

Out of a Labyrinth

by Lawrence L. Lynch, 1853-1914
(of the Secret Service)

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Table of Contents

Chapter I ...	A Bad Beginning.
Chapter II ...	The Enemy Makes a Move.
Chapter III ...	Scenting a Mystery.
Chapter IV ...	Chartering a Dummy.
Chapter V ...	En Route for Trafton.
Chapter VI ...	Jim Long.
Chapter VII ...	We Organize.
Chapter VIII ...	A Resurrection.

Chapter IX ...	Mob Law.
Chapter X ...	Two Fair Champions.
Chapter XI ...	A Cup of Tea.
Chapter XII ...	A Big Haul.
Chapter XIII ...	Squire Brookhouse Makes a Call.
Chapter XIV ...	Mrs. Ballou's Pistol Practice.
Chapter XV ...	Preparations of War.
Chapter XVI ...	Fly Crooks in Trafton.
Chapter XVII ...	Southward to Clyde.
Chapter XVIII ...	A Sewing Machine Agent.
Chapter XIX ...	Haunted by a Face.
Chapter XX ...	Some Bits of Personal History.
Chapter XXI ...	„Evolving a Theory.“
Chapter XXII ...	Two Departures.
Chapter XXIII ...	A Shot in the Dark.
Chapter XXIV ...	Jim Long Shows His Hand.
Chapter XXV ...	In Which I Take Jim on Trust.
Chapter XXVI ...	The Trail of the Assassin.
Chapter XXVII ...	An Angry Heiress.
Chapter XXVIII ...	Jim Gives Bail.
Chapter XXIX ...	Vigilants.
Chapter XXX ...	A Chapter of Telegrams.
Chapter XXXI ...	Carnes Tells His Story.
Chapter XXXII ...	Amy Holmes Confesses.
Chapter XXXIII ...	Johnny la Porte is Brought to Book.
Chapter XXXIV ...	How Bethel was Warned.
Chapter XXXV ...	We Prepare fo a „Party“.
Chapter XXXVI ...	Something the Moon Failed to See.
Chapter XXXVII ...	Caught in the Act.
Chapter XXXVIII ...	„The Counterfeiter's Daughter.“
Chapter XXXIX ...	„Louise Barnard's Friendship.“
Chapter XL ...	The Story of Harvey James.
Chapter XLI ...	A Gathering of the Fragments.
Chapter XLII ...	In Conclusion.

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Illustrations

Frontispiece: Then the vigilants post themselves as a wall of defence about the building.

II „Chris, did you bring any letters for any one, except mother, last night?“

II „From out the blackness of the hedge came a flash and a sharp report.“

II „Why did you not heed this warning?” she asked.

III „But that ain’t all; we can beat the city itself for burglars.”

IV „So! Got shot again? Go on, go on, sir!”

V „Now, old man, why not run down to that little paradise of freebooters and see what we think of it?”

VI „Look here, Mr. Ireland,” expostulated Jim, „ye shouldn’t shake a chap that way.”

VII „System’s the word,” said Carnes, jerking his chair close to the table, upon which he planted his elbows.

X „Look, all of ye,” shouted Briggs. „So much fer his big words; them’s the things he did the job with.”

X „Stand down, parson,” cried Jim Long, rifle in hand.

X Glancing in the direction indicated by Jim, I saw that Carnes was engaged in a fisticuff bout with Tom Briggs, and hastened to interpose.

XI „Candidly, now,” she said, „as if I were not Miss Manvers, but a man to be trusted.

XI Well he passed the gate, climbed the fence, sneaked up to the front of the house.

XII „Nothin’ new at all, Cap’n; the Trafton Bandits have been at it again that’s all.”

XIII „We are a victimized community, sir. I suppose you have found that out?”

XIV „Just then the man stepped back, so that I had a fair chance at him.”

XVI Then Dimber Joe arose, stretched himself.

XVIII When he halted before me, however, I stepped back in feigned surprise and confusion.

XIX „It has gone far enough! It has gone too far. It must stop now, or—”

XIX „Ah!” The exclamation falls sharply from my lips, the „gallery” almost falls from my hands.

XX Entering the room with evident caution, he nevertheless awoke the „dummy”.

XXII „If you think yourself sufficiently sober, you may come up-stairs and pack your things.”

XXII I had been in my room less than half an hour, when I heard Carnes.

XXIII Thus assured, I fitted one of the skeleton keys.

XXIII „Carl Bethel has been shot down at his own door!”

XXIV „Carl, Carl! speak to me!”

XXVI When Bethel heard the call, he put down the book and pipe with cool deliberation.

XXVIII „Goodness!” ejaculated the valorous officer of the law.

XXIX I follow him into his own cabin, and stand beside the door, which some one has closed as we enter.

- XXXI „Open that door,” she said, turning upon me a look of angry defiance.
- XXXIII „I took him by the shoulders, and lifting him fairly off his feet shook him as a terrier shakes a rat.“
- XXXIV And so the day came when I sat by Bethel’s bedside and held his weak, nerveless hand in my own.
- XXXVI He works noiselessly, and very soon has made an opening, into which he crawls.
- XXXVI „Lie still, Joe Blaikie! I’ve waited for this opportunity for eight long years.“
- XXXVII Men are bounding over the low hedge to the left!
- XXXVII Then the vigilants post themselves as a wall of defence about the building.
- XXXIX „I wish I knew how such a woman as Louise Barnard would advise me.“

Illustration:

Then the vigilants post themselves as a wall of defence about the building.



Chapter I

A Bad Beginning.

It was a June day; breezy, yet somewhat too warm. The slow going old passenger train on the slow going mail route, that shall be nameless in these chronicles, seemed in less of a hurry than usual, and I, stretched lazily across two seats, with my left arm in a sling, was beginning to yield to the prevailing atmosphere of stupidity, when we rumbled up to a village station, and took on board a single passenger.

I was returning from a fruitless mission; and had stepped on board the eastward-bound train in anything but an enviable frame of mind; and no wonder! I, who prided myself upon my skill in my profession; I, who was counted by my chief the “best detective on the force, sir,”—had started, less than a week before, for a little farming settlement in one of the interior States, confident of my ability to unravel soon, and easily, a knotty problem.

I had taken every precaution to conceal my identity, and believed myself in a fair way to unveil the mystery that had brought grief and consternation into the midst of those comfortable, easy-going farmers; and I had been *spotted* at the very outset! I had been first warned, in a gentlemanly but anonymous fashion, to leave the neighborhood, and then, because I did not avail myself of the very first opportunity to decamp, had been shot from behind a hedge!

And this is how it happened:

Groveland, so called, doubtless, because of the total absence of anything bearing closer resemblance to a grove than the thrifty orchards scattered here and there, is a thriving township, not a town.

Its inhabitants reside in the midst of their own farms, and, save the farm buildings, the low, rambling, sometimes picturesque farm houses, or newer, more imposing, "improved" and often exquisitely ugly, white painted dwellings; the blacksmith shop, operated by a thrifty farmer and his hard-fisted sons; the post-office, kept in one corner of the "front room" by a sour-visaged old farmer's wife; and the "deestrick" school-house, then in a state of quiescence,—town institutions there were none in Groveland.

The nearest village, and that an exceedingly small one, was five miles west of Groveland's western boundary line; and the nearest railroad town lay ten miles east of the eastern boundary.

So the Grovelanders were a community unto themselves, and were seldom disturbed by a ripple from the outside world.

It was a well-to-do community. Most of its inhabitants had "squatted" there when the land was cheap and uncultivated, and they were poor and young.

Time, railroads, and the grand march of civilization had increased the value of their acres; and their own industry had reared for them pleasant homes, overflowing granaries, barns "good enough to live in," orchards, vineyards, all manner of comforts and blessings. Strong sons and fair daughters had grown up around them; every man knew his neighbor, and had known him for years. They shared in their neighborhood joys and griefs, and made common cause at weddings, funerals, threshings, huskings, cider makings, everything.

