

Wells Carolyn

The Vanishing of Betty

Varian



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CHAPTER I

Headland Harbor

It is, of course, possible, perhaps even probable, that somewhere on this green earth there may be finer golf links or a more attractive clubhouse than those at Headland Harbor, but never hope to wring such an admission from any one of the summer colony who spend their mid-year at that particular portion of the Maine coast.

Far up above the York cliffs are more great crags and among the steepest and wildest of these localities, a few venturesome spirits saw fit to pitch their tents.

Others joined them from time to time until now, the summer population occupied nearly a hundred cottages and bungalows and there was, moreover, a fair sized and fairly appointed inn.

Many of the regulars were artists, of one sort or another, but also came the less talented in search of good fishing or merely good idling. And they found it, for the majority of the householders were people of brains as well as talent and by some mysterious management the tone of the social side of things was kept pretty much as it should be.

Wealth counted for what it was worth, and no more. Genius counted in the same way, and was never overrated. Good nature and an amusing personality were perhaps the best assets one could bring to the conservative little community, and most of the shining lights possessed those in abundance.

To many, the word harbor connotes a peaceful, serene bit of blue water, sheltered from rough winds and basking in the sunlight.

This is far from a description of Headland Harbor, whose rocky shores and deep black waters were usually wind-swept and often storm-swept to a wild picturesqueness beloved of the picture painters.

But there were some midsummer days, as now, one in late July, when the harbor waters lay serene and the sunlight dipped and danced on the tiny wavelets that broke into spray over the nearby rocks.

Because it was about the hour of noon, the clubhouse verandah was crowded with members and guests waiting for the mail, which, as always, was late.

The clubhouse, a big, low building, with lots of shiny paint and weathering shingles, was at the nearest spot consistent with safety to the shore. From it could be had a magnificent view of the great headland that named the place.

This gigantic cliff jutted out into the sea, and rising to a height of three hundred feet, the mighty crag showed a slight overhang which rendered it unscalable. The wet black rock glistened in the sunlight, as spray from the dashing breakers broke half way up its sides.

The top was a long and narrow tableland, not much more than large enough to accommodate the house that crowned the summit. There was a strip of sparse lawn on either side the old mansion, and a futile attempt at a garden, but vegetation was mostly confined to the weird, one-sided pine trees that waved the branches of their lee sides in mournful, eerie motions.

“Can’t see how any one wants to live up there in that God-forsaken shack,” said John Clark, settling more comfortably in his porch rocker and lighting a fresh cigarette.

“Oh, I think it’s great!” Mrs Blackwood disagreed with him. “So picturesque – ”

“You know, if you say ‘picturesque’ up here, you’ll be excommunicated. The thing is all right, but the word is taboo.”

“All right, then, chromoesque.”

“But it isn’t that,” Clark objected; “it’s more like an old steel engraving – ”

“Oh, not with all that color,” said Lawrence North. “It is like an engraving on a gray, cloudy day, – but today, with the bright water and vivid sunshine, it’s like a – ”

“Speak it right out!” cried Ted Landon, irrepressibly, “like a picture postcard!”

“It can’t help being like that,” Mrs Blackwood agreed, “for the postcards for sale in the office of the club are more like the reality than any picture an artist has ever made of the Headland House.”

“Of course, photographs are truer than drawings,” North said, “and that card that shows the cliff in a storm comes pretty near being a work of art.”

“The difficulty would be,” Clark observed, “to get any kind of a picture of that place that wouldn’t be a work of art. Why, the architect’s blueprints of that house would come a good deal nearer art than lots of watercolors I’ve seen in exhibitions. I’m keen on the place.”

“Who isn’t?” growled Landon, for most of the Headlanders resented the faintest disparagement of their cherished masterpiece, a joint work of nature and man.

The promontory was joined to the mainland by a mere narrow neck of rocky land, and from that point a rough road descended, over and between steep hills, reaching at last the tiny village and scattered settlement of Headland Harbor.

Headland House itself was a modified type of old world architecture. Built of rough gray stone, equipped with a few towers and turrets, pierced by deep and narrow windows, it had some effects of a French chateau and others that suggested an old English castle.

It was true to no school, it followed no definite type, yet perched on its lonely height, sharply outlined against the sky, its majestic rock foundations sweeping away from beneath it, it showed the grandeur and sublimity of a well-planned monument.

And, partly because of their real admiration, partly because of a spirit of ownership, the artist colony loved and cherished their Headland House with a jealous sensitiveness to criticism.

“Stunning thing, – from here,” John Clark said, after a few moments of further smoking and gazing; “all the same, as I stated, I shouldn’t care to live up there.”

“Too difficult of access,” Claire Blackwood said, “but, otherwise all right.”

Mrs Blackwood was a widow, young, attractive, and of a psychic turn of mind. Not enough of an occultist to make her a bore, but possessing quick and sure intuitions and claiming some slight clairvoyant powers. She dabbled in water colors, and did an occasional oil. She was long-limbed, with long fingers and long feet, and usually had a long scarf of some gauzy texture trailing about her. Of an evening or even on a dressy afternoon, she had a long panel or sash-end hanging below her short skirt, and which was frequently trodden on by blundering, inattentive feet.

Good-looking, of course, Claire Blackwood was, – she took care to be that, – but her utmost care could not make her beautiful, – much to her own chagrin. Her scarlet lips were too thin, and the angle of her jaw too hard. Yet she was handsome, and by virtue of her personality and her implicit belief in her own importance, she was the leader socially, notwithstanding the fact that the colony disclaimed any society element in its life.

“Tell us about the Headland House people, Claire. You’ve called, haven’t you?”

This from Ted Landon, who by reason of his sheer impudence was forgiven any unconventionality. No other man at the Harbor would have dreamed of addressing Mrs Blackwood by her first name.

“Yes; I’ve called. They’re delightful people.” The words said more than the tone.

“With reservations?” asked North.

“Oh, in a way. They’re quite all right, – it’s only that they’re not picture mad, – as we all are.”

“Ignorant?”

“Oh, no, – not that. Well, I’ll sketch them for you. Mr Varian is a Wall Street man, – ”

“Magnate?”

“Yes, I daresay. Wealthy, anyway. He’s big and Vandyke-bearded. Well mannered, – but a bit preoccupied, – if – ”

“Yes, we get what you mean,” said the irrepressible Ted. “Go on, – what about the daughter?”

“I haven’t come to her yet. The mother is due first. Mrs Varian is the clingiest vine I ever saw. I only saw her on parade, of course, but I’m positive that in curl-papers, she can whine and fret and fly into nervous spasms! Her husband spoils her, – he’s far too good to her, – ”

“What a lot you gathered at one interview,” murmured Lawrence North.

“That’s what I went for,” Mrs Blackwood returned, coolly. “Well. Mother Varian is wrapped up in her blossom-child. Betty is a peach, – as I know you boys will agree, – but I never saw greater idolatry in any mother than Mrs Varian shows.”

“Betty worth it?” asked John Clark, idly.

“Rather!” Mrs Blackwood assured him. “She’s a dear thing. I don’t often enthuse over young girls, but Betty Varian is unusual.”

“As how?”

“Prettier than most girls, more charm, better manners, and, – a suspicion of brains. Not enough to hurt her, but enough to make it a pleasure to talk to her. Moreover, she’s a wilful, spoiled, petted darling of two worshipping parents, and it’s greatly to her credit that she isn’t an arrogant, impossible chit.”

“Sounds good to me,” commented Ted; “when can I meet her?”

“I’ll introduce you soon. They want to meet some of our best people – ”

“Of course. That lets me in at once. When will you take me?”

“Tomorrow afternoon. They’re having a small picnic and they asked me to bring two amusing young men.”

“May I go?” asked Lawrence North.

“*Young* men, I said,” and Mrs Blackwood looked at him calmly. “You are old enough to be Betty Varian’s father!”

“Well, since I’m not, that needn’t prevent my meeting her.”

“So you shall, some time. But I’m to take two tomorrow, and, – what do you think? I said I would bring Rodney Granniss, and Mr Varian said, ‘No, he’d rather I asked some one in his place!’”

“Why, for heaven’s sake?” cried Landon. “Rod’s our star performer.”

“Well, you see, they know him – ”

“All the more reason – ”

“Oh, it’s this way. Rod Granniss is already a beau of Betty’s, – and her father doesn’t approve of the acquaintance.”

“Not approve of Granniss!” John Clark looked his amazement. “Mr Varian must be an old fuss!”

“I think that’s just what he is,” assented Claire Blackwood, and then Ted Landon urged,

“You haven’t described the siren yet. What’s she like to look at?”

“A little thing, sylphish, rather, – dainty ways, quick, alert motions, and with the biggest gray eyes you ever saw, – edged with black.”

“Raving tresses?”

“No; very dark brown, I think. But the liveliest coloring. Red-under-brown cheeks, scarlet lips and – ”

“I know, – teeth like pearls.”

“No; good, sound, white teeth, and fluttering hands that emphasize and illustrate all she says.”

“All right, she’ll do,” and Ted looked satisfied. “I can cut out old John here, and if Granniss is barred, I’ll have a cinch!”

“You must behave yourself, – at first, anyway, because I am responsible for you. Be ready to go up there with me at four tomorrow afternoon.”

“Leave here at four?”

“Yes, we’ll walk up. A bit of a climb, but motors can go only to the lodge, you know, and that’s not worth while.”

