. Mrs. Black, on the other hand, thought only of herself and her own future.

She was a very beautiful woman, with finely cut features and raven black hair, which she wore in glossy smooth waves partly over her small ears. Her eyes were large and black and her mouth was scarlet and finely curved. She was of Italian parentage, though born in America. Her husband had been a New York lawyer, but dying, left her in greatly straitened circumstances and she had gladly accepted the position of housekeeper in

the Trowbridge home. At first, she had rejected the advances of Rowland Trowbridge, thinking she preferred a younger and gayer man. But the kindness and generosity of her employer finally won her heart, or her judgment, and she had promised to marry him. It is quite certain, however, that Eleanor Black would never have come to this decision, had it not been for Rowland Trowbridge's wealth.

Late into the night, Avice sat thinking. It seemed to her that she must by some means ferret out the facts of the case, – must find the dastardly villain who killed her uncle and let justice mete out his punishment. But where to turn for knowledge, she had no idea.

Her mind turned to what Mr. Berg had said about enemies. It couldn't be possible that either of the men she had mentioned could be implicated, but mightn't there be some one else? Perhaps some one she had never heard of. Then the impulse seized her to go down to her uncle's library, and look over his recent letters. She might learn something of importance. Not for a moment did she hesitate to do this, for she knew she was the principal heir to his fortune, and the right to the house and its contents was practically hers.

And her motives were of the best and purest. All she desired was to get some hint, some clue, as to which way to look for a possible suspect.

Walking lightly, though taking no especial precautions of silence, she went slowly down stairs, and reached the door of the

library. From the hall, as she stood at the portière, she heard some one talking inside the room. Listening intently she recognized the voice of Eleanor Black at the telephone.

"Yes," Mrs. Black was saying: "keep still about it for the present, – yes, – yes, I'll do whatever you say, – but don't come here tonight. You see it was an Italian – yes, I'll meet you tomorrow at the same time and same place. No, don't call me up, – when I can, I'll call you."

Hearing the click that told of the hanging up of the receiver Avice quickly stepped aside into an alcove of the hall, where she could not be seen.

But apparently, Mrs. Black had no thought of any one near her, for she turned off the library table light she had been using, and softly went upstairs. A low hall light was sufficient illumination for this, and Avice saw her go.

After waiting a few moments, the girl went into the library, and first closing the door, she switched on the light.

Taking up the telephone, she said to the operator, "Please tell me that number I just had. I can't remember it, and I want to preserve it."

Sleepily the girl responded, telling the number and exchange.

"Thank you," said Avice, and hanging up the receiver she went to the desk and jotted down the number.

"Not that I have the least suspicion of Eleanor," she said to herself, "but if I'm going to investigate, I mustn't leave a stone unturned, especially anything so unusual as a midnight

telephoning."

And then Avice set herself to the task she had come for. But she found nothing definite or incriminating. There were some old and carefully preserved notes from men who were very evidently angry with her uncle, but they were not sufficiently strong to point to anything criminal. There was the usual collection of bills, business letters and memoranda, but nothing to interest or alarm her, and finally, growing wearied, she went back upstairs.

As she passed Mrs. Black's door it softly opened, and the lady herself, wrapped in a kimono, looked out. Her long black hair hung in two braids, and her eyes were very bright.

"Avice, where have you been? At this time of night!"

"Just down in the library, looking after some matters."

"Well, it's time you were in bed," and the door closed again.

"H'm," thought Avice, "she is afraid I heard her telephoning! That's why she's on the watch!"

And now, her momentary weariness gone, Avice was again widely awake.

"I've got to think it out," she told herself. "I don't for a minute imagine Eleanor is implicated in Uncle Rowly's death, but what was she telephoning for? And she said 'it was an Italian,' and she's Italian herself, and there's something queer. I'm glad I got that telephone number, but I doubt if I'll ever use it. It doesn't seem quite right now, though it did when I asked Central for it. I believe I'll tear it up."

But she didn't.

CHAPTER III
PINCKNEY, THE REPORTER

"There's no use mincing matters," said Mrs. Black, as she and Avice sat at breakfast next morning: "I was your uncle's promised wife and I feel that it is, therefore, my right to assume the head of the household and give orders."

Avice looked at her sadly. "I have no objection to your giving orders so long as they in no way interfere with *my* plans or wishes. But I think it would be pleasanter for us both if you were to drop that defiant air, and let us be on a more friendly footing. I quite appreciate your position here, but you must remember that though you were engaged to my uncle you were *not* married to him and that – "

"That makes no difference in reality! As his future wife, I have every right of a wife already, so far as this house is concerned. Indeed, it is already mine, by will as you are soon to find out."

"Very well, Mrs. Black," said Avice, wearily, "let's not quarrel over it. I'm sure *I* don't want this house, and I am not at all afraid that my uncle's will leaves me unprovided for. I wish the coroner would come! I long to get to work on the solution of the mystery."

"How you talk!" and Mrs. Black shuddered delicately; "I don't see how you can bear to have to do with those awful investigations!"

"Would you sit calmly down, and let the murderer go scot-free?"

"Yes, rather than mix in with that awful coroner man, and worse still, detectives!" Mrs. Black brought out the word as if she had said "scorpions."

Avice was about to make an indignant reply, when the bell rang, and the card was brought in of Mr. Pinckney, a reporter.

"Don't see him," said Mrs. Black, looking scornfully at the card.

"Indeed I shall," and Avice rose determinedly. "Why, if I don't set him straight, there's no telling what he'll print!"

Realizing this, Mrs. Black followed the girl into the library, and together they met the reporter.

"Awfully sorry to intrude," said a frank-faced, nice-voiced young man. "Often I wish I'd chosen any other career than that of a reporter. Downright good of you to see me, Miss Trowbridge, – isn't it?"

"Yes," said Avice, "I am Miss Trowbridge and this is Mrs. Black."

"What can we tell you?" said Mrs. Black, acknowledging the visitor's bow, and quickly taking the initiative. "There is so little to tell – "

"Ah, yes," and the interrupting Pinckney deliberately turned to Avice. "But you will tell me all you know, won't you? It's so annoying to the family to have details made up – and – we must get the news somehow."

His youthful, almost boyish air pleased Avice, who had thought reporters a crude, rather slangy lot, and she responded at once.

"Indeed I will Mr. Pinckney. It's horrid to have things told wrongly, especially a thing like this." Her eyes filled, and the reporter looked down at his still empty notebook.

"But, don't you see, Miss Trowbridge," he said, gently "if you tell me the details it might help in unearthing the truth, – for you don't know who did it, do you?"

"No, we don't" broke in Eleanor Black; "you'd better not try to talk Avice, dear, you are so unstrung. Let me answer Mr. Pinckney's questions."

"I'm not unstrung, Eleanor, at least not so much so that I can't talk. Mr. Pinckney, if you can be of assistance in any way of solving the mystery of my uncle's death, I shall be very grateful. The inquest will be held this morning, and I suppose, – I hope that will throw some light on it all. But just now I know of no way to look."

"Oh of course, it was a highway robber," said Mrs. Black. "There can be no doubt of it."

"But is there any proof of it?" and the reporter looked at her inquiringly. "No doubt is not sufficient, proof positive is what we want."