One would suppose it difficult to have a secret in Groveland, and yet a mystery had come among them.

'Squire Ewing, 'squire by courtesy, lived in a fine new white house on a fine farm in the very center of the township. His family consisted of his wife, two daughters, the eldest, eighteen, the younger, fifteen, and two sons, boys of twelve and ten.

The daughters of 'Squire Ewing were counted among the brightest and prettiest in Groveland, and they were not lacking in accomplishments, as accomplishments go in such communities. Much learning was not considered a necessity among the Groveland young ladies, but they had been smitten with the piano-playing mania, and every Winter the district school-house was given over, for one night in the week, to the singing school.

The Misses Ewing were ranked among the best "musicians" of Groveland, and they had also profited for a time by the instructions of the nearest seminary, or young ladies' school.

One evening, just as the sun was setting, Ellen, or Nell Ewing, as she was familiarly called, mounted her pony and cantered blithely away, to pass the night with a girl friend.

It was nothing unusual for the daughters of one farmer to ride or drive miles and pass the night or a longer time with the daughters of another, and Nellie's destination was only four miles away.

The night passed and half of the ensuing day, but the eldest daughter of Farmer Ewing did not return.

However, there was no cause for alarm in this, and 'Squire Ewing ate his evening meal in peace, confident that his daughter would return before the night had closed in. But a second night came and went, and still she did not come.

Then the good farmer became impatient, and early on the morning of the second day he dispatched his eldest son to hasten the return of the tardy one.

But the boy came back alone, and in breathless agitation. Nellie had not been seen by the Ballous since the night she left home. She had complained of a headache, and had decided to return home again. She had remained at Mrs. Ballou's only an hour; it was not yet dark when she rode away.

Well, Nellie Ewing was never seen after that, and not a clue to her hiding-place, or her fate, could be discovered.

Detectives were employed; every possible and impossible theory was "evolved" and worked upon, but with no other result than failure.

Groveland was in a state of feverish excitement; conjectures the most horrible and most absurd were afloat; nothing was talked of save the mysterious disappearance of Nellie Ewing.

And so nearly three months passed. At the end of that time another thunderbolt fell.

Mamie Rutger, the only daughter of a prosperous German farmer; wild little Mamie, who rode the wickedest colts, climbed the tallest trees, sang loudest in the singing-school, and laughed oftenest at the merry-makings, also vanished. At first they thought it one of her jokes, for she was given to practical joking; but she did not come back. No trace of her could be found.

At twilight one June evening she was flitting about the door-yard, sometimes singing gayly, sometimes bending over a rosebush, sometimes snatching down handfuls of early cherries. After that she was seen no more.

Then ensued another search, and a panic possessed that once quiet community. The country was scoured. Every foot of road, every acre of ground, every hedge or clump of trees, every stream, every deserted or shut-up building for miles around was faithfully searched.

And then Farmer Rutger and 'Squire Ewing closeted themselves together, took counsel of each other, and decided to call in the aid of a city detective. They came together to our office and laid their case before our chief.

"If any man can clear up this matter, it's Bathurst," said that bluff old fellow.

And so I was called into the consultation.

It was a very long and very earnest one. Questions were asked that would have done credit to the brightest lawyer. Every phase of the affair, or the two affairs, was closely examined from different standpoints. Every possibility weighed; copious notes taken.

Before the two men left us, I had in my mind's eye a tolerably fair map of Groveland, and in my memory, safely stowed away, the names of many Grovelanders, together with various minute, and seemingly irrelevant, items concerning the families, and nearest friends and neighbors, of the two bereaved fathers.

They fully perceived the necessity for perfect secrecy, and great caution. And I felt assured that no word or sign from them would betray my identity and actual business when, a few days later, I should appear in Groveland.

It was a strange case; one of the sort that had a wonderful fascination for me; one of the sort that once entered upon, absorbed me soul and body, sleeping or waking, day and night, for I was an enthusiast in my profession.

After waiting a few days I set out for the scene of the mystery. I did not take the most direct route to reach my destination, but went by a circuitous way to a small town west of the place, and so tramped into it, coming, not from the city, but from the opposite direction.

My arrival was as unobtrusive as I could make it, and I carried my wardrobe in a somewhat dusty bundle, swung across my shoulder by a strap.

I had assumed the character of a Swede in search of employment, and my accent and general ensemble were perfect in their way.

Perseveringly I trudged from farm to farm, meeting sometimes with kindness, and being as often very briefly dismissed, or ordered off for a tramp. But no one was in need of a man until I arrived at the widow Ballou's.

This good woman, who was a better farmer than some of her male neighbors, and who evidently had an eye to the saving of dollars and cents, listened quite indifferently to my little story while I told how long I had looked for work, and how I had been willing to labor for very small wages. But when I arrived at the point where I represented myself as now willing to work for my board until I could do better, her eyes brightened, she suddenly found my monotone more interesting, decided that I "looked honest," and, herself, escorted me to the kitchen and dealt me out a bountiful supper, for I had reached the Ballou farmhouse at sundown.

Chapter II

The Enemy Makes a Move.

Three days passed, and of course during that time I heard much about the two girls and their singular disappearance.

At night, after work was done, and supper disposed of, Mrs. Ballou would send some one to the post-office. This duty had usually fallen to Miss Grace Ballou, or been chosen by her, but since the night when Nellie Ewing rode away from the door, never again to be seen, Mrs. Ballou had vetoed the evening canters that Grace so much loved, and so the post-office was attended to by Master Fred, the spoiled son and heir, aged thirteen, or by the "hired man."

On the evening of the third day of my service, I saddled one of the farm horses, and rode to the post-office to fetch the widow's mail, and great was my surprise when the grim postmistress presented me with a letter bearing my assumed name, Chris Ollern, and directed to the care of Mrs. Ballou.

Stowing away the widow's papers and letters in a capacious coat pocket, and my own letter in a smaller inner one, I rode thoughtfully homeward.

Who had written me? Not the men at the office; they were otherwise instructed; besides, the letter was a local one, bearing only the Groveland mark. Could it be that Farmer Rutger or 'Squire Ewing had forgotten all my instructions, and been insane enough to write me?

I hurriedly put my horse in his stable, unburdened my pocket of the widow's mail, and mounted to my room.

Locking my door and lighting a tallow candle—the widow objected to kerosene in sleeping rooms,—I opened my letter.

It was brief, very, containing only these words:

Chris Ollern—As you call yourself, unless you wish to disappear as effectually as did Nellie Ewing and Mamie Rutger, you will abandon your present pursuit. A word to the wise is sufficient.

Here was an astonisher, and here was also a clue. I was betrayed, or discovered. But the enemy had showed his hand. I had also made a discovery.

There was an enemy then; there had been foul play; and that enemy was still in the vicinity, as this letter proved.

It was a wily enemy too; the letter would betray nothing as regarded identity. It was *printed*; the letters were smooth and even, but perfectly characterless. It was a wily enemy, but not quite a wise one, as the sending of such a letter proved.

I did not leave my room again that night, but sat for hours thinking.

The next morning as I came from the barn-yard with a pail of milk, I encountered Miss Grace Ballou. She was feeding a brood of chickens, and seemed inclined to talk with me.

"Did you ever see such fine chicks, Chris?" she asked; "and they are only two weeks old."

I stopped, of course, to admire the chickens and express my admiration in broken English.

Suddenly she moved nearer me, and said, in a lower tone:

"Chris, did you bring any letters for any one except mother, last night?"

Illustration:

„Chris, did you bring any letters for any one, except mother,
last night?"

Promptly and unblushingly, yet somewhat surprised, I answered, "No."

Her eyes searched my face for a second, and then she said, falling back a step:

"Well, don't say anything about my asking you, Chris. I—I expected a letter."