The porter’s lodge belonging to Headland House was partly visible from the clubhouse, and it guarded the gates that gave ingress to the estate. There was no other mode of entrance, for a high wall ran completely across the narrow neck that joined the headland to the main shore, and all other sides of the precipitous cliff ran straight down to the sea.

From where they sat the group could discern the motor road as far as the lodge; and here and there above that could be glimpsed the narrow, tortuous path that led on to the house.

“Grim old pile,” Landon said, looking at Headland House. “Any spook connected with its history?”

“I never heard of any,” said Mrs Blackwood. “Did you, Mr North?”

“Not definitely, but I’ve heard vague rumors of old legends or traditions of dark deeds – ”

“Oh, pshaw, I don’t believe it!” and Mrs Blackwood shook her head at him. “You’re making that up to lend an added interest!”

North grinned. “I’m afraid I was,” he admitted, “but if there isn’t any legend there surely ought to be. Let’s make one up.”

“No, I won’t have it. I hate haunted houses, and I shan’t allow a ghost to be invented. The place is too beautiful to have a foolish, hackneyed old ghost yarn attached to it. Just because you were up here last summer and this is the first year for most of us, you needn’t think you can rule the roost!”

“Very well,” Lawrence North smiled good-naturedly, “have it your own way. But, truly, I heard rumors last year – ”

“Keep them to yourself, then, and when you meet the Varians, as of course you will, don’t say anything to them about such a thing.”

“Your word is law,” and North bowed, submissively. “Here comes the mail at last, and also, here comes Granniss, – the disapproved one!”

A tall outdoorsy-looking young man appeared, and throwing himself into a piazza swing, asked breezily, “Who’s disapproving of me, now? Somebody with absolute lack of fine perception!”

“Nobody here,” began Landon, and then a warning glance from Claire Blackwood prevented his further disclosures on the subject.

“Don’t make a secret of it,” went on Granniss, “own up now, who’s been knocking poor little me?”

“I,” said Mrs Blackwood, coolly.

“Nixy, Madame Claire! You may disapprove of me, but you’re not the one I mean. Who else?”

“Oh, let’s tell him,” North laughed; “he can stand the shock. They say, Granniss, you’re *persona non grata* up at the house on the headland.”

Rodney Granniss’ eyes darkened and he looked annoyed. But he only said, “That’s a disapproval any one may obtain by the simple process of admiring Miss Varian.”

“Really?” asked Claire Blackwood.

“Very really. To call twice is to incur the displeasure of one or both parents; to venture a third time is to be crossed out of the guest book entirely.”

“But, look here, old man,” Landon said, “they’ve only been in that house about a week. Haven’t you been rushing things?”

“I knew them before,” said Granniss, simply. “I’ve met them in New York.”

“Oh, well, then their dislike of you is evidently well-founded!”

But this impudence of Landon’s brought forth no expression of resentment from its victim. Granniss only winked at Ted, and proceeded to look over his letters.

It was the first time in the memory of any of the present *habitués* of Headland Harbor, that the house on the rocks had been occupied. Built long ago, it was so difficult of access and so high priced

of rental that no one had cared to live in it. But, suddenly, and for no known reason, this summer it had been rented, late, and now, toward the end of July, the new tenants were only fairly settled.

That their name was Varian was about all that was known of them, until Mrs Blackwood's call had been hospitably received and she brought back favorable reports of the family.

It seems Betty was anxious to meet some young people and Mrs Varian was glad to learn from her caller that small picnics were among the favored modes of entertainment, and she decided to begin that way.

Next day, she explained, a few house guests would arrive, and if Mrs Blackwood would bring two or three young men and come herself, perhaps that would be enough for a first attempt at sociability.

This met Mrs Blackwood's entire approval, and she proposed Rodney Granniss' name, all unsuspecting that he would not be welcomed.

"He's all right, you understand," Mrs Varian had said, – Betty not being then present, – "but he's too fond of my daughter. You can tell, – you know, – and I want the child to have a good time, but I want her to have a lot of young acquaintances, and be friendly with all, but not specially interested in any one. Her father feels the same way, – in fact, he feels more strongly about it even than I do. So, this time, please leave Mr Granniss out of it."

This was all plausible enough, and no real disparagement to Rodney, so Mrs Blackwood agreed.

"Can I do anything for you?" she asked her hostess at parting. "Have you everything you want? Are your servants satisfactory?"

"Not in every respect," – Mrs Varian frowned. "But we're lucky to keep them at all. Only by the most outrageous concessions, I assure you. If they get too overbearing, I may have to let some of them go."

"Let me know, in that case, and I may be able to help you," and with a few further amenities, Claire Blackwood went away.

"But if I were one of her servants I shouldn't stay with her!" she confided later to a trusted friend. "I never saw a more foolishly emotional woman. She almost wept when she told me about her cook's ingratitude! As if any one looked for appreciation of favors in a cook! And when she talked about Betty, she bubbled over with such enthusiasm that she was again moved to tears! It seems her first two little ones died very young, and I think they've always feared they mightn't raise Betty. Hence the spoiling process."

"And it also explains," observed the interested friend, "why the parents discountenance the attentions of would-be swains."

"Of course, – but Betty is twenty, and that is surely old enough to begin to think about such things seriously."

"For the girl, – yes. And doubtless she does. But parents never realize that their infants are growing up. It is not impossible that Rod Granniss and Miss Betty have progressed much further along the road to Arcady than her elders may suspect. Why did the Varians come here, – where Rod is?"

"I don't suppose they knew it, – though, maybe Betty did. Young people are pretty sharp. And you know, Rod was here in June, then he went away and only returned after the Varians arrived. Yes, there must have been some sort of collusion on the part of the youngsters."

"Maybe not. I daresay Miss Betty has lots of admirers as devoted as young Granniss. Can't you ask me to the picnic?"

"Not this one. It's very small. And there are to be some guests at the house, I believe. The family interests me. They are types, I think. Betty is more than an ordinary flutterbudget, like most of the very young girls around here. And the older Varians are really worth while. Mr Varian is a brooding, self-contained sort, – I feel sorry for him."

"There, there, that will do, Claire! When you feel sorry for a man – I remember you began by being sorry for Lawrence North!"

“I’m sorry for him still. He’s a big man, – in a way, a genius, – and yet he –”

“He gets nowhere! That’s because he *isn’t* a genius! But he’s a widower, so he’s fair quarry. Don’t go to feeling sorry for married men.”

“Oh, there’s no sentiment in my sympathy for Mr Varian. Only he intrigues me because of his restless air, – his restrained effect, as if he were using every effort to keep himself from breaking through!”

“Breaking through what?”

“I don’t know! Through some barrier, some limit that he has fixed for himself – I tell you I don’t *know* what it’s all about. That’s why I’m interested.”

“Curious, you mean.”

“Well, curious, then. And how he puts up with that hand-wringing ready-to-cry wife! Yet, he’s fawningly devoted to her! He anticipates her slightest wish, – he is worried sick if she is the least mite incommoded or disturbed, – and I know he’d lie down and let her walk on him if she even looked as if she’d care to!”

“What a lot you read into a man’s natural consideration for his wife!”

“But it’s there! I’m no fool, – I can read people, – you know that! I tell you that man is under his wife’s thumb for some reason far more potent than his love for her, or her demand for affection from him.”

“What *could* be the explanation?”

“I don’t know. That’s why I’m curious. I’m going to find out, though, and that without the Varians in the least suspecting my efforts. Wait till you see her. She’s almost eerie, she’s so emotional. Not noisy or even verbally expressive, but her face is a study in nervous excitement. She seems to grab at the heartstrings of a mere passer-by, and play on them until she tears them out!”

“Good gracious, you make her out a vampire!”

“I think she is, – not a silly vamp, that the girls joke about, – but the real thing!”

CHAPTER II

Betty Varian

“Dad, you’re absolutely impossible!”

“Oh, come now, Betty, not as bad as that! Just because I don’t agree to everything you say – ”

“But you *never* agree with me! You seem to be opposed on principle to everything I suggest or want. It’s always been like that! From the time I was born, – how old was I, Dad, when you first saw me?”

Mr Varian looked reminiscent.

“About an hour old, I think,” he replied; “maybe a little less.”

“Well, from that moment until this, you have persistently taken the opposite side in any discussion we have had.”

“But if I hadn’t, Betty, there would have been no discussion! And, usually there hasn’t been. You’re a spoiled baby, – you always have been and always will be. Your will is strong and as it has almost never been thwarted or even curbed, you have grown up a headstrong, wilful, perverse young woman, and I’m sure I don’t know what to do with you!”

“Get rid of me, Dad,” Betty’s laugh rang out, while her looks quite belied the rather terrible character just ascribed to her.

One foot tucked under her, she sat in a veranda swing, now and then touching her toe to the floor to keep swaying. She wore a sand-colored sport suit whose matching hat lay beside her on the floor.

Her vivid, laughing face, with its big gray eyes and pink cheeks, its scarlet lips and white teeth was framed by a mop of dark brown wavy hair, now tossed by the strong breeze from the sea.

The veranda overlooked the ocean, and the sunlit waves, stretching far away from the great cliff were dotted in the foreground with small craft.

Frederick Varian sat on the veranda rail, a big, rather splendid-looking man, with the early gray of fifty years showing in his hair and carefully trimmed Vandyke beard.

His air was naturally confident and self-assured, but in the face of this chit of a girl he somehow found himself at a disadvantage.

“Betty, dear,” he took another tack, “can’t you understand the fatherly love that cannot bear the idea of parting with a beloved daughter?”