"Of course, we do," agreed Avice. "Just think, Mr. Pinckney, we know *nothing* but that my uncle was stabbed to death in the woods. We don't even know why he went into the woods. Though

that, of course, is probably a simple reason. He was a naturalist and went often on long tramps looking for certain specimens for his collections."

"Yes, that would explain his being there," said Pinckney, eagerly. "Did you know he was going?"

"No; on the contrary he said he would be home at five o'clock."

"He told *me* he might be home earlier," said Mrs. Black, looking sorrowful. "I expected him as early as three or four, for we were going out together. You see, Mr. Trowbridge was my fiancé."

"Ah," and Pinckney looked at her with increased interest. "Are there other members of this household?"

"No," replied Mrs. Black. "Just Mr. Trowbridge and myself, and our dear niece, Miss Trowbridge. We were a very happy family, and now – " Mrs. Black raised her handkerchief to her eyes, "and now, I am all alone."

"You two will not remain together, then?" the reportorial instinct cropped out.

"We haven't decided on anything of that sort yet," broke in Avice. "Eleanor, don't be ridiculous! Mr. Pinckney is not interested in our domestic arrangements."

"Indeed I am. The readers of *The Gazette* are all anxious to know the least details of your life and home."

"They must be disappointed then," and Avice's haughty look forbade further personal questions.

"Tell me more of the – the tragedy, then. Was the weapon found?"

"No, not that I know of," and Avice looked surprised. "I never thought of it."

"No, it was not," affirmed Mrs. Black. "The police were unable to find any weapon."

"Too bad," frowned Pinckney; "the dear public loses a thrill."

"The public? Do they care?" and Avice started.

"Rather! New Yorkers love a murder mystery if there are gruesome elements here and there."

"All I want is justice," and Avice's big, brown eyes turned full on Pinckney's face. "You know about such things. Do you suppose we can trace the murderer with so little to go on?"

"Can't tell yet. May be lots of evidence forthcoming at the inquest."

At this point Mrs. Black was called from the room by a servant, and Pinckney said quickly, "Who is she? and why don't you like her?"

For some reason, Avice did not resent the man's directness, and answered, slowly. "She is housekeeper, and was engaged to my uncle. I don't dislike her, – not altogether."

"Is she Italian? She looks so."

"Of Italian descent, yes. Why?"

"Nothing. She's a stunner for looks, but she's entirely able to take care of herself. I say, Miss Trowbridge, are you alone, – in this matter, I mean."

"In a way, I am. There is no one in the house but the housekeeper and myself. But Judge Hoyt, my uncle's lawyer, looks after all business affairs for us."

"Judge Hoyt?"

"Yes, Leslie Hoyt."

"You're fixed all right that way, then. But I say, Miss Trowbridge, I don't want you to think me impertinent, but if I can help you at all in looking about, – investigating, you know, – "

"Do you mean detecting?"

"Yes, in a small way. I've opportunities to go into the world and inquire into things that are a sealed book to you. But I suppose you'll have detectives, and all that. And any way, it's too soon to think about it. But remember, if you want any sleuthing done, – on the side, in an amateur way I'd be awfully glad to help you out."

"That's kind of you Mr. Pinckney, and I'll be glad to take advantage of your offer. But do you have to put everything in your paper?"

"Just about. Oh, of course, if I unearth anything of importance, – like a clue, you know, I'd tell the police first but I'd want the scoop for ours."

"How can there be any clues when it happened in the lonely woods? I thought clues were little things picked up off the floor, or found in people's pockets."

"Well, mightn't they pick up little things off the ground? Or find them in your uncle's pockets?"

"Do you think they will? Mr. Pinckney, you've no idea how I want to find the murderer! I never knew before that I had so much revenge in my nature, but I feel now I could devote my whole life, if need be, to tracking down that villain! I loved my uncle almost like a father. Most girls, I suppose, would be so broken up with grief that they couldn't talk like this, but I seem to find the only comfort in the thought of avenging this horrible deed!"

"Don't bank on it too much, Miss Trowbridge. They say only one murderer in six is convicted, and in only a small fraction of murders is anybody even suspected of the crime. But this case will be ferreted out, I'm sure, both because of the prominence of your uncle, and the fact that there is money enough to hire the best talent, if desired."

"Indeed it is desired! I shall, of course, inherit much of my uncle's fortune, and I would spend every penny rather than fail in the search!"

"You won't mind my reporting this conversation, will you, Miss Trowbridge? I'm here for a story, you know, – "

"Oh, must you put me in the paper? Please don't!"

"I won't put anything you won't like. But our readers want you. You know, all the men want now-a-days is a graft yarn, and the women, some inside society gos – information."

Avice would have made further objection to newspaper publicity, but people began to arrive, and, too, Pinckney was content to leave off conversation at that point.

He was young, and enthusiastic in his chosen career.

Moreover, he was canny and clever. He had further chat with Mrs. Black, and he managed to get a few words with the servants. And somehow, by hook or crook, he secured photographs of both women, and of the house, as well as of the victim of the tragedy himself.

Aside from reportorial talent, Pinckney had a taste for detective work. He was, or fancied himself, the stuff of which story-book detectives are made, and he was more than glad to have the press assignment of this case, which might give him wide range for his powers of deduction.

When Judge Hoyt arrived, he at once sought out Avice, and his fine, impassive face grew infinitely gentle as he greeted the sad-eyed girl.

In her black gown, she looked older, and her pale cheeks and drawn countenance told of a sleepless night.

"How are you dear?" asked Hoyt, taking her hands in his. "I've been so anxious about you."

"I'm all right," and Avice tried to smile bravely. "But I'm glad you've come. I feel so alone and responsible – Mr. Pinckney says I have a splendid lawyer – but I don't see anything for a lawyer to do."

"There may be. I believe the police have made quite a few discoveries, though I know nothing definite. Of course, all my legal powers are at your disposal, but I too, doubt if the criminal is ever apprehended."

"Oh, don't say that! We *must* find him! You will, won't you?"

"I'll do my best Avice. But I am a lawyer, not a detective, you know."

"But you're a judge, and you have been district attorney, and you're the greatest criminal lawyer in the state!"

"Yes, but a criminal lawyer must have a criminal to convict. Rest assured if the criminal is found, he shall have full punishment."

"Of course, but I want help to find him. I want to employ detectives and – "

"And so you shall, but wait Avice, until the inquest is over. That may bring developments. I wish I had been here in New York yesterday."

"What could you have done?"

"Perhaps nothing to prevent or help, but I would have been at your uncle's office during the day, and I would have known of his plans. Who is this Pinckney you mentioned?"

"A reporter for *The Daily Gazette*? I didn't want to see him at first, but I'm glad I did. He's going to help me detect."

"Avice, dear, 'detecting' as you call it, isn't a casual thing, to be done by anybody. It's a trade, a profession – "

"Yes, I know. But Mr. Pinckney knows something of it, and he is very kind."

"When a reporter is kind, it's only for his personal benefit. The moment crime is committed, Avice, the reporters are on the job, and they never let go of it, until all suspects are freed or sentenced. But what they learn by their 'detection' is only for their

paper; it is rarely given in testimony, or turned to real account."