That night I went to the post-office as usual, and the next morning Miss Grace repeated her question:

"Did you bring no letters for any one, positively?"

"No, there were only papers that night."

The third night after the receipt of my mysterious warning, however, there came a letter for Grace, which, a little to my surprise, was promptly handed over by her mother. Whether this was the expected missive or not it threw the young lady into unmistakable raptures.

Amy was coming! Amy Holmes; she would be at the station to-morrow, and Grace must go in the carriage to meet her.

Everybody was pleased except Fred Ballou. Mrs. Ballou heartily expressed her satisfaction, and announced that I should drive with Grace to "the station;" and Ann, the "help," became quite animated.

But Fred scornfully declined his mother's proposition, that he should ride to town with his sister and myself.

"Catch me," he sniffed, "for that stuck-up town girl; she was always putting ideas into Grace's head; and—he hated girls anyway. And hoped some one would just carry Amy Holmes off as they did Nellie Ewing."

Whereupon Grace turned, first pale, then scarlet, and lastly, flew at her brother and boxed his ears soundly.

The next day we went as per programme to the town, ten miles distant, where Miss Holmes would be. She had arrived before us, and was waiting.

She was a handsome, showy-looking girl, stylishly dressed, and very self-possessed in manner; evidently a girl who knew something of town life.

We found her beguiling the time of waiting by conversation with a well-dressed, handsome young fellow, who was evidently a prime favorite with both young ladies. He accompanied them while they went about making certain purchases that Mrs. Ballou had charged her daughter not to forget, and then he assisted them into the carriage, while I stowed away their bundles, shook their hands at parting, and stood gazing after them as the carriage rolled away, the very model of a young Don Juan, I thought.

I had hoped to gain something from my ten-mile drive with the two young ladies sitting behind me. I had learned that Miss Holmes was a friend of the Ewings, and also of Mamie Rutger, and as she had not been in the vicinity since these young ladies had vanished, what more natural than that she should talk very freely of their mysterious fate, and might not these girl friends know something, say something, that in my hands would prove a clue?

But I was disappointed; during the long drive the names of Nellie Ewing and Mamie Rutger never once passed their lips. Indeed, save for a few commonplaces, these two young ladies, who might be supposed to have so much to say to each other, never talked at all.

I had driven the steady old work horses in going for Miss Holmes, and so when night came, a feeling of humanity prompted me to buckle the saddle upon a young horse scarcely more than half broken, and set off upon his back for the post-office.

It was a little later than usual, and by the time I had accomplished the first half of my journey, stowed away the usual newspapers, and remounted my horse, it was fully dark; and I rode slowly through the gloom, thinking that Groveland was ambitious indeed to bring the mail every day from a railway ten miles distant, and wondering what it would be like to be the mail boy, and jog over that same monotonous twenty miles of fetching and carrying every day.

I had now reached a high hedge that assured me that my homeward journey was half accomplished, when, from an imaginary inland mail boy, I was suddenly transformed into an actual, crippled John Gilpin. From out the blackness of the hedge came a flash and a sharp report; my horse bounded under me, my left arm dropped helpless, and then I was being borne over the ground as if mounted upon a whirlwind!

Illustration:

„From out the blackness of the hedge came a flash and a sharp report;
my horse bounded under me, my left arm dropped helpless.”

It was useless to command, useless to strive with my single hand to curb the frightened beast. It was a miracle that I did not lose my seat, for at first I reeled, and feeling the flow of blood, feared a loss of consciousness. But that swift rush through the dewy evening air revived me, and rallied my scattered senses.

As we dashed on, I realized that my life had been attempted, and that the would-be assassin, the abductor or destroyer of the two missing girls, had been very near me; that but for the unruly beast I rode I might perhaps have returned his little compliment; at least have found some trace of him.

My horse kept his mad pace until he had reached his own barn-yard gate, and then he stopped so suddenly as to very nearly unseat me.

I quickly decided upon my course of action, and now, dismounting and merely leading my horse into the inclosure, I went straight to the house. I knew where to find Mrs. Ballou at that hour, and was pretty sure of finding her alone.

As I had anticipated, she was seated in her own room, where she invariably read her evening papers in solitude. I entered without ceremony, and much to her surprise.

But I was not mistaken in her; she uttered no loud exclamation, either of anger at my intrusion, or of fright at sight of my bleeding arm. She rose swiftly and came straight up to me.

Before she could ask a question, I motioned her to be silent, and closed the door carefully. After which, without any of my foreign accent, I said:

“Mrs. Ballou, a woman who can manage a great farm and coin money in the cattle trade, can surely keep a secret. Will you bind up my arm while I tell you mine?”

“What!” she exclaimed, starting slightly; “you are not a—”

“Not a Swede? No, madame,” I replied; “I am a detective, and I have been shot to-night by the hand that has struck at the happiness of ‘Squire Ewing and his neighbor.’”

The splendid woman comprehended the situation instantly.

“Sit there,” she said, pointing to her own easy chair. “And don’t talk any more now. I shall cut away your sleeve.”

“Can you?” I asked, deprecatingly.

“Can I?” contemptuously; “I bleed my cattle.”

I smiled a little in spite of myself; then—

“Consider me a colt, a heifer, anything,” I said, resignedly. “But I feel as if I had been bled enough.”

"I should think so," she replied, shortly. "Now be still; it's lucky that you came to me."

I thought so too, but obedient to her command, I "kept still."

She cut away coat and shirt sleeves; she brought from the kitchen tepid water and towels, and from her own especial closet, soft linen rags. She bathed, she stanchd, she bandaged; it proved to be only a flesh wound, but a deep one.

"Now then," she commanded in her crisp way, when all was done, and I had been refreshed with a very large glass of wine, "tell me about this."

"First," I said, "your colt stands shivering yet, no doubt, and all dressed in saddle and bridle, loose in the stable-yard."

"Wait," she said, and hurried from the room.

In a few moments she came back.

"The colt is in his stable, and no harm done," she announced, sitting down opposite me. "How do you feel?"

"A little weak, that is all. Now, I will tell you all about it."

In the fewest words possible, I told my story, and ended by saying:

"Mrs. Ballou, you, as a woman, will not be watched or suspected; may I leave with you the task of telling 'Squire Ewing and Mr. Rutger what has happened to me?"

"You may," with decision.

"And I must get away from here before others know how much or little I am injured. Can your woman's wit help me? I want it given out that my arm is broken. Do you comprehend me?"

"Perfectly. Then no one here must see you, and—you should have that wound dressed by a good surgeon, I think. There is a train to the city to-morrow at seven. I will get up in the morning at three o'clock, make us a cup of coffee, harness the horses, and drive you to Sharon."

"You?" I exclaimed.

"Yes, I! Why not? It's the only way. And now, would you mind showing me that letter?"

I took it from my pocket-book and put it in her hand. She read it slowly, and then looked up.

"Why did you not heed this warning?" she asked.

Illustration:

"Why did you not heed this warning?" she asked.

"Because I wanted to find out what it meant."

"Well, you found out," sententiously. "Now, go to bed, but first let me help you remove that coat."

"Mrs. Ballou, you are a woman in a thousand," I exclaimed, as I rose to receive her assistance. "And I don't see how I can ever repay you. You are your own reliance."

As I spoke, the coat fell from my shoulder and my hand touched the weapon in my pistol pocket.

She saw it, too, and pointing to it, said:

"I have never owned a pistol, because I could not buy one without letting Fred know it; he is always with me in town. If you think I have earned it give me that."

"Gladly," I said, drawing out the small silver-mounted six-shooter; "it is loaded, every barrel. Can you use it?"

"Yes; I know how to use firearms."

"Then when you do use it, if ever, think of me." I laughed.

"I will," she said, quite soberly.

And little either of us dreamed how effectively she would use it one day.

The next morning, at half-past three, we drove out of the farm yard, en route for the railway station.