“Oh, yes, but a father’s love ought to think what is for that daughter’s happiness. Then he ought to make the gigantic self-sacrifice that may be necessary.”

A dimple came into Betty’s cheek, and she smiled roguishly, yet with a canny eye toward the effect she was making.

But Varian looked moodily out over the sea.

“I won’t have it,” he said, sternly. “I suppose I have some authority in this matter and I forbid you to encourage any young man to the point of a proposal, or even to think of becoming engaged.”

“How can I ward off a proposal, Dad?” Betty inquired, with an innocent air.

“Don’t be foolish. Of course you can do that. Any girl with your intelligence knows just when an acquaintance crosses the line of mere friendship – ”

“Oh, Daddy, you are *too* funny! And when you crossed the line of mere friendship with mother, – what did she do?”

“That has nothing to do with the subject. Now, mind, Betty, I am not jesting, – I am not talking idly – ”

“You sound very much like it!”

“I’m not. I’m very much in earnest. You are not to encourage the definite attentions of any – ”

“All right, let Rod Granniss come up here then, and I promise not to encourage him.”

“He shall not come up here, because he has already gone too far, and you have encouraged him too much – ”

“But I love him, Daddy, – and – and I think you might – ”

“Hush! That’s enough! Don’t let me hear another word now or ever regarding Granniss! He is crossed off our acquaintance, and if he persists in staying here, we will go away!”

“Why, Father, we’ve only just come!”

“I know it, and I came here, thinking to get you away from that man. He followed us up here, – ”

“He was here before we came!”

“But he didn’t come until he knew we were coming.”

“All right, he came because he wanted to be where I am. And I want to be where he is. And you’d better be careful, Father, or I may take the bit in my teeth and – ”

“And run off with him? That’s why I came here. You can’t get away. You perfectly well know that there’s no way down from this house but by that one narrow path, – I suppose you’ve no intention of jumping into the sea?”

“Love will find a way!” Betty sang, saucily.

“It isn’t love, Betty. It’s a miserable childish infatuation that will pass at once, if you lose sight of the chap for a short time.”

“Nothing of the sort! It’s the love of my life!”

Varian laughed. “That’s a fine-sounding phrase, but it doesn’t mean anything. Now, child, be reasonable. Give up Granniss. Be friends with all the young people up here, boys and girls both, but don’t let me hear any foolishness about being engaged to anybody.”

“Do you mean for me never to marry, Father?”

“I’d rather you didn’t, my dear. Can’t you be content to spend your days with your devoted parents? Think what we’ve done for you? What we’ve given you, – ”

“Dad, you make me tired! What have you given me, what have you done for me, more than any parents do for a child? You’ve given me a home, food and clothing, – and loving care! What else? And what do I owe you for that, except my own love and gratitude? But I don’t owe you the sacrifice of the natural, normal, expectation of a home and husband of my own! I’m twenty, – that’s quite old enough to think of such things. Pray remember how old mother was when she married you. She was nineteen. Suppose her father had talked to her as you’re talking to me! What would you have said to him, I’d like to know!”

By this time Fred Varian was walking with quick short strides up and down the veranda. Betty rose and faced him, standing directly in his path.

“Father,” she said, speaking seriously, “you are all wrong! You don’t know what you’re talking about – ”

“That will do, Betty!” When Varian’s temper was roused he could speak very harshly, and did so now. “Hush! I will not hear such words from you! How dare you tell me I don’t know what I’m talking about! Now you make up your mind to obey me, or I’ll cut off all your association with the young people! I’ll shut you up – ”

“Hush, yourself, Dad! You’re talking rubbish, and you know it! Shut me up! In a turret of the castle, I suppose! On bread and water, I suppose! What kind of nonsense is that?”

“You’ll see whether it’s nonsense or not! What do you suppose I took this isolated place for, except to keep you here if you grow too independent! Do you know there is no way you can escape if I choose to make you a prisoner? And if that’s the only way to break your spirit, I’ll do it!”

“Why, Father Varian!” Betty looked a little scared, “whatever has come over you?”

“I’ve made up my mind, that’s all. For twenty years I’ve humored you and indulged you and acceded to your every wish. You’ve been petted and spoiled until you think you are the only dictator in this family! Now a time has come when I have put my foot down – ”

“Well, pick it up again, Daddy, and all will be forgiven.”

Betty smiled and attempted to kiss the belligerent face looking down at her.

But Frederick Varian repulsed the offered caress and said, sternly:

“I want no affection from a wilful, disobedient child! Give me your word, Betty, to respect my wishes, and I’ll always be glad of your loving ways.”

But Betty was angry now.

“I’ll give you no such promise! I shall conduct myself as I please with my friends and my acquaintances. You know me well enough to know that I never do anything that is in bad form or in bad taste. If I choose to flirt with the young men, or even, as you call it, encourage them, I propose to do so! And I resent your interference, and I deny your right to forbid me in such matters. And, too, I’ll go so far as to warn you that if you persist in this queer attitude you’ve taken, – you’ll be sorry! Remember that!”

Betty’s eyes flashed, but she was quiet rather than excited.

Varian himself was nervous and agitated. His fingers clenched and his lips trembled with the intensity of his feelings and as Betty voiced her rebellious thoughts he stared at her in amazement.

“What *are* you two quarreling about?” came the surprised accents of Mrs Varian as she came out through the French window from the library and looked curiously at them.

“Oh, Mother,” Betty cried, “Dad’s gone nutty! He says I never can marry anybody.”

“What nonsense, Fred”; she did not take it at all seriously. “Of course, Betty will marry some day, but not yet. Don’t bother about it at present.”

“But Daddy’s bothering very much about it at present. At least, he’s bothering me, – don’t let little Betty be bothered, Mummy, – will you?”

“Let her alone, Fred. Why do you tease the child? I declare you two are always at odds over something!”

“No, Minna, that’s not so. I always indulge Betty – ”

“Oh, yes, after I’ve coaxed you to do so. You’re an unnatural father, Fred, you seem possessed to frown on all Betty’s innocent pleasures.”

“I don’t want her getting married and going off and leaving us – ” he growled, still looking angry.

“Well, the baby isn’t even engaged yet, – don’t begin to worry. And, too, that is in the mother’s province.”

“Not entirely. I rather guess a father has some authority!”

“Oh, yes, if it’s exercised with loving care and discretion. Don’t you bother, Betty, anyway. Father and mother will settle this little argument by ourselves.”

“I’d rather settle it with Dad,” Betty declared spiritedly. “It’s too ridiculous for him to take the stand that I shall never marry! I’m willing to promise not to become engaged without asking you both first; I’m willing to say I won’t marry a man you can convince me is unworthy; I’m willing to promise anything in reason, – but a blind promise never to marry is too much to ask of any girl!”

“Of course, it is!” agreed Mrs Varian. “Why do you talk to her like that, Fred?”

“Because I propose to have my own way for once! I’ve given in to you two in every particular for twenty years or more. Now, I assert myself. I say Betty shall not marry, and I shall see to it that she does not!”

“Oh, my heavens!” and Mrs Varian wrung her hands, with a wail of nervous pettishness, “sometimes, Fred, I think you’re crazy! At any rate, you’ll set me crazy, if you talk like that! Do stop this quarrel anyhow. Kiss and make up, won’t you? To think of you two, the only human beings on earth that I care a rap for, acting like this! My husband and my child! The only things I live for! The apple of my eye, the core of my soul, both of you, – can’t you see how you distress me when you are at odds! And you’re always at odds! Always squabbling over some little thing. But, heretofore, you’ve always laughed and agreed, finally. Now forget this foolishness, – do!”

“It isn’t foolishness,” and Varian set his lips together, doggedly.

“No, it isn’t foolishness,” said Betty quietly, but with a look of indomitable determination.

“Well, stop it, at any rate,” begged Mrs Varian, “if you don’t I shall go into hysterics, – and it’s time now for the Herberts to come.”

Now both Fred and Betty knew that a suggestion of hysterics was no idle threat, for Minna Varian could achieve the most annoying demonstrations of that sort at a moment’s notice. And it was quite true that the expected guests were imminent.

But no truce was put into words, for just then a party of three people came in sight and neared the veranda steps.

The three were Frederick Varian’s brother Herbert and his wife and daughter. This family was called the Herberts to distinguish them from the Frederick Varian household.

The daughter, Eleanor, was a year or two younger than Betty, and the girls were friendly, though of widely differing tastes; the brothers Varian were much alike; but the two matrons were as opposite as it is possible for two women to be. Mrs Herbert was a strong character, almost strong-minded. She had no patience with her sister-in-law’s nerves or hysterical tendencies. It would indeed be awkward if the Herberts were to arrive in the midst of one of Mrs Frederick’s exhibitions of temperamental disturbance.

“Wonderful place!” exclaimed Herbert Varian as they ascended the steps to the verandah. “Great, old boy! I never saw anything like it.”

“Reminds me of the Prisoner of Chillon or the Castle of Otranto or – ” said Mrs Herbert.

“Climbing that steep path reminded me of the Solitary Horseman,” Herbert interrupted his wife. “Whew! let me sit down! I’m too weighty a person to visit your castled crag of Drachenfels very often! Whew!”

“Poor Uncle Herbert,” cooed Betty; “it’s an awful long, steep pull, isn’t it? Get your breath, and I’ll get you some nice, cool fruit punch. Come on, Eleanor, help me; the servants are gone to the circus, – every last one of ’em – ”

“Oh, I thought you were having a party here this afternoon,” Eleanor said, as she went with Betty.