"Mr. Pinckney will help me, I'm sure," Avice persisted. "And besides, he was in college with Mr. Landon, uncle's nephew out West."

"Landon? The chap you used to be in love with?" and Judge Hoyt made a wry face.

"In love! Nonsense! I'm as much in love with him now as I ever was."

"And how much is that?"

"It's so long since I've seen him, I've forgotten," and Avice, who couldn't help an occasional flash of her innate coquetry, smiled up into the stern face regarding her.

"Beg pardon, Miss Avice," said Stryker, the butler, coming toward them; "but do you want to be in the drawing-room for the – the inquest, or upstairs?"

"I want to be right near the coroner and the jury. I want to know everything that goes on. Shall we go in there now, Leslie?"

"Yes, in a moment. What do you know of Mr. Trowbridge's death, Stryker?"

"Me, Judge Hoyt? Nothing, – nothing at all, sir. How should I?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. I merely asked. Where were you yesterday afternoon, Stryker?"

"It was my day off, sir. I was out all afternoon."

"Oh, all right. Don't take my question too seriously." Hoyt spoke kindly, for the butler showed considerable agitation. He

started to say something, paused, stammered, and finally burst out with, "*I* didn't kill him, Sir!"

"Good Lord, Stryker, nobody thought you did! But don't show such a scared face to the coroner when he questions you, or he may think all sorts of things."

"What c – could he think?"

"Nothing that I know of. By the way, Stryker, now that Mr. Trowbridge is gone, you can take out that insurance policy, can't you?"

"Oh, Mr. Hoyt, don't speak of such things now!" and the old butler fairly wrung his hands.

"All right, I won't. But when you want to talk it over, come to me. Is that your Pinckney, Avice, talking to Mrs. Black?"

"Yes; why, he's interviewing her! See his notebook. She is telling him lots!"

"He's getting what they call a 'sob story.' She's working on his sympathies by pathetic tales of her loss. How does she treat you? All right?"

"Yes, except that she wants to be head of the house, and – "

"That will settle itself. You won't stay here, dear, you will come to me. We will – "

"Please don't talk like that now. I can't bear it." Avice's brave, determined air forsook her, and with quivering lip, she looked imploringly at the man who gazed passionately into her troubled eyes.

"Forgive me, dear, I should have known better. But when I

think of you, here, alone, save for a woman who is nothing to you, I want to carry you off where I can protect you from all annoyance or trouble."

"I know you do, and I ought to feel more grateful, but I can't seem to think of anything just now but – "

"Of course, my darling, I understand, and it is all right. Only tell me what you want and I am at your orders, always and forever."

"Then come with me to the other room, stay by me, and tell me what things mean, when I don't understand. Listen, too, yourself, to everything, so you'll know just what to do when the police fail."

"Why are you so sure they will fail?"

"Because the case is all so mysterious. Because it will take a clever and skilled brain to find my uncle's murderer."

Avice spoke in low, intense tones, as if she were stirred to the very soul by her harrowing anxiety.

"Avice," said Hoyt, suddenly, "have you any suspicion of anybody – anybody at all?"

"No! oh, no! How could I have?"

"But have you?" Hoyt scanned her face closely, noting the quickly dropped eyelids and firm, set mouth.

"Not a suspicion – oh, no!"

"A premonition, then? A vague idea of any way to look?"

"No – no. No, I haven't."

The first negative was hesitating, the second, positive and

decided. It was as if she had instantly made up her mind to say nothing more.

Leslie Hoyt looked at her, and then with a gentle smile, as of one humoring a child, he said: “All right, dear. Come now with me.”

And together, they went to listen to the inquest held to determine the circumstances of the death of Rowland Trowbridge.

CHAPTER IV
THE INQUEST BEGINS

As Avice entered the drawing-room, she seemed to sense only a blur of faces. It was incredible that this should be the room where she had so often laughed and danced and sung in thoughtless joyousness of spirit. She blindly followed Judge Hoyt, and sat where he bade her, quite near the coroner and his jury.

The jurymen, though solemnly attentive to their duty, could not help their roving gaze being attracted to the splendor of their surroundings. The Trowbridge home was the perfection of quiet, old-fashioned elegance. Often Avice had wanted to introduce more modern furniture and decorations, but Mr. Trowbridge had firmly denied her requests. And so the old crystal chandeliers still drooped their festooned prisms and the massive doors were still of a soft, lusterless black, with fine gilt outlines of panelling.

Mrs. Black, too, often sighed for modern bric-a-brac and fashionable window draperies, but the will of the master was law, and the quaint Sevres vases and heavy hangings remained untouched.

Coroner Berg fairly fluttered with importance. Only lately had he been appointed to his office, and he assumed a knowing air to hide his lack of experience. He was naturally acute and shrewd,

but his mind just now was occupied more with the manner than the matter of his procedure. He had studied well his book of rules, and it was with great dignity that he called for the police report on the case.

The testimony of the chief of police and the police surgeon set forth the principal known facts, which were, however, lamentably few. Even the coroner's intelligent questions failed to bring out more than the story of the telephone message, the account of the finding of the body and the nature of the crime.

"Do you assume the assailant to have been right-handed?" Berg asked of the surgeon.

"Apparently, yes. But not necessarily so. The blade penetrated the victim's left breast, and was most likely dealt by a person standing directly facing him."

"Was the thrust directed with an upward slant or downward?"

"Neither. It was just about level. It slanted, however, toward the middle of the body, from the left side, thus practically proving a right-handed use of the weapon."

"Was death instantaneous?"

"Probably not. But it must have occurred very shortly after the blow."

Doctor Fulton, the family physician, corroborated the report of the police surgeon in all its essentials.

"Was Mr. Trowbridge in general good health, so far as you know?" asked the coroner.

"Absolutely. He was strong, hale and hearty, always. I have

known him for years, and he was never seriously ill."

"And strong?"

"Of average strength."

"Would you not judge then, he could have resisted this attack?"

"Undoubtedly he tried to do so. There is some indication of a muscular struggle. But the assumption must be that the assailant was a stronger man than the victim."

"How do you explain his contorted features, even in death?"

"By the fact that he was surprised and overpowered, and his dying struggles were so desperate as to leave their mark."

"You do not attribute the expression on the dead face to any terrific mental emotion at the moment of death?"

"It may be so. Indeed, it may be the result of both mental and physical agony."

"The point is important," said the coroner, with an impressive wave of his hand. "For if mental, it might mean that the man who attacked him was known to him; while merely physical horror would imply a robber or thug."

The jurymen wagged their heads wisely at this sapient remark, as if it opened up a new field of conjecture.

Avice was questioned next.

She was a little startled at the suddenness of the call, but responded clearly and with an entirely collected manner to all queries.

"You are Mr. Trowbridge's niece?"

"Yes, the daughter of his younger brother."

"You make your home here?"

"Yes."

"How long have you done so?"

"Since childhood. My parents died before I was ten years old."

"And you are your uncle's heiress?"

Judge Hoyt looked a little annoyed at the baldness of this question, but Avice replied, serenely, "To the extent of part of his fortune."

"Can you tell me any details of the last day of your uncle's life?"