During our drive, we talked like two men, and when we parted at Sharon we were very good friends. I dropped her work-hardened hand reluctantly, and watched her drive away, thinking that she was the only really sensible woman I had ever known, and feeling half inclined to fall in love with her in spite of the fact that she was twenty-five years my senior.

Chapter III

Scenting a Mystery.

That is how I chanced to be rolling city-ward on that phlegmatic, oft-stopping, slow going, accomodation train, and that is why I was out of temper, and out of tune.

My operation had been retarded. Instead of working swiftly on to a successful issue, this must be a case of waiting, of wit against wit, and I must report to my chief a balk in the very beginning.

Nevertheless, as I said in the outset, fifty miles of monotonous rumble, together with the soothing influence of a good cigar, had blunted the edge of my self-disgust; my arm was quite easy, only warning me now and then that it was a crippled arm; I was beginning to feel phlegmatic and comfortable.

I had formed a habit of not thinking about my work when the thinking would be useless, and there was little room for effective thought in this case. My future movements were a foregone conclusion. So I rested, and fell almost asleep, and then it was that the single passenger of whom I made mention, came on board.

I had not noticed the name of the station, but as I roused myself and looked out, I saw that we were moving along the outskirts of a pretty little town, and then I turned my eyes toward the new passenger.

He was coming down the aisle towards me, and was a plain, somewhat heavy-featured man, with a small, bright, twinkling eye. Certainly it was not a prepossessing countenance, but, just as certainly, it was an honest one. He was dressed in some gray stuff, the usual "second best" of a thriving farmer or mechanic, and might have been either.

By the time I had arrived at this stage in my observations, there was rustle and stir behind me, and a man who had been lounging, silent, moveless, and, as I had supposed, asleep, stretched forward a brown fist, exclaiming:

“Hallo, old boy! Stop right here. Harding, how are ye?”

Of course the “old boy” stopped. There was the usual hand shaking, and mutual exclamations of surprise and pleasure, not unmixed with profanity. Evidently they had been sometime friends and neighbors, and had not met before for years.

They talked very fast and, it seemed to me, unnecessarily loud; the one asking, the other answering, questions concerning a certain village, which, because it would not be wise to give its real name we will call Trafton.

Evidently Trafton was the station we had just left, and where we took on this voluble passenger. They talked of its inhabitants, its improvements, its business; of births, and deaths, and marriages. It was very uninteresting; I was beginning to feel bored, and was meditating a change of seat, when the tone of the conversation changed somewhat, and, before I could sufficiently overcome my laziness to move, I found myself getting interested.

“No, Trafton ain’t a prosperous town. For the few rich ones it’s well enough, but the poor—well, the only ones that prosper are those who live without work.”

“Oh! the rich?”

“No! the poor. ‘Nuff said.”

“Oh! I see; some of the old lot there yet; wood piles suffer?”

“*Wood piles!*”

“And hen roosts.”

“*Hen roosts!*” in a still deeper tone of disgust.

“Clothes lines, too, of course.”

“*Clothes lines!*” Evidently this was the last straw. “Thunder and lightning, man, that’s baby talk; there’s more deviltry going on about Trafton than you could scoop up in forty ordinary towns.”

“No! you don’t tell me. What’s the mischief?”

“Well, it’s easy enough to tell what the mischief is, but where it is, is the poser; but there’s a good many in Trafton that wouldn’t believe you if you told them there was no such thing as an organized gang of marauders near the place.”

“An organized gang!”

“Yes, sir.”

“But, good Lord, that’s pretty strong for Trafton. Do you believe it?”

“Rather,” with Yankee dryness.

“Well, I’m blessed! Come, old man, tell us some of the particulars. What makes you suspect blacklegs about that little town?”

“I’ve figured the thing down pretty close, and I’ve had reason to. The thing has been going on for a number of years, and I’ve been a loser, and ever since the beginning it has moved like clock-work. Five years ago a horse thief had not been heard of in Trafton for Lord knows how long, until one night Judge Barnes lost a valuable span, taken from his stable, slick and clean, and never heard of afterwards. Since then, from the town and country, say for twenty-five miles around, they have averaged over twenty horses every year, and they are always the very best; picked every time, no guess work.”

The companion listener gave a long, shrill whistle, and I, supposed by them to be asleep, became very wide awake and attentive.

“But,” said the astonished man, “you found some of them?”

“No, sir; horses that leave Trafton between two days never come back again.”

“Good Lord!”

There was a moment’s silence and then the Traftonite said:

“But that ain’t all; we can beat the city itself for burglars.”

Illustration:

„But that ain’t all; we can beat the city itself for burglars”

“Burglars, too!”

“Yes, burglars!” This the gentleman emphasized very freely. “And cute ones; they never get caught, and they seldom miss a figure.”

“How’s that?”

“They always know where to strike. If a man goes away to be absent for a night or two, they know it. If a man draws money from the bank, or sells cattle, they know that. And if some of our farmers, who like to go home drunk once in a while, travel the road alone, they are liable to be relieved of a part of their load.”

“And who do the folks suspect of doing the mischief?”

“They talk among themselves, and very carefully, about *having* suspicions and *being* on the watch; but very few dare breathe a name. And after all, there is no clear reason for suspecting anyone.”

“But *you* suspect some one, or I miss my guess.”

“Well, and so I do, but I ain’t the man to lay myself liable to an action for damages, so I say nothing, but *I’m watching*.”

Little more was said on the subject that interested me, and presently the Traftonite took leave of his friend, and quitted the train at a station, not more than twenty miles east of Trafton; the other was going to the city, like myself.

When quiet was restored in my vicinity, I settled myself for a fresh cogitation, and now I gave no thought to the fate of Mamie Rutger and ‘Squire Ewing’s daughter. My mind was absorbed entirely with what I had just heard.

The pretty, stupid-looking little town of Trafton had suddenly become to me what the great Hippodrome is to small boys. I wanted to see it; I wanted to explore it, and to find the mainspring that moved its mystery.

The words that had fallen from the lips of the Trafton man, had revealed to my practiced ear a more comprehensive story than he had supposed himself relating.

Systematic thieving and burglary for five years! Systematic, and always successful. What a masterful rogue must be the founder of this system! How secure he must be in his place, and his scheming, and what a foeman to encounter. It would be something to thwart, to baffle, and bring to justice a villain of such caliber.

After a while my thoughts turned back to Groveland. Certainly the mystery there was quite as deep, and the solution of it of more vital importance. But—Groveland was the mystery that I had touched and handled; Trafton was the mystery unseen.

So my mind returned to the latter subject, and when, hours later, we ran into the city, Groveland was still absent, and Trafton present, in my thoughts.

Chapter IV

Chartering a Dummy.

By the time I reached the city my arm, which needed fresh bandages, began to pain me, and I went straight to the office of a surgeon, well-known to fame, and to the detective service. He had bound up many a broken bone for our office, and we of the fraternity called him "Our Samaritan." Some of the boys, and, let me confess it, myself among the number, called him "Our old woman," as well, for, while he bandaged and healed and prescribed, he waged continued warfare upon our profession, or rather the dangers of it.

Of course, the country needed secret service men, and must have them, but there was an especial reason why each one of us should not be a detective. We were too young, or too old; we were too reckless, or we were cut out for some other career. In short, every patient that came under the hand of good Dr. Denham, became straightway an object of interest to his kindly old heart; and—strange weakness in a man of his cloth—he desired to keep us out of danger.

"So ho!" cried "our old woman," when I appeared before him with my bandaged arm, "here *you* are! I knew you'd be along soon. You've kept out of my clutches a good while. Arm, eh? Glad of it! I'll cut it off; I'll cut it off! That'll spoil one detective."

I laughed. We always laughed at the talkative soul, and he expected it.

"Cut it off, then," I retorted, flinging myself down in a chair and beginning to remove my sling. "I don't need a left arm to shoot the fellow that gave me this, and I'm bound to do that, you know."