“Not a party, a picnic. They’re the proper caper up here. And only a little one. The baskets are all ready, and the men carry them, – then we go to a lovely picnic place, – not very far, – and we all help get the supper. You see, up here, if you don’t let the servants go off skylarking every so often, they leave.”

“I should think they would!” exclaimed Eleanor, earnestly; “I’m ready to leave now! How do you stand it, Betty? I think it’s fearful!”

“Oh, it isn’t the sort of thing you’d like, I know. Put those glasses on that tray, will you, Nell? But I love this wild, craggy place, it’s like an eagle’s eyrie, and I adore the solitude, – especially as there are plenty of people, and a golf club and an artist colony and all sorts of nice things in easy distance.”

“You mean that little village or settlement we came through on the way from the station?”

“Yes; and a few of their choicest inhabitants are coming up this afternoon for our picnic.”

“That sounds better,” Eleanor sighed, “but I’d never want to stay here. Is Rod Grannis here? Is that why you came?”

“Hush, Nell. Don’t mention Rod’s name, at least, not before Father. You see, Dad’s down on him.”

“Down on Rod! Why for?”

“Only because he’s too fond of little Betty.”

“Who is? Rod or your father?”

Betty laughed. “Both of ’em! But, I mean, Dad is down on any young man who’s specially interested in me.”

“Oh, I know. So is my father. I don’t let it bother me. Fathers are all like that. Most of the girls I know say so.”

“Yes, I know it’s a fatherly failing; but Dad is especially rabid on the subject. There you take the basket of cakes and I’ll carry the tray.”

It was nearly five o’clock when the picnic party was finally ready to start for its junketing.

Mrs Blackwood had arrived, bringing her two promised young men, Ted Landon and John Clark.

Rearranged in picnic garb, the house guests were ready for the fun, and the Frederick Varians were getting together and looking over the baskets of supper.

“If we could only have kept one helper by us,” bemoaned Minna Varian, her speech accompanied by her usual wringing of her distressed hands. “I begged Kelly to stay but he wouldn’t.”

“The circus is here only one day, you know, Mrs Varian,” Landon told her, “and I fancy every servant in Headland Harbor has gone to it. But command me – ”

“Indeed, we will,” put in Betty; “carry this, please, and, Uncle Herbert, you take this coffee paraphernalia.”

Divided among the willing hands, the luggage was not too burdensome, and the cavalcade prepared to start.

“No fear of burglars, I take it,” said Herbert, as his brother closed the front door and shook it to be sure it was fastened.

“Not a bit,” and Frederick Varian took up his own baskets. “No one can possibly reach this house, save through that gate down by the lodge. And that is locked. Also the windows and doors of the house are all fastened. So if you people have left jewelry on your dressing tables, don’t be alarmed, you’ll find it there on your return.”

“All aboard!” shouted Landon, and they started, by twos or threes, but in a moment were obliged to walk single file down the steep and narrow path.

“Oh, my heavens!” cried Betty, suddenly, “I must go back! I’ve forgotten my camera. Let me take your key, Father, I’ll run and get it in a minute!”

“I’ll go and get it for you, Betty,” said Varian, setting down his burden.

“No, Dad, you can’t; it’s in a closet, behind a lot of other things, and you’d upset the whole lot into a dreadful mess. I know you!”

“Let me go, Miss Varian,” offered several of the others, but Betty was insistent.

“No one can get it but myself, – at least, not without a lot of delay and trouble. Give me the key, Father, I’ll be right back.”

“But, Betty – ”

“Oh, give her the key, Fred!” exclaimed his wife; “don’t torment the child! I believe you enjoy teasing her! There, take the key, Betty, and run along. Hurry, do, for it’s annoying to have to wait for you.”

“Let me go with you,” asked John Clark, but Betty smiled a refusal and ran off alone.

Most of them watched the lithe, slight figure, as she bounded up the rugged, irregular steps, sometimes two of them at a time, and at last they saw her fitting the key into the front door.

She called back a few words, but the distance was too great for them to hear her clearly, although they could see her.

She waved her hand, smilingly, and disappeared inside the house, leaving the door wide open behind her.

“Extraordinary place!” Herbert Varian said, taking in the marvelous crag from this new viewpoint.

“You must see it from the clubhouse,” said Landon; “can’t you all come here tomorrow afternoon, on my invite?”

“We’ll see,” Mrs Varian smiled at him, for it was impossible not to like this frank, good-looking youth.

The conversation was entirely of the wonders and beauties of Headland House, until at last, Mrs Blackwood said, “Isn’t that child gone a long while? I could have found half a dozen cameras by this time!”

“She is a long time,” Frederick Varian said, frowning; “I was just thinking that myself. I think I’ll go after her.”

“No, don’t,” said his wife, nervously, “you’ll get into an argument with her, and never get back! Let her alone, – she’ll be here in a minute.”

But the minutes went by, and Betty didn’t reappear in the open doorway.

“I know what she’s up to,” and Frederick Varian shook his head, in annoyance.

Whereupon Mrs Frederick began to cry.

“Now, Fred, stop,” she said; “Herbert, you go up to the house and tell Betty to come along. If she can’t find her camera, tell her to come without it. I wish we had a megaphone so we could call her. Go on, Herbert.”

“Stay where you are, Herbert,” said his brother. “I shall go. It’s all right, Minna, I won’t tease the child, – I promise you. It’s all right, dear.”

He kissed his wife lightly on the brow, and started off at a swinging pace up the rocky flight of steps.

“I’ll fetch her,” he called back, as he proceeded beyond hearing distance. “Chirk up, Minna, Janet; tell her I shan’t abuse Betty.”

“What does he mean by that?” asked Mrs Herbert of Mrs Frederick, as she repeated the message.

“Oh, nothing,” and Mrs Frederick clasped her hands resignedly. “Only you know how Betty and her father are always more or less at odds. I don’t know why it is, – they’re devoted to each other, yet they’re always quarreling.”

“They don’t mean anything,” and her sister-in-law smiled. “I know them both, and they’re an ideal father and daughter.”

CHAPTER III

The Tragedy

Doctor Herbert Varian stood slightly apart from the rest of the group, his observant eyes taking in all the details of the peculiar situation of his brother's house. His eye traversed back over the short distance they had already come, and he saw a narrow, winding and exceedingly steep path. At intervals it was a succession of broken, irregular steps, rocky and sharp-edged. Again, it would be a fairly easy, though stony footway. But it led to the house, and had no branch or side track in any direction.

"Everything and everybody that comes to this house has to come by this path?" he demanded.

"Yes," said Minna Varian, and added, complainingly, "a most disagreeable arrangement. All the servants and tradespeople have to use it as well as ourselves and our guests."

"That could be remedied," suggested Varian, "a branch, say –"

"We'll never do it," said Minna, sharply. "I don't like the place well enough to buy it, though that is what Fred has in mind –"

"No, don't buy it," advised her brother-in-law. "I see nothing in its favor except its wonderful beauty and strange, weird charm. That's a good deal, I admit, but not enough for a comfortable summer home."

He turned and gazed out over the open sea. From the high headland the view was unsurpassable. The few nearby boats seemed lost in the great expanse of waters. Some chugging motor boats and a dozen or so sailing craft ventured not very far from shore. North, along the Maine coast, he saw only more rocky promontories and rockbound inlets.

Turning slowly toward the South, he saw the graceful curve of Headland Harbor, with its grouped village houses and spreading array of summer cottages.

"I never saw anything finer," he declared. "I almost think, Minna, after all, you would be wise to buy the place, and then, arrange to make it more getatable. A continuous flight of strong wooden steps –"

"Would spoil the whole thing!" exclaimed Claire Blackwood. "Oh, Doctor Varian, don't propose anything like that! We Harborers love this place, just as it is, and we would defend it against any such innovations. I think there's a law about defacing natural scenery."

"Don't bother," said Minna, carelessly; "we'll never do anything of the sort. I won't agree to it."

"That's right," said her sister-in-law. "This is no place to bring up Betty. The girl has no real society here, no advantages, no scope. She'll become a savage –"

"Not Betty," Minna Varian laughed. "She's outdoor-loving and all that, but she has nothing of the barbarian in her. I think she'd like to go to a far gayer resort. But her father –"

"Where is her father?" asked Doctor Varian, impatiently. "It will be dark before we get to our picnic. Why don't they come?"

He gave a loud view-halloo, but only the echoes from the rocky heights answered him.

"I knew it!" and Minna Varian began to wring her hands. "He and Betty are quarreling, – I am sure of it!"

"What do you mean, Min? What's this quarreling business about?"

"They've always done it, – it's nothing new. They adore each other, but they're eternally disagreeing and fighting it out. They're quite capable of forgetting all about us, and arguing out some foolish subject while we sit here waiting for them!"

"I'll go and stir them up," the doctor said, starting in the direction of the house.

"Oh, no, Herbert. It's a hard climb, and you've enough walking ahead of you."

"I'll go," and Ted Landon looked inquiringly at Mrs Varian.

"Oh, what's the use?" she said; "they'll surely appear in a minute."

So they all waited a few minutes longer and then Janet Varian spoke up.

“I think it’s a shame to keep us here like this. Go on up to the house, Mr Landon, do. Tell those two foolish people that they must come on or the picnic will proceed without them.”

“All right,” said Ted, and began sprinting over the rocks.

“I’m going, too,” and Claire Blackwood followed Landon.