"Very few. He left home in the morning to go to his business office quite as usual. He generally returns about five o'clock. When he did not arrive at that time, I felt anxious, and later, called Judge Hoyt on the telephone to ask if he had seen or heard of my uncle."

"Why did you call Judge Hoyt?"

"He was not only my uncle's lawyer, but his personal friend. They had business to transact at times, and I thought my uncle might possibly have gone to see him. When I learned that Judge Hoyt knew nothing of my uncle's whereabouts, I asked him to come here, as I felt decidedly uneasy and wanted some one to confer with in whom I felt confidence."

"Had Mr. Trowbridge manifested any unusual tendencies or habits of late?"

"None whatever. He has been well, happy and quite as usual

in every way."

"Can you form any opinion or have you any suspicion as to who might have committed this crime?"

"Absolutely none. But I have an unflinching determination to find out, at any expense of time, labor or money!"

The girl's voice rang out in a high, sharp tone, and she clenched her slender hands until the knuckles showed through the white skin.

"We all have that determination, Miss Trowbridge," said the coroner, a little stiffly, and after a few unimportant questions, Avice was dismissed.

Mrs. Black was called next. This time it was a case of diamond cut diamond. If the coroner was self-important, he was no more so than his witness. If he spoke with pomposity she answered with disdain, and if he was dictatorial she was arrogant.

"You are housekeeper here?" Berg began.

"That is my position, but I was also the fiancée of the late Mr. Trowbridge and should have been his wife next month, had he lived so long."

"Confine your answers, please, to the questions asked."

"Your question required two statements in reply."

"You are a beneficiary under the will of Mr. Trowbridge?"

"I have not yet heard the will read."

"Do you not know?"

"I know only what Mr. Trowbridge himself told me."

"And that was?"

"That I should inherit a handsome sum, in addition to this house and its contents."

"In the event of your being his wife?"

"In the event of his death."

"Do you know anything further than we have heard of Mr. Trowbridge's movements on the day that he met his death?"

"I do, – a little." Eleanor Black bridled and smiled sadly. The jurymen gazed in involuntary admiration, for the features of the beautiful brunette took on an added charm from that slight smile.

"What is it?"

"He telephoned to me about two o'clock, saying he would be home early and we would go out for a little motor ride. He was very fond of motoring, – with me."

The last two words were added in a lower tone that implied a most romantic attachment between these two.

"He intended to leave his office shortly after noon, then?"

"Possibly it was a little later than two that he called me up. I don't remember exactly. But he said he would be home by three or four."

"And when he did not appear were you not alarmed?"

"No, Mr. Trowbridge was so apt to have unexpected business matters turn up, that I merely supposed that was the case, and thought nothing strange of it. Nor was I surprised when he did not appear at six. I felt sure, then, that some important development in his affairs had kept him down town so late."

"Miss Trowbridge was greatly alarmed?"

"Yes."

The superb indifference of Eleanor Black's manner showed clearly that it was a matter of no moment to her if another had been anxious.

"Have you any suspicion as to who could have done this thing?"

The great black eyes of the witness turned slowly toward the coroner. At the remark about Avice she had looked carelessly in another direction.

"I think not," she said.

"Are you not sure?"

"What do you mean by suspicion?"

"Do you know of anybody who might have killed Mr. Trowbridge?"

"That's no question!" Her scorn was marked. "Hundreds of people *might* have killed him."

"Do you know of any one, then, who you think would be likely to have done so?"

"Likely to? Goodness, no."

"Who possibly did do so, then?"

"Possibly?"

"Yes, possibly. Is there any one whom you can definitely consider a possible suspect?"

"No; I don't know of any one."

The widow was a most provoking witness. She gave an impression of holding something back, yet her face wore an

ingenuous expression and she pouted a little, as if unfairly addressed.

"You were at home all day yesterday?" the coroner went on.

"Yes, I expected Mr. Trowbridge, so of course I did not go out."

"Why, Eleanor," exclaimed Avice, impulsively, "you went out for an hour soon after luncheon. Don't you know, I gave you a letter to post?"

"Oh, yes, I forgot that," and Mrs. Black looked a trifle confused. "I was sure Mr. Trowbridge wouldn't get here before three, so I ran out for a few moments."

"Where did you go?"

"Oh, nowhere in particular. I only went to get a little air. Just walking around the adjacent blocks." She spoke lightly, but her heightened color and quickened breathing betokened an embarrassment which she strove not to show, and, too, she cast a glance at Avice that was anything but friendly.

The coroner seemed unable to think of anything else to ask the witness. He looked at her thoughtfully, and she returned his glance coolly, but he questioned her no further just then.

The butler came next, and his testimony was garbled and incoherent. His emotion frequently overcame him, and he was unable to speak.

At last Judge Hoyt spoke rather sharply to him.

"Brace up, Stryker," he said. "If you can do a good turn for a master who was always kind to you, don't spoil your chance by

acting like a baby. If your betters can control themselves, surely you can."

With an effort Stryker stopped shuffling about and a few more sniffs ended his emotional outburst.

"I'm sixty years old," he said, apologetically, and, apparently, to all present, "and I've been in this same employ for fifteen years. It's natural as to how I should feel bad, ain't it, now, Mr. Coroner?"

"Yes, my man, but it's also natural that you should try to control your grief. As Judge Hoyt says, you may render assistance to your late master by your testimony. Now, tell us all you know of Mr. Trowbridge's callers of late, or any little thing that might come to your notice as a butler. Sometimes you servants have opportunities of observation not known upstairs."

"That we have, sir," and Stryker nodded his head thoughtfully. "Yes, that we have. But I know nothing, sir, nothing at all, as has a bearing on the death of the master, – no, sir, not anything."

"'Methinks the fellow doth protest too much,'" Pinckney murmured to himself. The reporter sat, with sharpened pencils, but so far he felt he had not much to work on in the way of clues. As to getting a story for his paper, he was more than satisfied. The elements of the fashionable household, a divided interest between the two women, the mysterious death of the millionaire, and now, the uncertain evidence of the old butler, all these would give him enough for a front page spread. But Pinckney wanted more than that. He wanted food for his detective instinct. He

wanted clues and evidence of a tangible nature, or at least of an indicative trend. And he had found little so far. Still, he had found some, and he had tucked away in his mind several speeches and looks, that, though not emphasized by the coroner, seemed to him to point somewhere, even if he had no idea where.

Further questions brought nothing definite from Stryker, and he was succeeded by two of the maids. These frightened creatures were even less communicative, and it was with a sigh of relief that Coroner Berg gave up all attempt to learn anything from the household, and called on Judge Hoyt, feeling sure that now he would, at least, get intelligent testimony.

The Judge was too well known to be questioned as to his identity and the coroner proceeded to ask concerning his relations with the deceased.

"Lifelong friends, almost," replied Hoyt. "We were at college together and have been more or less associated ever since. Unfortunately, I was out of town yesterday, or I might know more of Mr. Trowbridge's movements. For I had expected to see him at his office, but was prevented by an unexpected call to Philadelphia. I wrote to Mr. Trowbridge that I could not see him until evening, and as the Philadelphia matter was connected with his business, I telegraphed from there that I would call at his house last evening, and give him my report."

"And then Miss Trowbridge telephoned you?" observed the coroner, who had heard this before.