"So! Got shot again? Go on, go on, sir! I'll have the pleasure of dissecting you yet. You'll come home dead some day, you scoundrel. Ah! here we are. Um! flesh wound, rear of arm, under side; close, pretty close, pret-ty close, sir!"

Illustration:

„So! Got shot again? Go on, go on, sir!

I'll have the pleasure of dissecting you yet.”

All this was jerked out in short breaths, while he was undoing and taking a first look at my arm. When the actual business of dressing commenced, "our old woman" was always silent and very intent upon the delicate task.

"Pity it wasn't a little worse," he sniffled, moving across the room and opening a case of instruments. "You chaps get off too easy; you don't come quite near enough to Death's door. There's Carnes, now; got a knife through his shoulder, and fretting and fuming because he can't put himself in a position to get another dig."

"Is Carnes in?"

"Yes. And was badly cut."

"Poor fellow! I'm sorry for that, but glad of the chance to see him; he's been on a long cruise."

"Well, I'm not so sure about his going on another. Now then."

And the doctor applied himself to business, and I sat, wincing sometimes, under his hand, but thinking through it all of Carnes.

He was the *comique* of the force; a man who was either loved or hated by all who knew him. No one could be simply indifferent to Carnes. He was a well-educated man, although he habitually spoke with a brogue. But I knew Carnes was not an Irishman; although he professed to have "hailed from Erin," he could drop the accent at pleasure and assume any other with perfect ease,—a feat rather difficult of accomplishment by a genuine Irishman.

Nobody knew much about Carnes; he had no confidants, although he had his favorites, one of whom I chanced to be.

He was older than myself by ten years, but when the mood seized him, could be younger by twenty. He had been absent from the office for nearly a year, and I mentally resolved that, after making my report and attending to business, I would lose no time in seeing him.

Under the skilled hand of Dr. Denham my arm was soon dressed and made comfortable. It would be well in a fortnight, the good doctor assured me, and then as soon as I could, I withdrew from his presence and his customary fire of raillery and questions, and stopping only to refresh myself at a restaurant by the way, hastened on toward our office, where I was soon closeted with my Chief.

As usual, he made no comments, asked no questions, when I dawned upon him thus unexpectedly. He never made use of unnecessary words. He only turned out one or two of the force who were lounging there, waiting his pleasure to attend to less important business, saw that the doors were closed and the outer office properly attended, and then seating himself opposite me at the desk, said quietly:

"Now, Bathurst?"

I was well accustomed to this condensed way of doing things, and it suited me. In a concise manner matching his own, I put him in possession of the facts relating to the Groveland case, and then I made a discovery. After relating how I had received the anonymous letter I produced my pocket-book, where I supposed it to be, and found it missing! It was useless to search; the letter was not in my pocket-book, neither was it on my person.

"Well!" I said, when fully convinced that the letter was certainly not in my possession, "here's another complication. I've been robbed and—I know who did it!"

My companion made no comment, and I continued:

"The letter was of no vital importance; I will finish my story and then you will know what has become of it."

I told the rest; of my ride upon Mrs. Ballou's colt, of the pistol shot, my runaway steed, and my subsequent interview with Mrs. Ballou. How she had dressed my wound, how the circumstances had compelled me to confide in her, and how she had risen to the occasion, and driven me to the station at half-past three in the morning, and I finished by saying:

"Now it looks to me as if Mrs. Ballou had stolen my letter, and if so, one might take that fact and the one that Nellie Ewing was never seen after leaving her house, and count it as strong circumstantial evidence; but, that kind of evidence won't convince me that Mrs. Ballou is implicated in the crime or the mystery. When I told her of the printed letter, I saw her eyes gleam; and when she asked to see the document I read anxiety in her face. I am sure she took the letter, and I think she has a suspicion of some sort; but if she has the letter she will return it."

My chief made no comment on all that I had told him; he picked up a paper weight and laid it down again with great precision, then he put all my story "on the shelf," as we were wont to express it, by asking abruptly:

"What are you going to do next?"

The question did not surprise me. He was not in the habit of offering much advice to such operatives as he trusted with delicate cases, for he never trusted a man until he felt full confidence in his skill and integrity. But when we desired to consult with him, he entered into the study of the case with animation and zeal; and then, and then only, did he do a full share of the talking.

"Going to send them a 'dummy,' if we can find one with the grit to face the chances. They must suppose me entirely out of the business."

"Yes."

"I want an extraordinary dummy, too; a blusterer."

"Wait," interrupted my companion, beginning to smile, "I have got just the animal. When do you want to see him?"

"As soon as possible; I want him in the field at once."

"Very good. This fellow came here yesterday, and he's the greatest combination of fool and egotist I ever saw. Knows he was born for a detective and is ready to face a colony of desperadoes; there is no limit to his cheek and no end to his tongue. If you want a talkative fool he'll do."

"Well," I replied, "that's what I want, but the man must not be quite destitute of courage. I don't think that the party or parties will make another attack upon a fresh man, and yet they may; and this dummy must remain there quite alone until the rascals are convinced that he has no confederates. There is a keen brain at the bottom of this Groveland mischief. I mean to overreach it and all its confederates, for I believe there must be confederates; and, sir, I don't believe those girls have been murdered."

"No?"

"No. But I want our dummy to act on the supposition that they have been. This will ease the vigilance of the guilty parties, and when they are off their guard, our time will come. Where is Carnes?"

My companion was in full sympathy with my abrupt change of the subject, and he answered, readily:

"At his old rooms. Carnes had a bad cut, but he is getting along finely."

"Is he? The doctor gave me the idea that he was still in a doubtful condition."

"Stuff," giving a short laugh, "some of his scarey talk; he told me that Carnes would be about within two weeks. Carnes did some good work in the West."

"He is a splendid fellow; I must see him to-night. But about our dummy: when can you produce him?"

"Will to-morrow do? say ten o'clock."

“It must be later by an hour; the doctor takes me in hand at ten.”

“Eleven, then. I will have him here, and you’ll find him a jewel.”

“Very good,” I said, rising, and taking up my hat, “any message to send to Carnes? I shall see him to-night.”

“Look here,” turning upon me suddenly, “you are not to go to Carnes for any purpose but to see him. You must not talk to him much, nor let him talk; the doctor should have told you that. He is weak, and easily excited. It’s bad enough to have two of my best men crippled and off at once; you must not retard his recovery. Carnes is as unruly as a ten-year old, now.”

I laughed; I could see just how this whimsical comrade of mine would chafe under his temporary imprisonment.

“I won’t upset the old fellow,” I said, and took my leave.

Chapter V

En Route for Trafton.

Over the minor events of my story I will not linger, for although they cannot be omitted altogether, they are still so overshadowed by startling and thrilling after events that they may, with propriety, be narrated in brief.

I saw Carnes, and found that the Chief had not exaggerated, and that the doctor had.

Carnes was getting well very fast, but was chafing like a caged bear, if I may use so ancient an illustration.

We compared notes and sympathized with each other, and then we made some plans. Of course we were off duty for the present, and could be our own masters. Carnes had been operating in a western city, and I proposed to him a change. I told him of the conversation I had overheard that morning, and soon had him as much interested in Trafton as was myself. Then I said:

“Now, old man, why not run down to that little paradise of freebooters and see what we think of it?”

Illustration:

„Now, old man, why not run down to that little paradise
of freebooters and see what we think of it?”

“Begorra and that’ll jist suit me case,” cried Carnes, who was just then in his Hibernian mood. “And it’s go we will widen the wake.”

But go “widen the wake” we did not.

We were forced to curb our impatience somewhat, for Carnes needed a little more strength, and my arm must be free from Dr. Denham’s sling.

We were to go as Summer strollers, and, in order to come more naturally into contact with different classes of the Traftonites, I assumed therôle of a well-to-do Gothamite with a taste for rural Summer sports, and Carnes made a happy hit in

choosing the character of half companion, half servant; resolving himself into a whole Irishman for the occasion.