“We may as well all go, and have our picnic on our own verandah,” said Minna, complainingly, and though Doctor Varian would have preferred that to any further exertions, he did not say so.

“It’s always like this,” Minna’s querulous voice went on; “whenever we start to go anywhere, somebody has to go back for something and they’re so slow and so inconsiderate of other people’s feelings – ”

“There they go,” interrupted Doctor Varian as the two latest emissaries went up over the rocks. “Now the house will swallow them up!”

“Oh, Herbert, don’t say such awful things,” wailed Minna; “you sound positively creepy! I have a feeling of fear of that house anyway, – I believe it would like to swallow people up!”

“Ought we to intrude?” Claire Blackwood laughingly asked of Landon, as they neared the house; “if Betty and her father want to quarrel, they ought to be allowed to do so in peace.”

“Oh, well, if they insist, we’ll go away again, and let them have it out comfortably. Queer thing, for Daughter and Dad to make a habit of scrapping!”

“I take Mrs Varian’s statements with a grain of salt,” said Claire, sagely. “She’s not awfully well balanced, that woman, and I doubt if Betty and her father are half as black as they’re painted. Shall we ring the bell or walk right in?”

But this question needed no answer, for as they mounted the steps of the verandah and neared the open front door, they were confronted by the sight of Mr Frederick Varian sprawled at full length on the floor of the hall.

“Oh, heavens, what is the matter?” cried Claire; “the man has had a stroke or something!”

Landon went nearer, and with a grave face, stooped down to the prostrate figure.

“Claire,” he whispered, looking up at her with a white face, “Claire, this man is dead.”

“What? No, – no! it can’t be – ”

“Yes, he is, – I’m almost certain, – I don’t think I’d better touch him, – or, should I? It can do no harm to feel for his heart, – no, it is not beating, – what does it mean? Where’s Miss Varian?”

“Think quickly, Mr Landon, what we ought to do.” Claire Blackwood spoke earnestly, and tried to pull herself together. “We must be careful to do the right thing. I should say, before we even think of Miss Betty we should call Doctor Varian up here – ”

“The very thing! Will you call him, or shall I?”

Considerately, Landon gave her her choice.

With a shuddering glance at the still figure, Claire said, “You call him, but let me go with you.”

They stepped out on the veranda, and Landon waved his hand at the group of waiting people below him.

Then he beckoned, but no one definitely responded.

“I’ll have to shout,” Ted said, with a regretful look. “Somehow I hate to, – ” the presence of death seemed to restrain him.

But of necessity, he called out, “Doctor Varian, – come here.”

The distance was almost too far for his voice to carry, but because of his imperative gestures, Herbert Varian said: “Guess I’ll have to go. Lord! What can be the trick they’re trying to cut up? I vow I won’t come back here! I’ll eat my picnic in your dining-room, Minna.”

“As you like,” she returned, indifferently. “I hate picnics, anyway. But for goodness’ sake, Herbert, do one thing or the other. If you’d really rather not go to the woods, take your baskets, and we’ll all go back to the house. It’s getting late, anyway.”

“Wait a bit,” counseled the doctor. “You people stay here, till I go up to the house, and see what’s doing. Then if I beckon you, come along back, all of you. If I don’t break my neck getting up there!”

“Don’t go, Father,” begged Eleanor; “let me go. What in the world can they want of you?”

“No, – I’ll go. I suppose there’s a leak in the pipes or something.”

Herbert Varian went off at a gait that belied his recalcitrant attitude, and as he neared the house, he could see the white faces and grave air of the two that awaited him.

“What’s the great idea?” he called out, cheerily.

“A serious matter, Doctor Varian,” replied Landon. “An accident, or sudden illness – ”

“No!” the doctor took the remaining steps at a bound. “Who?”

For answer, Landon conducted him inside the hall, and in an instant Varian was on his knees beside the stricken man.

“My God!” he said, in a hoarse whisper, “Frederick’s dead!”

“A stroke?” asked Landon, while Claire Blackwood stood by, unable to speak at all.

“No, man, no! Shot! See the blood, – shot through the heart. What does it – what can it mean? Where’s Betty?”

“We don’t know,” Claire spoke now. “Doctor Varian, are you sure he’s dead? Can nothing be done to save him?”

“Nothing. He died almost instantly, from internal hemorrhage. But how unbelievable! How impossible!”

“Who shot him?” Landon burst out, impetuously; “or, – is it suicide?”

“Where’s the pistol?” said the doctor, looking about.

Both men searched, Landon trying to overcome his repugnance to such close association with the dead, but no weapon of any sort could be found.

“I – I can’t see it, – ” Varian wiped his perspiring brow. “I can’t see any solution. But, this won’t do. We must get the others up here. Oh, heavens, what shall we do with Minna?”

“Let me go down, and take her home with me,” suggested Claire Blackwood, eager to do anything that might help or ease the coming disclosure of the tragedy.

“Oh, I don’t know, – ” demurred Varian. “You see, she’s got to know, – of course, she must be told at once, – and then, – she’ll have to look after Betty, – where is the child? Anyway, my wife is a tower of strength, – she’ll be able to manage Mrs Varian, – even if she has violent hysterics, – which, of course, she will!”

“Command me, Doctor Varian,” said Landon. “I will do whatever you advise.”

“All right; I’ll be glad of your assistance. Suppose you go back to the people down there on the rocks, and then, – let me see, – suppose you tell my wife first what has happened; then, ask her to break the news to Mrs Varian, – she’ll know how best to do it. Then, – oh, Lord, – I don’t know what then! They’ll have to come back here, – I suppose, – what else can they do? I don’t know, Mrs Blackwood, but your idea of taking Mrs Varian away with you is a good one. If she’ll go.”

“She won’t go,” said Claire, decidedly, “if she knows the truth. If I take her, it’ll have to be on some false pretense, – ”

“Won’t do,” said Varian, briefly. “We’ve got no right to keep her in ignorance of her husband’s death. No; she must be told. That girl of mine, too, – Eleanor, she hasn’t her mother’s poise, – she’s likely to go to pieces, – always does, in the presence of death. Oh, what a moil!”

“Here’s another thing,” said Landon, a little hesitantly. “What about the authorities?”

“Yes, – yes, – ” the doctor spoke impatiently, “I thought of that, – who are they, in this God-forsaken place? Town Constable, I suppose.”

“I don’t know myself,” said Landon. “County Sheriff, more likely. But Clark’s a good, sensible sort. Say we send him down to the village – ”

“Oh, must it be known down there right away?” cried Claire. “Before even Mrs Varian is told! Or Betty. Where is Betty?”

“Betty is somewhere in the house,” said Doctor Varian in a low voice. “We know that. Now, let that question rest, till we decide on our first move. I think, Landon, you’d better do as I said. Go and tell my wife, and, while she’s telling Mrs Varian and my daughter, Eleanor, you can take Mr Clark aside and tell him. Then, – then, I think, you’d all better come back here to the house. We’ll send Clark on that errand later, – or, we can telephone.”

Landon started on his difficult descent and on his even more difficult errand.

“Can’t you, – can’t you put Mr Varian somewhere – somewhere – “ Claire began, incoherently.

“I’m not supposed to move a body until the authorities give permission,” said Doctor Varian, slowly. “It would seem to me, that in this very peculiar and unusual case, that I might, – but, that’s just it. I’ve been thinking, – and the very mysteriousness of this thing, makes it most necessary for me to be unusually circumspect. Why, Mrs Blackwood, have you any idea what we have ahead of us? I can’t think this mystery will be simple or easily explained. I don’t – ”

“What do you think – ”

“I don’t dare think! Isn’t there a phrase, ‘that way madness lies’? Well, it recurs to me when I let myself think! No, – I won’t think, – and I beg of you, don’t question me! I’m not a hysterical woman, – but there are times when a man feels as if hysterics might be a relief!”

“Then let’s not think, – ” said Claire, tactfully, “but let me try to be helpful. If Mrs Varian is coming here, – do you advise that we – cover – Mr Varian with – ”

“With a sheet, I suppose, – do you know where to find one?”

“No, I’ve never been upstairs, – and then, after all, isn’t a sheet even more gruesome than the sight as it is at present? How about a dark cover?”

“Very well, – find one.” The Doctor spoke absordedly, uncaring.

Glancing about, Claire noticed a folded steamer rug, on the end of the big davenport in the hall, and fetching that, she laid it lightly over the still form.

“Now, about Betty, – ” said the doctor, coming out of his brown study. “She is in the house, – probably hiding, – from fear, – ”

“Oh, do you think that? Then let us find her!”

“We can’t both go. Will you remain here and meet the others or shall I stay here while you go to look for the girl?”

Claire Blackwood pondered. Either suggestion was too hard for her to accept.

“I can’t, – ” she said, at last. “I’m a coward, I suppose, – but I can’t search this great, empty house, – for Betty. And, if she were in it, she would surely come here to us, – ”

Doctor Varian looked at her.

“Then I’ll go,” he said, simply. “You stay here.”

“No!” Claire grasped his arm. “I can’t do that either. Oh, Doctor Varian, stay here with me! Think, – these are not my people, – I’m sympathetic, of course, but, I’m terrified, – I’m afraid – ”

“There’s nothing to fear.”

“I can’t help that, – I won’t stay here alone. If you leave me, I shall run down the path to meet them.”

“Then I’ll have to stay here. Very well, Mrs Blackwood, they’ll arrive in a few moments, – we’ll wait for them together.”