"Yes, and I came right up here, and was here when the police

telephoned of their discovery."

"Then as you can tell us nothing of yesterday's events, can you throw any light on the case by anything you know of Mr. Trowbridge's affairs in general? Had he any enemies, or any quarrel of importance?"

"No, I am sure he had no quarrel with any one who would go so far as to kill him. It seems to me it must have been the work of some of those Camorra societies."

"Why would they attack him?"

"Only for purposes of robbery, I should say. But the dagger implies or may imply an Italian, for American citizens do not go around with such weapons."

"That is true. And there may have been robbery of some valuables that we do not know of. But do you think, Judge Hoyt, that the Camorra is such a desperate menace? Are not fears of it exaggerated and unfounded?"

"There is a great deal of the real thing, Mr. Berg. When you consider that there are a million and a half Italians in America and six hundred thousand of them are in New York City, it is not surprising that many of their secret societies are represented here. Therefore, it seems to me, that circumstances point to a crime of this sort, whether for robbery or whether at the hire of some superior criminal."

"It is certainly possible that if Mr. Trowbridge was desired dead by some enemy in his own rank of life, the actual deed might have been committed by a hired crook, whether of

an Italian society or of a New York gang. And the fact of the information first coming from an Italian woman, gives plausibility to the foreign theory."

"It may be, and if so, it may prove a very difficult matter to discover the truth."

"You are right, Judge, and so far we have but the slightest shreds of evidence to work on. The articles found in the pockets of Mr. Trowbridge give absolutely no clues toward detection."

At this, Pinckney pricked up his ears. Surely there must be a hint here, if one were but bright enough to see it.

CHAPTER V
THE SWEDE

All the others present, as well as the young reporter, looked on with eager interest as the contents of the pockets were exhibited.

There were a great many articles, but all were just what might be looked for in the pockets of a well-to-do business man.

Several letters, cards, memoranda and telegrams. The usual knife, bunch of keys, pencil, watch and money. Also a small pair of folding scissors and a couple of handkerchiefs.

In a gold locket was a portrait of Mrs. Black, but there was no other jewelry.

"Perhaps some jewelry was taken," suggested a juryman, but both Avice and Mrs. Black were sure that Mr. Trowbridge had on none.

He was wearing a bow tie, and a soft shirt with its own buttons, the report informed them, so there was no occasion for studs or pin.

The letters were read, as of possible interest. There were two or three bills for personal matters. There was the letter Judge Hoyt himself had told of sending to announce his trip to Philadelphia. There was also a telegram from the Judge in Philadelphia saying,

Peddie agrees. Everything O. K. See you tonight.

Hoyt.

All of these roused little or no interest. Judge Hoyt explained that Peddie was the man with whom he was making a deal with a real estate corporation for Mr. Trowbridge, and that the matter had been successfully put through to a conclusion.

But next was shown a letter so old that it was in worn creases and fairly dropping apart. It had evidently been carried in the pocket for years. Gingerly unfolding it, Coroner Berg read a note from Professor Meredith that was angry, even vituperative. The bone of contention was the classification of a certain kind of beetle, and the letter implied that Mr. Trowbridge was ignorant and stubborn in his opinions and his method of expressing them. There was no threat of any sort, merely a scathing diatribe of less than a page in length. But it was quite evident that it had hurt Rowland Trowbridge severely, as its date proved that he had carried it around for two years.

And there was another old letter. This was from Justice Greer and was a blast on some old political matter. Here again, a strong enmity was shown, but nothing that could be construed as an intimation of revenge or even retaliation.

Still there were the two letters from decided enemies, and they must be looked into.

Avice, in her own heart, was sure they meant nothing serious. Her uncle had held these two grudges a long time, but she didn't think any recent or desperate matter had ensued.

Some newspaper clippings, most of them concerning Natural History, and a few elaborate recipes for cooking, completed the collection found in the pockets.

"Nothing in the least indicative, unless it might be those two old letters," commented the coroner.

Pinckney was disappointed. He had hoped for some clue that he could trace. Like Avice, he thought little of the old letters. Those two eminent citizens were most unlikely to murder a colleague, or even to employ a rogue to do it for them. To his mind, there was nothing enlightening in all the inquest so far. Indeed, he had almost no use for the Black Hand theory. It didn't seem convincing to him. He thought something would yet come out to give them a direction in which to look, or else the truth would never be discovered.

And then there was a commotion in the hall, and an officer came in bringing with him a big, husky-looking Swede, and a pale blue-eyed little woman.

"This is Clem Sandstrom," the officer informed the coroner. "And this is his wife. You can get their stories best from them."

The big foreigner was very ill at ease. He shuffled about, and when told where to sit, he dropped into the chair with his stolid countenance expressing an awed fear.

The woman was more composed, but seemed overwhelmed at the unaccustomed splendor of her surroundings. She gazed at the pictures and statues with round, wide eyes, and glanced timidly at Avice, as if the girl might resent her presence there.

"What is your name?" asked Berg of the big Swede.

"Clem Sandstrom, Ay bane a Swede, but Ay bane by America already two years."

"Where do you live and what do you do?"

"Ay live up in the Bronnix, and Ay work at the digging."

"Digging? Where?"

"Any digging Ay can get. Ay bane good digger."

"Well, never mind the quality of your digging. What do you know of this murder of Mr. Trowbridge?"

"Last night, Ay bane goon home, through Van Coortlandt Park wood, and Ay heerd a man groan like he was dying. Ay went to him, and Ay lift his head, but he was nigh about gone then. Ay try to hold up his head, but it drop back and he say, a few words and he fall back dead."

"How did you know he was dead?"

"Ay felt his heart to beat, and it was all still. Ay saw the blood on his clothes, and Ay know he bane stob. Ay think Italian Black Hander did it."

"And what did you do then?"

"Ay run away to my home. To my wife. Ay bane afraid the police think Ay did it."

"Did you see the police there?"

"Yes. Ay bane wait behind the bushes till they coom. Ay bane afraid of everything."

"Oh, after the man died, you waited around there till the police came?"

"Yes. Ay thought Ay must do that. Then Ay saw all the police and the dead wagon, and Ay waited more till they took the man away. Then Ay ran fast to my home."

"What did you take from the body?" Coroner Berg spoke sternly and the already frightened man trembled in his chair.

"Ay take nothing. Ay would not rob a corp. Nay, that I wouldn't."

"And you took nothing away from the place?"

The Swede hesitated. He glanced at his wife, and like an accusing Nemesis, she nodded her head it him.

"Tell the truth, Clem," she cried shrilly. "Tell about the strange bottle."

"A bottle?" asked the coroner.

"Yes, but it was of no use," Sandstrom spoke sulkily now. "It was an old milk bottle."

"A milk bottle? Then it had nothing to do with the crime."

"That's what Ay think. But the wife says to tell. The milk bottle, a pint one, was much buried in the ground."

"How did it get in so deeply? Was it put there purposely?"

"Ay tank so. It had in it – " The man made a wry face, as at a recollection.

"Well, what?"

"Ay don't know. But it smelled something very *very* bad. And molasses too."

"Molasses in it?"

"Yes, a little down in the bottom of the bottle. Such a queer

doings!"