It was a fancy of his always to operate in disguise, so for this reason, and because of his pallor, and the unusual length of his hair and beard, he chose to take his holiday *en naturale*, and most unnatural he looked to me, who had never seen him in ill-health.

As for me, I preferred on this occasion to adopt a light disguise.

In spite of the warning of our Chief, but not in defiance of it, I talked Carnes into a fidget, and even worked myself into a state of enthusiasm. Of course I made no mention of the Groveland case; we never discussed our private operations with each other; at least, not until they were finished and the finale a foregone conclusion.

After bidding Carnes good-night, I sauntered leisurely homeward, if a hotel may be called home, and the ring of a horse's hoofs on the pavement brought to my mind my wild ride, Groveland, and Mrs. Ballou.

Why had she stolen that letter of warning? That she had I felt assured. Did she give her true reason for wishing my revolver? Would she return my letter? And would she, after all, keep the secret of my identity?

I did not flatter myself that I was the wonderful judge of human nature some people think themselves, but I did believe myself able to judge between honest and dishonest faces, and I had judged Mrs. Ballou as honest.

So after a little I was able to answer my own questions. She would return my letter. She could keep a secret, and—she would make good use, if any, of my weapon.

It was not long before my judgment of Mrs. Ballou, in one particular at least, was verified.

On the morning after my interview with Carnes, I saw the man who was destined to cover himself with glory in the capacity of "Dummy," and here a word of explanation may be necessary.

Sometimes, not often, it becomes expedient, if not absolutely necessary, for a detective to work under a double guard. It is not always enough that others should not know him as a detective; it is required that they should be doubly deluded by fancying themselves aware of who is, hence the dummy.

But in this narrative I shall speak in brief of the dummy's operations. Suffice it to say that he was just the man for the place; egotistical, ignorant, talkative to a fault, and thoroughly imbued, as all dummies should be, with the idea that he was "born for a detective."

Of course he was not aware of the part he was actually to play. He was instructed as to the nature of the case, given such points as we thought he would make best use of, and told in full just what risk he might run.

But our dummy was no coward. He inspected my wounded arm, expressed himself more than ready to take any risk, promised to keep within the bounds of safety after nightfall, and panted to be in the field.

Just one day before our departure for Trafton I received a letter from Mrs. Ballou. Enclosed with it was my lost note of warning. Its contents puzzled me not a little. It ran thus:

Dear Sir—I return you the letter I took from your pocket the morning you left us. You did not suspect me of burglary, did you? Of course you guessed the truth when you came to miss it. I thought it might help me to a clue, but was wrong. I can not use it.

If anything new or strange occurs, it may be to your interest to inform me first of all.

The time may come when you can doubly repay the service I rendered you not long since. If so, remember me. I think I shall come to the city soon.

Respectfully, etc.,

M. A. Ballou

P. S.—Please destroy.

From some women such a letter might have meant simply nothing. From Mrs. Ballou it was fraught with meaning.

How coolly she waived the ceremony of apology! She wanted the letter—she took it; a mere matter of course.

And as a matter of course, she returned it.

Thus much of the letter was straight-forward, and suited me well enough; but—

—
“*I thought it might help me to a clue, but was wrong.* I can not use it.”

Over these words I pondered, and then I connected them with the remainder of the letter. Mrs. Ballou was clever, but she was no diplomatist. She had put a thread in my hands.

I made some marks in a little memorandum book, that would have been called anything but intelligible to the average mortal, but that were very plain language to my eye, and to none other. Next I put a certain bit of information in the hands of my Chief; then I turned my face toward Trafton.

To my readers the connection between the fate of the two missing girls, and the mysterious doings at Trafton, may seem slight.

To my mind, as we set out that day for the scene of a new operation, there seemed nothing to connect the two; I was simply, as I thought, for the time being, laying down one thread to take up another.

A detective has not the gift of second sight, and without this gift how was I to know that at Trafton I was to find my clue to the Groveland mystery, and that that mystery was in its turn to shed a light upon the dark doings of Trafton, and aid justice in her work of requital?

So it is. Out of threads, divers and far-fetched, Fate loves to weave her wonderful webs.

And now, for a time, we leave Groveland with the shadow upon it. We leave the shadow now; later it comes to us.

For the present we are *en route* for Trafton.

Chapter VI

Jim Long.

“Trafton?” said Jim Long, more familiarly known as Long Jim, scratching his head reflectively, “can’t remember just how long I did live in Trafton; good sight longer’n I’ll live in it any more, I calklate; green, oh, dretful green, when I come here; in fact mem’ry hadn’t de-welluped; wasn’t peart then like I am now. But I ain’t got nothin’ to say agin’ Trafton, I ain’t, tho’ there be some folks as has. Thar’s Kurnel Brookhouse, now, he’s bin scalped severial times; then thar’s—hello!”

Jim brought his rhetoric up standing, and lowered one leg hastily off the fence, where he had been balancing like a Chinese juggler.

At the same moment a fine chestnut horse dashed around a curve of the road, bearing a woman, who rode with a free rein, and sat as if born to the saddle. She favored Jim with a friendly nod as she flew past, and that worthy responded with a delighted grin and no other sign of recognition.

When she had disappeared among the trees, and the horse’s hoofs could scarcely be heard on the hard dry road, Jim drew up his leg, resumed his former balance, and went on as if nothing had happened.

“There was Kurnel Brookhouse and—”

“The mischief fly away wid old Brookhouse,” broke in Carnes, giving the fence a shake that nearly unseated our juggler. “Who’s the purty girl as bowed till yee’s? That’s the question on board now.”

“Look here, Mr. Ireland,” expostulated Jim, getting slowly off the fence backward, and affecting great timidity in so doing, “ye shouldn’t shake a chap that way when he’s practisin’ jimnasti—what’s its name? It’s awful unsafe.”

Illustration:

„Look here, Mr. Ireland,” expostulated Jim,
„ye shouldn’t shake a chap that way.”

And he assured himself that his two feet were actually on terra firma before he relinquished his hold upon the top rail of the fence. Then turning toward Carnes he asked, with a most insinuating smile:

“Wasn’t you askin’ something?”

“That’s jist what I was, by the powers,” cried Carnes, as if his fate hung upon the answer. “Who is the leddy? be dacent, now.”

We had been some two weeks in Trafton when this dialogue occurred, and Jim Long was one of our first acquaintances. Carnes had picked him up somewhere about town; and the two had grown quite friendly and intimate.

Long was a character in the eyes of Carnes, and was gradually developing into a genius in mine. Jim was, to all outward appearances, the personification of laziness, candor, good nature, and a species of blundering waggishness; but as I grew to know him better, I learned to respect the irony under his innocent looks and boorish speeches, and I soon found that he possessed a faculty, and a fondness, for baffling and annoying Carnes, that delighted me; for Carnes was, like most indefatigable jokers, rather nonplussed at having the tables turned.

Jim never did anything for a livelihood that could be discovered, but he called himself a “Hoss Fysician,” and indeed it was said that he could always be trusted

with a horse, if he could be induced to look at one. But he had his likes and dislikes, so he said, and he would obstinately refuse to treat a horse toward which he had what he called “onfriendly feelin’s.”

Jim could tell us all there was to tell concerning the town of Trafton. It was only necessary to set him going; and no story lost anything of spirit through being told by him.

He was an oracle on the subjects of fishing and hunting; indeed, he was usually to be found in the companionship of gun or fishing rod.

Fortunately for us, Trafton had rare facilities for sports of the aforementioned sort, and we gathered up many small items while, in the society of Long Jim, we scrambled through copses, gun in hand, or whipped the streams, and listened to the heterogenous mass of information that flowed from his ready tongue.