And then Varian again fell to ruminating, and Claire Blackwood, sick with her own thoughts, said no word.

At last they heard footsteps, and looked out to see the little procession headed by the two sisters-in-law.

Janet Varian was half supporting Minna, but her help was not greatly needed, for the very violence of Minna’s grief and fright gave her a sort of supernormal strength and she walked uprightly and swiftly.

“Where’s Frederick?” she demanded, in a shrill voice as she came up the steps, – “and where’s Betty? Where’s my child?”

Her voice rose to a shriek on the last words, and Doctor Varian took her by the arm, giving her his undivided attention.

“Be careful now, Minna,” he said, kindly but decidedly; “don’t lose your grip. You’ve a big trouble to face, – and do try, dear, to meet it bravely.”

“I’m brave enough, Herbert, don’t worry about that. Where’s Fred, I say?”

“Here,” was the brief reply, and Varian led her to her husband’s body.

As he had fully expected, she went into violent hysterics. She cried, she screamed, then her voice subsided to a sort of low, dismal wailing, only to break out afresh with renewed shrieks.

“Perhaps it’s better that she should do this, than to control herself,” the Doctor said; “she’ll soon exhaust herself at this rate, and may in that way become more tractable. I wish we could get her to bed.”

“We can,” responded his wife, promptly. “I’ll look after that. Give a look at Eleanor, Herbert.”

The harassed doctor turned his attention to his daughter, who was controlling herself, but who was trembling piteously.

“Good girl,” said her father, taking her in his arms. “Buck up, Nell, dear. Dad’s got a whole lot on his shoulders, and my, how it will help if you don’t keel over!”

“I won’t,” and Eleanor tried to smile.

Claire Blackwood approached the pair.

“Doctor Varian,” she said, “suppose I take your daughter home with me for the night, – or longer, if she’ll stay. It might relieve you and your wife of a little care, and I’ll be good to her, I promise you. And, if I may, I’d like to go now. I can’t be of any service here, can I? And as Miss Eleanor can’t either, what do you think of our going now?”

“A very good idea, Mrs Blackwood,” and the doctor’s face showed grateful appreciation. “Take one of the young men with you, and leave the other here to help me.”

“We’ll take John Clark,” Claire decided, “and Ted Landon will, I know, be glad to stand by you.”

The three departed, and then the sisters-in-law left the room and went upstairs, Minna making no resistance to Janet’s suggestions.

Left alone with the dead, Doctor Varian and young Landon looked at each other.

“What does it all mean?” asked the younger man, a look of absolute bewilderment on his face.

“I can’t make it out,” returned the other, slowly. “But it’s a pretty awful situation. Now the women are gone, I’ll speak out the thing that troubles me most. Where’s Betty?”

“Who? Miss Varian? Why, yes, where is she? She came for her camera, you know. She – why, she must be in the house.”

“She must be, – that is, – I can’t see any alternative. I understand there’s no way out of this house, save down the path we took.”

“No other, sir.”

“Then if the girl’s in the house, – she must be found.”

“Yes, – ” and Landon saw the terrible fear in the other’s eyes, and his own glance responded. “Shall we search the rooms?”

“That must be done. Now, I’m not willing to leave the body of my brother unattended. Will you watch by it, while I run over the house, or the other way about?”

“I’ll do as you prefer I should, Doctor Varian, – but if you give me a choice, I’ll stay here. I’ve never been in the house before, and I don’t know the rooms. However, I want to be frank, – and, the truth is, I’d rather not make that search, – even if I did know the rooms.”

“I understand, Mr Landon, and I don’t blame you. I’ve never been in the house before either, – and I don’t at all like the idea of the search, but it must be made, – and made at once, and it’s my place to do it. So, then, if you’ll remain here, I’ll go the rounds.”

Ted Landon nodded silently, and sat down to begin the vigil he had been asked to keep.

Herbert Varian went first upstairs to Minna's room, and opening the door softly, discovered the widow was lying quietly on her bed. Janet, sitting by, placed a warning forefinger against her lip, and seeing that the patient was quiet, Varian noiselessly closed the door and tiptoed away.

He stood a moment in the second story hall, looking upward at a closed door, to which a narrow and winding staircase would take him.

Should he go up there, – or search the two lower stories first? He looked out of a window at the foot of the little stair.

It gave West, and afforded no view of the sea. But the wild and inaccessible rocks which he saw, proved to him finally that there was no way of approach to this lonely house, save by that one and only path he had already climbed. He sighed, for this dashed his last hope that Betty might have left the house on some errand or some escapade before her father had reached it.

With vague forebodings and a horrible sinking at his heart, he began to ascend the turret stair.

CHAPTER IV

The Search

Doctor Herbert Varian was a man accustomed to responsibilities; more, he was accustomed to the responsibilities of other people as well as his own. Yet it seemed to him that the position in which he now found himself was more appalling than anything he had ever before experienced, and that it was liable to grow worse rather than better with successive developments.

Varian had what has been called “the leaping mind,” and without being unduly apprehensive, he saw trouble ahead, such as he shuddered to think about. His brother dead, there was the hysterical widow to be cared for. And Betty in hiding —

He paused, his hand on the latch of the door at the top of the stair.

Then, squaring his shoulders, he shook off his hesitation and opened the door.

He found himself in a small turret room, from which he went on to other rooms on that floor. They were, for the most part, quite evidently unoccupied bedrooms, but two gave signs of being in use by servants.

Varian paid little heed to his surroundings, but went rapidly about hunting for the missing girl.

“Betty, —” he called, softly; “Betty, dear, where are you? Don’t be afraid, — Uncle Herbert will take care of you. Come, Betty, come out of hiding.”

But there was no answer to his calls. He flung open cupboard doors, he peered into dark corners and alcoves, but he saw no trace of any one, nor heard any sound.

Two other tiny staircases led up to higher turrets, but these were empty, and search as he would he found no Betty, nor any trace of her.

Unwilling to waste what might be valuable time, Doctor Varian went downstairs again.

Then, one after another, he visited all the rooms on the second floor but found no sign of his niece.

He went again to the room where the women were and beckoned his wife outside.

“Minna is asleep?” he asked, in a whisper.

“Yes,” Janet replied, “but, of course, only as an effect of that strong opiate you gave her. She tosses and moans, — but, yes, she is asleep.”

“I dread her waking. What *are* we to do with her? And, Janet, where is Betty? I’ve been all over these upper floors, — and now I’ll tackle the rooms downstairs, and the cellar. The girl must be found —”

“Herbert! Did you ever know such a fearful situation? And — as to — Frederick — don’t you have to —”

“Yes, yes, of course; the authorities must be called in. Don’t think I haven’t realized that. But first of all we must find Betty — dead or alive!”

“Don’t say that!” Janet clutched at his arm. “I can’t bear any more horrors.”

“Poor girl, — you may have to. Brace up, dear, I’ve all I can do to —”

“Of course you have,” his wife kissed him tenderly. “Don’t be afraid. I won’t add to your burdens, and I will help all I can. Thank heaven that kind woman took Eleanor away with her.”

“Yes; but I daresay we ought to have kept them all here. There’s crime to be considered, and —”

“Never mind, they’re gone, — and I’m glad of it. You can get them back when necessary.”

“But it’s a mystery, — oh, what shall I do first? I never felt so absolutely unable to cope with a situation. But the first thing is to hunt further for Betty.”

Pursuant of his clearest duty, Doctor Varian went on through the yet unsearched rooms, on to the kitchen, and on down to the cellar. He made a hasty but careful search, flinging open closets,

cupboards and storerooms, and returned at last to the hall where Ted Landon sat with folded arms, keeping his lonely vigil.

“I can’t imagine where Betty can be,” and Varian sank wearily into a chair.

“She must be in the house,” said Landon, wonderingly, “for there’s no way out, except down the path where we all were.”

“There’s a back door, I suppose.”

“I mean no way off the premises. Yes, there must be a back door – you know I’ve never been in this house before.”

“No; well, look here, Landon; the authorities must be notified; the local doctor ought to be called in, – and all that. But first, I want to find Betty. Suppose I stay here, – I’m – I admit I’m pretty tired, – and you take a look out around the back door, and kitchen porch. By the way, the servants will be coming home soon – ”

“No, they were to stay out for the evening, I think Mrs Varian said.”

“But those people who went back to the village will, of course, tell of the matter, and soon we’ll have all kinds of curious visitors.”

“All right, Doctor Varian, I’ll do just what you say.”

The younger man went on his errand, and going through the kitchen, found the back porch. To reach it he had to unlock the outside door, thus proving to his own satisfaction that Betty had not gone out that way.

But he went out and looked about. He saw nothing indicative. The porch was pleasant and in neat order. A knitting-bag and a much be-thumbed novel were evidently the property of the cook or waitress, and an old cap on a nail was, doubtless, the butler’s.

He took pains to ascertain that there was no path or road that led down to the gate but the path that also went from the front door, and which he had been on when Betty returned to the house.

He had seen her enter the house, had seen her father go in a few moments later, now where was the girl?

Back to the kitchen Landon went, and in the middle of the floor, he noticed a yellow cushion. It was a satin covered, embroidered affair, probably, he thought, a sofa cushion, or hammock pillow, but it seemed too elaborate for a servant’s cushion. Surely it belonged to the family.

The kitchen was in tidy order, save for a tray of used glasses and empty plates which was on a table.

Landon picked up the pillow, – and then, on second thoughts, laid it back where he had found it. It might be evidence.