"Have you the bottle?"

"At my home, yes. The wife make me empty the bad stuff out."

"Why?" and Berg turned to the Swedish woman.

"I think it a poison. I think the bad man kill the good man with a poison."

"Well, I don't think so. I think you two people trumped up this bottle business yourselves. It's too ridiculous to be real evidence."

The jurymen were perplexed. If these Swedes were implicated in the murder, surely they would not come and give themselves up to justice voluntarily. Yet, some reasoned that if they were afraid of the police, they might think it better to come voluntarily than to seem to hide their connection with it. It is difficult to tell the workings of the uncultured foreign intellect, and at any rate the story must be investigated, and the Swedes kept watch of.

Under the coroner's scrutiny, Sandstrom became more restless than ever. He shuffled his big feet about and his countenance worked as if in agony. The woman watched him with solicitude. Apparently, her one thought was to have him say the right thing.

Once she went over and whispered to him, but he only shook his head.

"Why did you kill the man?" the coroner suddenly shot at the witness as if to trip him.

Sandstrom looked at him stolidly. "Ay didn't kill him. Ay bane got na goon."

"He wasn't shot, he was stabbed."

"Ay bane got na knife. And Ay na kill him. Ay heerd his dyin' words." The Swede looked solemn.

"What were they?" asked the coroner, in the midst of a sudden silence.

"He said, 'Ay bane murdered! Cain killt me! Wilful murder!' and wi' them words he deed."

The simple narrative in the faulty English was dramatic and convincing. The countenance of the stolid foreigner was sad, and it might well be that he was telling the truth as he had seen and heard it.

Like an anti-climax, then, came an explosive "Gee!" from the back of the room.

People looked around annoyed, and the coroner rapped on the table in displeasure.

"You have heard this witness," he said pompously; "we have no real reason to disbelieve him. It is clear that Rowland Trowbridge was wilfully murdered by a dastardly hand, that he lived long enough to tell this, and to stigmatize as 'Cain' the murderer who struck him down."

"Gee!" came the explosive voice again; but this time in a discreet whisper.

"Silence!" roared the coroner, "another such disturbance and the culprit will be expelled from the room."

There was no further interruption and the inquiry proceeded.

Several employés of Mr. Trowbridge's office were called.

Miss Wilkinson, the stenographer, was an important young person of the blondine variety, and made the most of her testimony, which amounted to nothing. She declared that Mr. Trowbridge had been at his office as usual the day before and that she had written the average number of letters for him, none of which were in any way bearing in this case or of any import, except the regular business of her employer. Mr. Trowbridge, she said, had left the office about two o'clock, telling her he would not return that day, and bidding her go home after she had finished her routine work.

This created a mild sensation. At least, it was established that Mr. Trowbridge had gone from his office earlier than usual, though this must have been presupposed, as his body was found miles away from the city at five o'clock. But nothing further or more definite could Miss Wilkinson tell, though she was loath to leave the witness stand.

Coroner Berg was disheartened. He had a natural dislike for the "person or persons unknown" conclusion, and yet, what other one was possible? Perfunctorily, he called the office boy, who was employed in Mr. Trowbridge's private office.

A few of the audience noted that this was the youth who had remarked "Gee!" with such enthusiasm and gave him a second look for that reason.

"What is your name?"

"Fibsy, – I mean Terence McGuire."

"Why did you say Fibsy?"

"'Cause that's what I'm mostly called."

"Why?"

"'Cause I'm such a liar."

"This is no time for frivolity, young man; remember you're a witness."

"Sure! I know what that means. I ain't a goin' to lie now, you bet! I know what I'm about."

"Very well, then. What can you tell us of Mr. Trowbridge's movements yesterday?"

"A whole heap. I was on the job all day."

"What did you see or hear?"

"I seen and heard a whole lot. But I guess what'll interest you most is a visitor Mr. Trowbridge had in the mornin'."

"A visitor?"

"Yep. And they come near havin'a fight."

The audience listened breathlessly. The red-headed, freckle-faced youth, not more than sixteen, held attention as no other witness had.

It was not because of his heroic presence, or his manly bearing. Indeed, he was of the shuffling, toe-stubbing type, and by his own admission, he had gained a nickname by continual and more or less successful lying. But in spite of that, truth now shone from his blue eyes and human nature is quick to recognize the signs of honesty.

"Tell about it in your own way," said the coroner, while the reporter braced up with new hope.

"Well, Mr. Berg, it was this way. Yest'day mornin' a guy blew into the office, – "

"What time?"

"'Bout 'leven, I guess. It was 'bout an hour 'fore eats. Well, he wanted to see Mr. T. and as he was a feller that didn't seem to want to be fooled with, I slips in to Mr. T's private office an' I sez, 'Guy outside wants to see you.' 'Where's his card?' says Mr. T. 'No pasteboards,' says I, 'but he says you'll be pleased to meet him.' Well, about now, the guy, he's a big one, walks right over me and gets himself into the inner office. 'Hello, Uncle Rowly,' says he, and stands there smilin'. 'Good gracious, is this you, Kane?' says Mr. Trowbridge, kinder half pleased an' half mad. 'Yep,' says the big feller, and sits down as ca'm as you please. 'Whatter you want?' says Mr. T. 'Briefly?' says the guy, lookin' sharp at him. 'Yes,' an' Mr. T. jest snapped it out. 'Money,' says the guy. 'I thought so. How much?' an' Mr. T. shut his lips together like he always does when he's mad. 'Fifty thousand dollars,' says Friend Nephew, without the quiver of an eyelash. 'Good-morning,' says uncle s'renely, But the chap wasn't fazed. 'Greeting or farewell?' says he, smilin' like. Then Mr. T. lit into him. 'A farewell, sir!' he says, 'and the last!' But Nephew comes up smilin' once again, already, yet! 'Oh, say, now, uncle,' he begins, and then he lays out before Mr. T. the slickest minin' proposition it was ever my misfortune to listen to, when I didn't have no coin to go into it myself! But spiel as beautiful as he would, he couldn't raise answerin' delight on the face of his benefactor-to-be. He argued

an' he urged an' he kerjoled, but not a mite could he move him. At last Mr. Trowbridge, he says, 'No, Kane, I've left you that amount in my will, or I'll give it to you if you'll stay in New York city; but I *won't* give it to you to put in any confounded hole in the ground out West!' And no amount of talk changed that idea of Mr. T.'s. Well, was that nephew mad! Well, *was* he! Not ragin' or blusterin', but just a white and still sort o' mad, like he'd staked all and lost. He got up, with dignerty and he bowed a little mite sarkasterkul, and he says, "Scuse me fer troublin' you, uncle; but I know of one way to get that money. I'll telephone you when I've raised it.' And he walked out, not chop-fallen, but with a stride like Jack the Giant Killer."

Fibsy paused, and there was a long silence. The coroner was trying to digest this new testimony, that might or might not be of extreme importance.

"What was this man's name?" he said, at last.

"I don't remember his full name, sir. Seems 'sif the last name began with L, – but I wouldn't say for sure."

"And his first name?"

"Kane, sir. I heard Mr. Trowbridge call him that a heap of times, sir."

"Kane!"

"Yes, sir." And then Fibsy added, in an awed voice, "that's why I said, 'Gee'!"