But the spirit of gossip was not always present with Jim. Sometimes he was in an argumentative mood, and then would ensue the most astounding discussions between himself and Carnes. Sometimes he was full of theology, and then his discourse would have enraptured Swing, and out-Heroded Ingersoll, for his theology varied with his moods. Sometimes he was given to moralizing, and then Carnes was in despair.

Jim lived alone in a little house, or more properly, “cabin,” something more than a mile from town. He had a small piece of ground which he called his “farm,” and all his slight amount of industry was expended on this.

“Who is the leddy, I tell yee’s?” roared Carnes, who, I may as well state here, had introduced himself to the Traftonites as Barney Cooley. “Bedad, a body would think she was your first shwateheart by the dumbness av yee’s!”

“And so she air,” retorted Jim with much solemnity. “Don’t you go ter presoomin’, Mr. Ireland. That are Miss Manvers, as lives in the house that’s just a notch bigger’n Kurnel Brookhouse’s; and her father was Captain Manvers, as went down in the good ship Amy Audrey, and left his darter that big house, and a bigger fortune dug out ‘en a treasure-ship on the coast uv—”

“Stop a bit, long legs,” interposed Carnes, or Barney, as we had better call him, “was it a threasure-ship yee’s wur hatchin’ when it tuck yee’s so long to shun out yer little sthory?”

“Well, then, Erin, tell your own stories, that’s all. If yer wan’t ter kick over one uv the institooshuns uv Trafton, why, wade in.”

But Carnes only shook his head, and lying at full length upon the ground feigning great pain, groaned at intervals:

“Oh! h! h! threasure-ship!”

“But, Long,” I interposed, “does this young lady, this Miss Manvers, sanction the story of a treasure from the deep, or is it only a flying rumor?”

“It’s flyin’ enough,” retorted Jim, soberly. “It’s in everybody’s mouth; that is, everybody as has an appetite for flyin’ rumors. And I never knew of the lady contradictin’ it, nuther. The facks is jest these, boss. There’s Miss Manvers, and there’s the big house, and the blooded horses, an’ all the other fine things that I couldn’t begin to interduce by their right names. They’re facks, as anybody can see. There seems to be plenty o’ money backin’ the big house an’ other big fixins, an’ I ain’t agoin’ to be oudacious enough ter say there ain’t a big treasure-ship backin’ up the whole business. Now, I ain’t never seen ‘em, an’ I ain’t never seen

anyone as has, not bein' much of a society man; but folks say as Miss Manvers has got the most wonderfulest things dug out o' that ship; old coins, heaps of 'em; jewels an'aunteeks, as they call 'em, that don't hardly ever see daylight. One thing's certain: old Manvers come here most six years ago; he dressed, looked, and talked like a sailor; he bought the big house, fitted it up, an' left his daughter in it. Then he went away and got drowned. They say he made his fortune at sea, and it's pretty sartin that he brought some wonderful things home from the briny. Mebbe you had better go up to the Hill, that's Miss Manvers' place, and interduce yourself, and ask for the family history, Mr. 'Exile of Erin,'" concluded Jim, with a grin intended to be sarcastic, as he seated himself on a half decayed stump, and prepared to fill his pipe.

"Bedad, an' so I will, Long Jim," cried Barney, springing up with alacrity. "An' thank ye kindly for mintionin' it. When will I find the leddy at home, then?"

Partly to avert the tournament which I saw was about to break out afresh between the two, and partly through interest in the fair owner of the treasure-ship spoils, I interposed once more.

"Miss Manvers must be a fair target for fortune-hunters, Long; are there any such in Trafton?"

"Wall, now, that's what *some* folks says, tho' I ain't goin' ter lay myself liable ter an action fer slander. There's lovers enough; it ain't easy tellin' jest what they air after. There's young Mr. Brookhouse; now, his pa's rich enough; he ain't no call to go fortin huntin'. There's a lawyer from G——, too, and a young 'Piscopal parson; then there's our new young doctor. I ain't hearn anyone say anythin' about him; but I've seen 'em together, and I makebold ter say that he's anuther on 'em. Seen the young doctor, ain't ye?" turning to me suddenly with the last question.

"Yes," I replied, carelessly; "he dines at the hotel."

"Just so, and keeps his own lodgin' house in that little smit on a cottage across the creek on the Brookhouse farm road."

"Oh, does he?"

"Yes. Queer place for a doctor, some think, but bless you, it's as central as any, when you come ter look. Trafton ain't got any heart, like most towns; you can't tell where the middle of it is. It's as crookid as—its reputation."

Not desiring to appear over anxious concerning the reputation of Trafton, I continued my queries about the doctor.

"He's new to Trafton, I think you said?"

"Yes, bran new; *too* new. We don't like new things, we don't; have to learn 'em afore we like 'em. We don't like the new doctor like we orter."

"We, Long? Don't you like Dr. Bethel?"

"Well, speakin' as an individual, I like him fust rate. I wuz speakin' as a good citizen, ye see; kind o' identifyin' myself with the common pulse," with an oratorical flourish.

"Oh, I do see," I responded, laughingly.

"Yis, we see!" broke in Barney, who had bridled his tongue all too long for his own comfort. "He's runnin' fur office, is Jim; he's afther wantin' to be alderman."

"Ireland," retorted Long, in a tone of lofty admonition, "we're talkin' sense, wot nobody expects ye to understand. Hold yer gab, won't yer?"

Thus admonished, Barney relapsed into silence, and Jim, who was now fairly launched, resumed:

“Firstly,” said he, “the doctor’s a leetle too good lookin’, don’t you think so?”

“Why, he is handsome, certainly, but it’s in a massive way; he is not effeminate enough to be too handsome.”

“That’s it,” replied Long, disparagingly; “he ain’t our style. Our style is curled locks, cunnin’ little moustachys, little hands and feet, and slim waists. Our style is more ruffles to the square fut of shirt front, and more chains and rings than this interlopin’ doctor wears.”

“Our sthyle! Och, murther, hear him!” groaned Carnes, in a stage aside.

“His manners ain’t our style, nuther,” went on Long, lugubriously. “We always has a bow and a smile fur all, rich an poor alike, exceptin’ now and then a no count person what there’s no need uv wastin’ politeness on. He goes along head up, independenter nor Fouth o’ July. He don’t make no distincshun between folks an’ folks, like a man orter. I’ve seen him bow jist the same bow to old Granny Sanders, as lives down at the poor farm, and to Parson Radcliffe, our biggest preachin’ gun. Now, that’s no way fer a man ter do as wants ter live happy in Trafton; it ain’t our way.”

A mighty groan from Barney.

“He’s got a practice, though,” went on Jim, utterly ignoring the apparent misery of his would-be tormentor. “Somehow he manages to cure folks as some of our old doctors can’t. I reckon a change o’ physic’s good fer folks, same’s a change o’ diet—”

“Or a clane shirt,” broke in Carnes, with an insinuating glance in the direction of Jim’s rather dingy linen.

“Eggsackly,” retorted Long, turning back his cuffs with great care and glancing menacingly at his enemy—“er a thrashin’.”

“Gentlemen,” I interposed, “let us have peace. And tell me, Jim, where may we find your model Traftonite, your hero of the curls, moustaches, dainty hands, and discriminating politeness? I have not seen him.”

“Whar?” retorted Long, in an aggrieved tone, “look here, boss, you don’t think I ever mean anythin’ personal by my remarks? I’d sworn it were all that way when you come ter notice. The average Traftonite’s the sleekest, pertiest chap on earth. We wuz born so.”

Some more demonstrations in pantomime from Carnes, and silence fell upon us. I knew from the way Long smoked at his pipe and glowered at Carnes that nothing more in the way of information need be expected from him. He had said enough, or too much, or something he had not intended to say; he looked dissatisfied, and soon we separated, Long repairing to his farm, and Carnes and I to our hotel, all in search of dinner.

“We won’t have much trouble in finding the ‘Average Traftonite,’ old man,” I said, as we sauntered back to town.