An open door showed the cellar stairs. Conquering a strong disinclination, Landon went down. The cellar was large, and seemed to have various rooms and bins, and some locked cupboards. But there was nothing sinister, the rooms were for the most part fairly light, and the air was good.

Remembering that Doctor Varian had already searched down there for Betty, Landon merely went over the same ground, and returned with the news of his unsuccessful search.

“No way out?” queried the doctor, briefly.

“None, except by passing the very spot where we all were when Betty ran back to the house.”

“Where is she, Landon?”

The two men stared at each other, both absolutely at a loss to answer the question.

“Well,” and Varian pulled himself together, “this won’t do. It’s a case for the police, – how shall we get at them?”

“I don’t know anything about the police, but if you telephone the inn or the clubhouse they’ll tell you. The local doctor is Merritt, – I know him. But he couldn’t do anything. Why call him when you’re here?”

“It’s customary, I think. You call Merritt, will you, and then I’ll speak to the innkeeper.”

The telephoning was just about completed, when a fearful scream from upstairs announced the fact that Minna Varian had awakened from her opiate sleep and had returned to a realization of her troubles.

Slowly Doctor Varian rose and went up the stairs.

He entered the bedroom to find Minna sitting up in bed, wild-eyed and struggling to get up, while Janet urged her to lie still.

“Lie still!” she screamed, “I will not. Come here, Herbert. Tell me, – where is my child? Why is Betty not here? Is she dead, too? Tell me, I say!”

“Yes, Minna,” Varian returned, quietly, “I will tell you all I can. I do not know where Betty is, but we’ve no reason to think she is dead – ”

“Then why doesn’t she come to me? Why doesn’t Fred come? Oh, – Fred is dead, – isn’t he?”

And then the poor woman went into violent hysterics, now shrieking like a maniac and now moaning piteously, like some hurt animal.

“The first thing to do,” said Doctor Varian, decidedly, “is to get a nurse for Minna.”

“No,” demurred his wife, “not tonight, anyway. I’ll take care of her, and there will be some maid servant who can help me. There was a nice looking waitress among those who went off this afternoon.”

“The servants will surely return as soon as they hear the news,” Varian said, and then he gave all his attention to calming his patient.

Again he placed her under the influence of a powerful opiate, and by the time she was unconscious, the local doctor had come.

Varian went down to find Doctor Merritt examining the body of his brother.

The two medical men met courteously, the local doctor assuming an important air, principally because he considered the other his superior.

“Terrible thing, Doctor Varian,” Merritt said; “death practically instantaneous.”

“Practically,” returned the other. “May have lived a few moments, but unconscious at once. You know the sheriff?”

“Yes; Potter. He’ll be along soon. He’s a shrewd one, – but, – my heavens! Who did this thing?”

Doctor Merritt’s formality gave way before his irrepressible curiosity. He looked from Doctor Varian to Ted Landon and back again, with an exasperated air of resentment at being told so little.

“We don’t know, Doctor Merritt,” Landon said, as the other doctor said nothing. “We’ve no idea.”

“No idea! A man shot and killed in this lonely, isolated house and you don’t know who did it? What do you mean?”

In a few words Varian detailed the circumstances, and added, “We don’t know where Miss Varian is.”

“Disappeared! Then she must have shot her father – ”

“Oh, no!” interrupted Landon, “don’t say such an absurd thing!”

“What else is there to say?” demanded Merritt. “You say there was nobody in the house but those two people. Now, one is here dead, and the other is missing. What else can be said?”

“Don’t accuse a defenseless girl, – ” advised Varian. “Betty must be found, of course. But I don’t for a minute believe she shot her father.”

“Where’s the gun?” asked Doctor Merritt.

“Hasn’t been found,” returned Varian, briefly. “Mrs Varian, my brother’s wife, is hysterical. I’ve been obliged to quiet her by opiates. Doctor Merritt, this is by no means a simple case. I hope your sheriff is a man of brains and experience. It’s going to call for wise and competent handling.”

“Potter is experienced enough. Been sheriff for years. But as to brains, he isn’t overburdened with them. Still, he’s got good horse sense.”

“One of the best things to have,” commented Varian. “Now, I don’t know that we need keep Mr Landon here any longer. What do you think?”

“I don’t know,” said Merritt, thoughtfully. “He was here at the time of the – crime?”

“Yes; but so were several others, and they’ve gone away. As you like, Mr Landon, but I don’t think you need stay unless you wish.”

“I do wish,” Ted Landon said. “I may be of use, somehow, and, too, I’m deeply interested. I want to see what the sheriff thinks about it, and, too, I want to try to find or help to find Miss Betty.”

“Betty must be found,” said Varian, as if suddenly reminded of the fact. “I am so distracted between the shock of my brother’s death and the anxiety regarding his wife’s condition, that for the moment I almost forgot Betty. That child must be hiding somewhere. She must have been frightened in some fearful way, and either fainted or run away and hid out in the grounds somewhere. I’m positive she isn’t in the house.”

“She couldn’t have gone out the back door,” said Landon. “It was locked when I went to it.”

“She couldn’t have gone out at the front door or we should have seen her,” Varian added, “She stepped out of a window, then.”

“Are you assuming some intruder?” asked Merritt, wonderingly.

“I’m not assuming anything,” returned Varian, a little crisply, for his nerves were on edge. “But Betty Varian must be found, – my duty is to the living as well as to the dead.”

He glanced at his brother’s body, and his face expressed a mute promise to care for that brother’s child.

“But how are you going to find her?” asked Landon. “We saw Miss Varian enter this house – ”

“Therefore, she is still in it, – or in the grounds,” said Varian, positively. “It can’t be otherwise. I shall hunt out of doors first, before it grows dusk. Then we can hunt the house afterward.”

“You have hunted the house.”

“Yes; but it must be hunted more thoroughly. Why, Betty, or – Betty’s body must be somewhere. And must be found.”

Doctor Merritt listened, dumfounded. Here was mystery indeed. Mr Varian dead, – shot, – no weapon found, and his daughter missing.

What could be the explanation?

The hunt out of doors for Betty resulted in nothing at all. There was no kitchen garden, merely a drying plot and a small patch of back yard, mostly stones and hard ground. This was surrounded by dwarfed and stunted pine trees, which not only afforded no hiding place, but shut off no possible nook or cranny where Betty could be hidden. The whole tableland was exposed to view from all parts of it, and it was clear to be seen that Betty Varian could not be hiding out of doors.

And since she could not have left the premises, save by the road where the picnic party was congregated, there was no supposition but that she was still in the house.

“Can you form any theory, Doctor Varian?” Landon asked him.

“No, I can’t. Can you?”

“Only the obvious one, – that Miss Varian killed her father and then hid somewhere.”

“But where? Mind you, I don’t for a moment admit she killed her father, that’s too ridiculous! But whoever killed him, may also have killed her. It is her body I think we are more likely to find.”

“How, then, did the assassin get away?”

“I don’t know. I’m not prepared to say there’s no way out of this place – ”

“But I know that to be the fact. There comes the sheriff, Doctor Varian. That’s Potter.”

They went into the house again, and found the sheriff and another man with him.

Merritt made the necessary introductions, and Doctor Varian looked at Potter.

“The strangest case you’ve ever had,” he informed him, “and the most important. How do you propose to handle it?”

“Like I do all the others, by using my head.”

“Yes, I know, but I mean what help do you expect to have?”

“Dunno’s I’ll need any yet. Haven’t got the principal facts. Dead man’s your brother, ain’t he?”

“Yes.”

“Shot dead and no weapon around. Criminal unknown. Now, about this young lady, – the daughter. Where is she?”

“I don’t know, – but I hope you can find her.”

And then Doctor Varian told, in his straightforward way, of his search for the girl.

“Mighty curious,” vouchsafed the sheriff, with an air of one stating a new idea. “The girl and her father on good terms?”

“Yes, of course,” Varian answered, but his slight hesitation made the sheriff eye him keenly.

“We want the truth, you know,” he said, thoughtfully. “If them two wasn’t on good terms, you might as well say so, – ’cause it’ll come out sooner or later.”

“But they were, – so far as I know.”

“Oh, well, all right. I can’t think yet, the girl shot her father. I won’t think that, – lessen I have to. But, good land, man, you say you’ve looked all over the house, – where’s the murderer, then?”

“Suicide?” laconically said the man who had come with the sheriff.

It was the first time he had spoken. He was a quiet, insignificant chap, but his eyes were keen and his whole face alert.

“Couldn’t be, Bill,” said the sheriff, “with no weapon about.”

“Might ’a’ been removed,” the other said, in his brief way.

“By whom?” asked Doctor Varian.

“By whoever came here first,” Bill returned, looking at him.

“I came here first,” Varian stated. “Do you mean I removed the weapon?”

“Have to look at all sides, you know.”

“Well, I didn’t. But I won’t take time, now, to enlarge on that plain statement. I’ll be here, you can question me, when and as often as you like. Now, Mr Potter, what are you going to do first?”

“Well, seems to me there’s no more to be done with Mr Varian’s body. You two doctors have examined it, you know all about the wound that killed him. Bill, here, has jotted down all the details of its position and all that. Now, I think you can call in the undertakers and have the body taken away or kept here till the funeral, – whichever you like.”

“The funeral!” exclaimed Doctor Varian, realizing a further responsibility for his laden shoulders. “I suppose I’d better arrange about that, for my sister-in-law will not be able to do so.”