The coroner looked at the expectant audience. "It seems to me," he began slowly, "that this evidence of the office boy, if

credible or not, must at least be looked into. While not wishing to leap to unwarranted conclusions, we must remember that the Swede declared that with his dying breath, Mr. Trowbridge denounced his murderer as Cain! It must be ascertained if, instead of the allusion to the first murderer, which we naturally assumed, he could have meant to designate this nephew, named Kane. Does any one present know the surname of this nephew?"

There was a stir in the back part of the room, and a man rose and came forward. He was tall and strong and walked with that free, swinging step, that suggests to those who know of such things, the memory of alfalfa and cactus. With shoulders squared and head erect, he approached the coroner at his table and said "I am Kane Landon, a nephew of the late Rowland Trowbridge."

CHAPTER VI
OUT OF THE WEST

A bomb dropped from an aeroplane could scarcely have caused greater excitement among the audience. Every eye in the room followed the tall young figure, as Kane Landon strode to the table behind which the coroner sat. That worthy official looked as if he had suddenly been bereft of all intelligence as well as power of speech. In fact, he sat and looked at the man before him, with such an alarmed expression, that one might almost have thought he was the culprit, and the new witness the accusing judge.

But Mr. Berg pulled himself together, and began his perfunctory questions.

"You are Kane Landon?"

"Yes."

"Related to Mr. Trowbridge?"

"I am the nephew of his wife, who died many years ago."

"Where do you live?"

"For the last five years I have lived in Denver, Colorado."

"And you are East on a visit?"

"I came East, hoping to persuade my uncle to finance a mining project in which I am interested."

"And which he refused to do?"

"Which he refused to do."

There was something about the young man's manner which was distinctly irritating to Coroner Berg. It was as if the stranger was laughing at him, and yet no one could show a more serious face than the witness presented. The onlookers held their breath in suspense. Avice stared at young Landon. She remembered him well. Five years ago they had been great friends, when she was fifteen and he twenty. Now, he looked much more than five years older. He was bronzed, and his powerful frame had acquired a strong, well-knit effect that told of outdoor life and much exercise. His face was hard and inscrutable of expression. He was not prepossessing, nor of an inviting demeanor, but rather repelling in aspect. His stern, clear-cut mouth showed a haughty curve and a scornful pride shone in the steely glint of his deep gray eyes. He stood erect, his hands carelessly clasped behind him, and seemed to await further questioning.

Nor did he wait long. The coroner's tongue once loosed, his queries came direct and rapid.

"Will you give an account of your movements yesterday, Mr. Landon?"

"Certainly. The narrative of my uncle's office boy is substantially true. I reached New York from the West day before yesterday. I went yesterday morning to see my uncle. I asked him for the money I wanted and he refused it. Then I went away."

"And afterward?"

"Oh, afterward, I looked about the city a bit, and went back

to my hotel for luncheon."

"And after luncheon?"

Landon's aplomb seemed suddenly to desert him. "After luncheon," he began, and paused. He shifted his weight to the other foot; he unclasped his hands and put them in his pockets; he frowned as if in a brown study and finally, his eyes fell on Avice and rested there. The girl was gazing at him with an eager, strained face, and it seemed to arrest his attention to the exclusion of all else.

"Well?" said the coroner, impatiently.

Landon's fair hair was thick and rather longer than the conventions decreed. He shook back this mane, with a defiant gesture, and said clearly, "After luncheon, I went to walk in Van Cortlandt Park."

The audience gasped. Was this the honesty of innocence or the bravado of shameless guilt?

Leslie Hoyt looked at Landon curiously. Hoyt was a clever man and quick reader of character, but this young Westerner apparently puzzled him. He seemed to take a liking to him, but reserved decision as to the justification of this attitude. Avice went white and was afraid she was going to faint. To her, the admission sounded like a confession of the crime, and it was too incredible to be believed. And yet, as she remembered Kane, it was like him to tell the truth. In their old play days, he had often told the truth, she remembered, even though to his own disadvantage. And she remembered, too, how he had

often escaped with a lighter punishment because he had been frank! Was this his idea? Had he really killed his uncle, and fearing discovery, was he trying to forestall the consequences by admission?

"Mr. Landon," went on the coroner, "that is a more or less incriminating statement. Are you aware your uncle was murdered in Van Cortlandt Park woods yesterday afternoon?"

"Yes," was the reply, but in a voice so low as to be almost inaudible.

"At what time were you there?"

"I don't know, exactly. I returned home before sundown."

"Why did you go there?"

"Because when with my uncle in the morning he happened to remark there were often good golf games played there, and as it was a beautiful afternoon, and I had nothing especial to do, I went out there."

"Why did you not go to call on your cousin, Miss Trowbridge?"

Landon glared at the speaker. "You are outside your privileges in asking that question. I decline to answer. My personal affairs in no way concern you. Kindly get to the point. Am I under suspicion of being my uncle's murderer?"

"Perhaps that is too definite a statement, but it is necessary for us to learn the truth about your implication in the matter."

"Go on, then, with your questions. But for Heaven's sake, keep to the point, and don't bring in personal or family affairs. And

incidentally, Miss Trowbridge is *not* my cousin."

The words were spoken lightly, almost flippantly, and seemed to some listeners as if meant to divert attention from the business in hand.

"But she is the niece of the late Mr. Trowbridge."

"Miss Trowbridge is the daughter of Mr. Trowbridge's brother, who died years ago. I am the nephew of Mr. Trowbridge's late wife, as I believe I have already stated."

Nobody liked the young man's manner. It was careless, indifferent, and inattentive. He stood easily, and was in no way embarrassed, but his bravado, whether real or assumed, was distasteful to those who were earnestly trying to discover the facts of the crime that had been committed. There were many who at once leaped to the conclusion that the Swede's testimony of the victim's dying words, proved conclusively that the murderer was of a necessity this young man, whose name was Kane, and who so freely admitted his presence near the scene of the tragedy.

"As you suggest, Mr. Landon," said the coroner, coldly, "we will keep to the point. When you were in Van Cortlandt Park, yesterday, did you see your uncle, Mr. Trowbridge there?"

"I did not."

The answer was given in a careless, unconcerned way that exasperated the coroner.

"Can you prove that?" he snapped out.

Landon looked at him in mild amazement, almost amusement. "Certainly not," he replied; "nor do I need to. The burden of

proof rests with you. If you suspect me of having killed my uncle, it is for you to produce proof."

Coroner Berg looked chagrined. He had never met just this sort of a witness before, and did not know quite how to treat him.

And yet Landon was respectful, serious, and polite. Indeed, one might have found it hard to say what was amiss in his attitude, but none could deny there was something. It was after all, an aloofness, a separateness, that seemed to disconnect this man with the proceedings now going on; and which was so, only because the man himself willed it.

Coroner Berg restlessly and only half-consciously sensed this state of things, and gropingly strove to fasten on some facts.

Nor were these hard to find. The facts were clear and startling enough, and were to a legal mind conclusive. There was, so far as known, no eye-witness to the murder, but murderers do not usually play to an audience.