“Jest’s you like,” said Potter. “Next, I’ll investigate for myself the absence of this girl. A mysterious disappearance is as serious a matter as a mysterious death, – maybe, more so.”

“That’s true,” agreed Varian. “I hope you’ll be able to find my niece, for she must be found.”

“Easy enough to say she must be found, – the trick is to find her.”

“Have you any theory of the crime, Mr Potter?” Landon asked.

“Theory? No, I don’t deal in theories. I may say it looks to me like the girl may have shot her father, but it only looks that way because there’s no other way, so far, for it to look. You can’t suspect a criminal that you ain’t had any hint of, can you? If anybody, now, turns up who’s seen a man prowling round – or seen any mysterious person, or if any servant is found who, say, didn’t go to the circus, but hung behind, or – ”

“But if there’s any such, they or he must be in the house now,” Bill said, quietly. “Let’s go and see.”

The two started from the room and Landon, after a glance at Doctor Varian, followed them.

“I don’t see,” Landon said to Potter as they went to the kitchen, “why you folks in authority always seem to think it necessary to take an antagonistic attitude toward the people who are representing the dead man! You act toward Doctor Varian as if you more than half suspected he had a hand in the crime himself!”

“Not that, my boy,” and Potter looked at him gravely; “but that doctor brother knows more than he’s telling.”

“That’s not so! I know. I came up here to the house with him. I was with him when he found his brother’s body – ”

“Oh, you were! Why didn’t you say so?”

“You didn’t ask me. No, I don’t know anything more. I’ve nothing to tell that can throw any possible light, but I do know that Doctor Varian had no hand in it and knows no more about it than I do.”

“Good land, I don’t mean that he killed his brother, – I know better than that. But he wasn’t frank about the relations between the girl and her father. Do you know that they were all right? Friendly, I mean?”

“So far as I know, they were. But I never met them until today. I can only say that they acted like any normal, usual father and daughter.”

“Oh, well, it doesn’t matter. It’ll all come out, – that sort of thing. Now to find the girl.”

CHAPTER V

The Yellow Pillow

“What’s this pillow doing here?” the sheriff asked, as he picked up the yellow satin cushion. “This looks to me like a parlor ornament.”

“I thought it was strange, too,” returned Landon. “But I can’t see any clue in it, can you?”

“Anything unusual may prove a clue,” said Potter, sententiously. “You never saw this pillow before, Mr Landon.”

“No; but I’m not familiar with the house at all. Maybe it’s a discarded one, handed down to the servants’ use.”

“Doesn’t look so; it’s fresh and new, and very handsome.”

“Lay it aside and come on,” growled Bill Dunn, who was alertly looking about the kitchen. “You can ask the family about that later. Let’s go down cellar.”

To the cellar they went, Landon following. He had a notion that he might help the family’s interests by keeping at the heels of these detectives.

But the most careful search revealed nothing of importance to their quest.

Until Potter said, suddenly, “What’s this? A well?”

“It sure is,” and Bill Dunn peered over an old well curb and looked down.

“A well in a cellar! How queer!” exclaimed Landon. “I never heard of such a thing.”

“Uncommon, but I’ve known of ’em,” said Bill “Looks promising, eh?”

Potter considered. “It may mean something,” he said, thoughtfully. “We’ll have to sound it, somehow.”

“Sound it, nothin’!” said the executive Bill; “I’ll go down.”

“How?” Potter asked him. “There’s no bucket. It’s probably a dried up well.”

“Prob’ly,” and Bill nodded. He already had one foot over the broken old well curb.

“Wait, for heaven’s sake!” cried Landon. “Don’t jump down! You must have a light.”

“Got one,” and Bill drew a small flashlight from his pocket.

With the agility of a monkey he clambered down the side of the old well. The stones were large and not smoothly fitted, so that he had little trouble in gaining and keeping his foothold.

The others watched him as he descended and at last reached the bottom.

“Nothing at all,” he called up. “I’m coming back.”

“Just an old dried up well,” he reported, as he reached them again. “Must ’a’ dried up long ago. No water in it for years, most likely. But there’s nothin’ else down there, neither. No body, nor no clues of any sort. Whatever became of that girl, she ain’t down that well.”

All parts of the cellar were subjected to the same thorough search.

Landon was amazed at the quickness and efficiency shown by these men whom he had thought rather stupid at first.

Cupboards were poked into to their furthest corners; bins were raked; boxes opened, and Bill even climbed up to scan a swinging shelf that hung above his head.

“How about secret passages?” Potter asked, when they had exhausted all obvious hiding places.

“I been thinkin’ about that,” Bill returned, musingly; “but, so far, I can’t see where there could be any. This isn’t the sort of house that has ’em, either. It’s straightforward architecture, – that’s what it is, – straightforward.”

“What do you mean by that?” asked Landon, interested in this strange man who looked so ignorant, yet was in some ways so well informed.

“Well, you see, there’s no unexpected juts or jambs. Everything’s four-square, mostly. You can see where the rooms above are, – you can see where the closets and stairs fit in and all that. There’s no concealed territory like, – no real chance for a secret passage, – at least not so far’s I see.”

“That’s right,” agreed Potter. “Bill’s the man when it comes to architecture and building plans. Well, – let’s get along upstairs, then.”

Going through the kitchen again, Potter picked up the yellow pillow and took it along with him. Quite evidently it belonged to a sofa in the large, square front hall. The upholstery fabric was the same, and there was a corresponding pillow already at one end of the sofa.

“Queer thing,” Potter said; “how’d that fine cushion get on the kitchen floor?”

“It is queer,” Landon assented, “but I can’t see any meaning in it, can you?”

“Not yet,” returned Potter. “Now, Doctor Varian,” and he turned to the physician who sat with bowed head beside his brother’s body, “I dessay the undertakers’ll be coming along soon. You see them and make plans for the funeral; while Bill and I go on over this house. Then, we’ll have to see the rest of the people who were around at the time of the – the tragedy.”

“Not Mrs Frederick Varian,” said Herbert, “you can’t see her. I forbid that, as her physician.”

“Well, we’ll see your wife first, and then, we’ll have to see the folks that went back to the village. And there’s the servants to be questioned.”

But the careful and exhaustive search of the two inquiry agents failed to disclose any sign of the missing Betty Varian or any clue to her whereabouts. They went over the whole house, even into the bedroom of the newly-made widow, – whose deep artificial sleep made this possible.

This was the last room they visited, and as they tiptoed out, Bill said,

“Never saw such a case! No clue anywhere; not even mysterious circumstances. Everything just as natural and commonplace as it can be.”

“There’s the yellow pillow, – ” suggested Potter.

“I know, – but that may have some simple explanation, – housemaid took it out to clean it, – or something.”

“Then, Bill, there’s got to be a secret passage; there’s just got to.”

“Well, there ain’t. Tomorrow, I’ll sound the walls and all that sort of thing, but I’ve measured and estimated, and I vow there ain’t no space unaccounted for in this whole house. But there’s a lot of questionin’ yet to be done. I’ll say there is!”

By this time some of the servants had heard of the affair and had returned.

Potter and Bill Dunn went to the kitchen to see them, and found Kelly the butler and Hannah the cook in a scared, nervous state.

“Do tell us, sir, all about it,” Kelly begged, his hard face drawn with sympathy. “The master – ”

“It’s true, Kelly, your master is dead. He was killed, and we are investigating. What can you tell us? Do you know of anybody who had it in for Mr Varian?”

“Oh, no, sir! I’m sure he hadn’t an enemy in the world.”

“Oh, no, you can’t be sure of that, my man. But tell me of the circumstances. When you all went away, this afternoon, there was no sign of disturbance, – of anything unusual?”

“Oh, no, sir. Everything was pleasant and proper. I had packed the luncheon for the picnic, Hannah here made the sandwiches, and I filled the coffee Thermos, and all such things. The baskets were all ready, and the family expected to start on the picnic almost as soon as we went off. I offered to stay behind and help Mrs Varian, but she was so kind as to say I needn’t do that. So we all went.”

“All at once?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You went down the path that leads from the front door?”

“There’s no other way. It branches around to the kitchen entrance, up here, but there’s no other way off the premises.”

“Not even for a burglar or robber?”

“No, sir. I don’t believe even a monkey could scramble up the cliff, and I know a man couldn’t. You see it overhangs, and it’s impossible.”

“But coming from the other direction, – the village?”

“From that way, everybody has to pass through the lodge gate. The lodge, you know, – that’s the garage, as well. There’s a gate here – ”

“Yes, I know.”

“Well, through that gate is the only way to get to this house.”

“But all the picnic party were waiting, in full view of that gate, and in full view of the house. Yet somebody – ”

“You needn’t say somebody got in, – for nobody could do that.”

“I don’t say it. But I’m looking out for some such person. If not, we must conclude – ”

“What, sir?”

“That Miss Varian shot her father, and then, – in some yet undiscovered place, killed herself, or still alive, – is in hiding.”

“Miss Betty kill her father!” exclaimed Hannah, the cook, speaking to the sheriff for the first time. “No, she never did that!”

“Yet there was ill feeling between them,” Potter returned, quickly.

“That there was not! A more loving father and child I never met up with! Bless her pretty face! To dare accuse darlin’ Miss Betty of such a thing! I say, now, Mister Man, you better be careful how you say such lies around here! You know you’ve nothin’ to go on, but your own black thoughts! You know you don’t know who killed the master, and you’re too dumb to find out, and so you pick on that poor dear angel child, who ain’t here to speak up for herself!”

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