"We have learned, Mr. Landon," the coroner said, "that you had an unsatisfactory interview with your uncle; that you did not get from him the money you desired. That, later, he was killed in a locality where you admit you were yourself. That his dying words are reported to be, 'Kane killed me! willful murder.' I ask you what you have to say in refutation of the conclusions we naturally draw from these facts?"

There was a hush over the whole room, as the answer to this arraignment was breathlessly awaited.

At last it came. Landon looked the coroner squarely in the eye,

and said: "I have this to say. That my uncle's words, – if, indeed, those were really his words, might as well refer, as you assumed at first, to any one else, as to myself. The name Cain, would, of course, mean in a general way, any one of murderous intent. The fact that my own name chances to be Kane is a mere coincidence, and in no sense a proof of my guilt."

The speaker grew more emphatic in voice and gesture as he proceeded, and this did not militate in his favor. Rather, his irritation and vehement manner prejudiced many against him. Had he been cool and collected, his declarations would have met better belief, but his agitated tones sounded like the last effort in a lost cause.

With harrowing pertinacity, the coroner quizzed and pumped the witness as to his every move of the day before. Landon was forced to admit that he had quarreled with his uncle, and left him in a fit of temper, and with a threat to get the money elsewhere.

"And did you get it?" queried the coroner at this point.

"I did not."

"Where did you hope to get it?"

"I refuse to tell you."

"Mr. Landon, your manner is not in your favor. But that is not an essential point. The charges I have enumerated are as yet unanswered: and, moreover, I am informed by one of my assistants that there is further evidence against you. Sandstrom, come forward."

The stolid-looking Swede came.

"Look at Mr. Landon," said Berg; "do you think you saw him in Van Cortlandt Park yesterday?"

"Ay tank Ay did."

"Near the scene of the murder?"

"Ay tank so."

"You lie!"

The voice that rang out was that of Fibsy, the irrepressible.

And before the coroner could remonstrate, the boy was up beside the Swede, talking to him in an earnest tone. "Clem Sandstrom," he said, "you are saying what you have been told to say! Ain't you?"

"Ay tank so," returned the imperturbable Swede.

"There!" shouted Fibsy, triumphantly; "now, wait a minute, Mr. Berg," and by the force of his own insistence Fibsy held the audience, while he pursued his own course. He drew a silver quarter from his pocket and handed it to Sandstrom. "Look at that," he cried, "look at it good!" He snatched it back. "Did you look at it good?" and he shook his fist in the other's face.

"Yes, Ay look at it good."

"All right; now tell me where the plugged hole in it was? Was it under the date, or was it over the eagle?"

The Swede thought deeply.

"Be careful, now! Where was it, old top? Over the eagle?"

"Yes. Ay tank it been over the eagle."

"You *tank* so! Don't you *know*?"

The heavy face brightened. "Yes, Ay *know*! Ay know it been

over the eagle."

"You're *sure*?"

"Yes, Ay bane sure."

"All right, pard. You see, Mr. Coroner," and Fibsy handed the quarter over to Berg, "they ain't no hole in it anywhere!"

Nor was there. Berg looked mystified. "What's it all about?" he said, helplessly.

"Why," said Fibsy, eagerly, "don't you see, if that fool Swede don't know enough to see whether there's a hole in a piece o' chink or not, he ain't no reliable witness in a murder case!"

The boy had scored. So far as the Swede's alleged recognition of Landon was evidence, it was discarded at once. Coroner Berg looked at the boy in perplexity, not realizing just how the incident of the silver quarter had come about. It was by no means his intention to allow freckle-faced office boys to interfere with his legal proceedings. He had read in a book about mal-observation and the rarity of truly remembered evidence, but he had not understood it clearly and it was only a vague idea to him. So it nettled him to have the principle put to a practical use by an impertinent urchin, who talked objectionable slang.

Judge Hoyt looked at Fibsy with growing interest. That boy had brains, he concluded, and might be more worth-while than his appearance indicated. Avice, too, took note of the bright-eyed chap, and Kane Landon, himself, smiled in open approval.

But Fibsy was in no way elated, or even conscious that he had attracted attention. He had acted on impulse; he had disbelieved

the Swede's evidence, and he had sought to disprove it by a simple experiment, which worked successfully. His assertion that the Swede had been told to say that he recognized Landon, was somewhat a chance shot.

Fibsy reasoned it out, that if Sandstrom had seen Landon in the woods, he would have recognized him sooner at the inquest, or might even have told of him before his appearance. And he knew that the police now suspected Landon, and as they were eager to make an arrest, they had persuaded the Swede that he had seen the man. Sandstrom's brain was slow and he had little comprehension. Whether guilty or innocent, he had come to the scene at his wife's orders, and might he not equally well have testified at the orders or hints of the police? At any rate, he had admitted that he had been told to say what he had said, and so he had been disqualified as a witness.

And yet, it all proved nothing, rather it left them with no definite proof of any sort. Fibsy ignored the stupid-looking Swede, and stared at the coroner, until that dignitary became a little embarrassed. Realizing that he had lessened his own importance to a degree, Berg strove to regain lost ground.

"Good work, my boy," he said, condescendingly, and with an air of dismissing the subject. "But the credibility of a witness's story must rest with the gentlemen of the jury. I understand all about those theories of psy – psychology, as they call them, but I think they are of little, if any, use in practice."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," said Judge Hoyt. "I find them very

interesting. Do *you* always see things clearly, Terence?"

"It isn't seeing clearly," said Fibsy, with an earnest face, "it's seein' true. Now, f'r instance, Mr. Coroner, is the number for six o'clock, on your watch, a figger or a VI?"

"I cannot allow this child's play," and Mr. Berg looked decidedly angry.

"But that's rather a good one," said Judge Hoyt. "Come, now, Berg, do you know which it is?"

"Certainly I do," Berg snapped out. "It's the Roman letters, VI."

"Yessir?" said Fibsy, eagerly. "An' are they right side up, or upside down, as you hold Twelve at the top?"

Berg thought a moment. "As I hold Twelve at the top, they're upside down, of course. All the numbers have their base toward the centre of the dial."

"Then the Six on your watch is VI, with the tops of the letters next the rim of the watch?"

"It is," said Berg, adding sneeringly, "would you like to see it?"

"Yessir," and Fibsy darted forward.

The coroner snapped his watch open, and after a brief glance, the boy gave a quick little wag of his head, and went back to his seat without a word.

But the man flushed a fiery red, and his pompous air deserted him.

"Were you right, Berg?" asked Judge Hoyt. "Come now, own up?"

"A very natural error," mumbled the coroner, and then Detective Groot pounced on him, demanding to see his watch.

"Why, there's no six on it at all!" he cried and then gave an uncontrollable guffaw. "There's only a round place with the second hand into it!"

"This tomfoolery must be stopped," began the coroner, but he had to pause in his speech until the ripple of merriment had subsided and the jury had realized afresh the seriousness of their purpose.

"Hold on Berg, that's a fairly good one on a coroner," said Judge Hoyt, a little severely. "Have you looked at that watch for years and didn't know there was no six on it?"

"I s'pose I have. I never thought about it."

"It does show the unreliability of testimony intended to be truthful," and Hoyt spoke thoughtfully. "Terence, how did you know Mr. Berg's watch had a second hand instead of the six numeral?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.