No answer; Carnes was smoking a huge black pipe and gazing thoughtfully on the ground.

“I wonder if any attempt has been made to rob Miss Manvers of those treasure-ship jewels,” I ventured next.

“Umph!”

“Or of her blooded horses. Carnes, what’s your opinion of Long?”

Carnes took his pipe from his mouth and turned upon me two serious eyes. When I saw the expression in them I knew he was ready to talk business.

“Honor bright?” he queried, without a trace of his Irish accent.

“Honor bright.”

“Well,” restoring his pipe and puffing out a black cloud, “he’s an odd fish!”

“Bad?”

“He’s a fraud!”

“As how?”

“Cute, keen, has played the fool so long he sometimes believes himself one. Did you notice any little discrepancies in his speech?”

“Well, rather.”

“Nobody else ever would, I’ll be bound; not the ‘Average Traftonite,’ at least. That man has not always been at odds with the English grammar, mark me. What do you think, Bathurst?”

“I think,” responded I, soberly, “that we shall find in him an ally or an enemy.”

We had been sauntering “across lots,” over some of the Brookhouse acres, and we now struck into a path leading down to the highway, that brought us out just opposite the cottage occupied by Dr. Bethel.

As we approached, the doctor was leaning over the gate in conversation with a gentleman seated in a light road wagon, whose face was turned away from us.

As we came near he turned his head, favoring us with a careless glance, and, as I saw his face, I recognized him as the handsome young gallant who had attended the friend of Miss Grace Ballou, on the occasion of that friend’s visit to the Ballou farm, and who had bidden the ladies such an impressive good-bye as I drove them away from the village station.

Contrary to my first intention I approached the gate, and as I drew near, the young man gathered up his reins and nodding to the doctor drove away.

Dr. Bethel and myself had exchanged civilities at our hotel, and I addressed him in a careless way as I paused at the gate.

“That’s a fine stepping horse, doctor,” nodding after the receding turnout; “is it owned in the town?”

“Yes,” replied the doctor; “that is young Brookhouse, or rather one of them. There are two or three sons; they all drive fine stock.”

I was passing in the town for a well-to-do city young man with sporting propensities, and as the doctor swung open the gate and strode beside me toward the hotel, Carnes trudging on in advance, the talk turned quite naturally upon horses, and horse owners.

That night I wrote to Mrs. Ballou, stating that I had nothing of much moment to impart, but desired that she would notify me several days in advance of her proposed visit to the city, as I wished to meet her. This letter I sent to our office to be forwarded to Groveland from thence.

Chapter VII

We Organize.

We had not been long in Trafton before our reputation as thoroughly good fellows was well established, "each man after his kind."

Carnes entered with zest into the part he had undertaken. He was hail fellow well met with every old bummer and corner loafer; he made himself acquainted with all the gossippers and possessed of all the gossip of the town.

After a little he began to grow somewhat unsteady in his habits, and under the influence of too much liquor, would occasionally make remarks, disparaging or otherwise as the occasion warranted, concerning me, and so it came about that I was believed to be a young man of wealth, the possessor of an irascible temper, but very generous; the victim of a woman's falseness;—but here Carnes always assured people that he did not know "the particulars," and that, if it came to my ears that he had "mentioned" it, it would cost him his place, etc.

These scraps of private history were always brought forward by, or drawn out of, him when he was supposed to be "the worse for liquor." In his "sober" moments he was discreetness itself.

So adroitly did he play his part that, without knowing how it came about, Trafton had accepted me at Carnes' standard, and I found my way made smooth, and myself considered a desirable acquisition to Trafton society.

I became acquainted with the lawyers, the ministers, the county officials, for Trafton was the county seat. I was soon on a social footing with the Brookhouses, father and son. I made my bow before the fair owner of the treasure-ship jewels; and began to feel a genuine interest in, and liking for, Dr. Bethel, who, according to Jim Long, was not Trafton style.

Thus fairly launched upon the Trafton tide, and having assured ourselves that no one entertained a suspicion of our masquerade, we began to look more diligently about us for fresh information concerning the depredations that had made the town attractive to us.

Sitting together one night, after Carnes had spent the evening at an especially objectionable saloon, and I had returned from a small social gathering whither I had been piloted by one of my new acquaintances, we began "taking account of stock," as Carnes quaintly put it.

"The question now arises," said Carnes, dropping his Hibernianisms, and taking them up again as his enthusiasm waxed or waned. "The question is this: What's in our hand? What do wee's know? What do wee's surmise, and what have wee's got till find out?"

"Very comprehensively put, old fellow," I laughed, while I referred to a previously mentioned note book. "First, then, what do we know?"

"Well," replied Carnes, tilting back his chair, "we know more than mony a poor fellow has known when he set out to work up a knotty case. We know we are in the field, bedad. We know that horses have been stolen, houses broken open, robberies great and small committed here. We know they have been well planned and systematic, engineered by a cute head."

Carnes stopped abruptly, and looked over as if he expected me to finish the summing up.

"Yes," I replied, "we knew all that in the beginning; now for what we have picked up. First, then, just run your eye over this memorandum; I made it out to-day, and, like a love letter, it should be destroyed as soon as read. Here you have, as near as I could get them, the names of the farmers who have lost horses, harness, buggies, etc. Here is the average distance of their respective residences from the town, and their directions. Do you see the drift?"

Carnes rubbed the bridge of his nose; a favorite habit.

"No, be the powers," he ejaculated; "St. Patrick himself couldn't see the sinse o' that."

"Very good. Now, here is a map of this county. On this map, one by one, you must locate those farms."

"Bother the location," broke in Carnes, impatiently. "Serve it up in a nutshell. What's the point?"

"The point, then, is this," drawing the map toward me. "The places where these robberies have been committed, are all in certain directions. Look; east, northeast, west, north; scarce one south, southeast, or southwest. Hence, I conclude that these stolen horses are run into some rendezvous that is not more than a five hours' ride from the scene of the theft."

"The dickens ye do!" muttered Carnes, under his breath.

"Again," I resumed, perceiving that Carnes was becoming deeply interested, and very alert, "the horses, etc., have been stolen from points ten, twelve, twenty miles, from Trafton; the most distant, so far as I have found out, is twenty-two miles."

"Ar-m-m-m?" from Carnes.

"Now, then, let us suppose the robbers to be living in this town. They leave here at nine, ten, or later when the distance is short. They ride fleet horses. At midnight, let us say, the robbery is committed. The horses must be off the road, and safe from prying eyes, before morning, and must remain perdu until the search is over. What, then? The question is, do the robbers turn them over to confederates, in order to get safely back to the town under cover of the night; or, is the hiding-place so near that no change is necessary?"

I paused for a comment, but Carnes sat mute.

"Now, then," I resumed, "I am supposing this lair of horse-thieves to be *somewhere* south, or nearly south, of the town, and not more than thirty miles distant."

"Umph!"

"I suppose it to be south, or nearly south, for obvious reasons. Don't you see what they are?"

"Niver mind; prache on."

"No horses have been taken from the south road, or from any of the roads that intersect it from this. I infer that it is used as an avenue of escape for the marauding bands. Consequently—"

"We must make the acquaintance of that north and south highway," broke in Carnes.

"Just so; and we must begin a systematic search from this out."

"System's the word," said Carnes, jerking his chair close to the table, upon which he planted his elbows. "Now, then, let's organize."

Illustration:

„System’s the word,” said Carnes, jerking his chair close to the table,
upon which he planted his elbows.

It was nearly daybreak before we knocked the ashes from our pipes, preparatory to closing the consultation, and when we separated to refresh ourselves with a few hours’ sleep, we were so thoroughly “organized” that had we not found another opportunity for private consultation during our operations in Trafton, we could still have gone on with the programme, as we had that night arranged it, without fear of blunder or misunderstanding.

* * * * *

“You came down upon me so sudden and solemn with your statistics and all that, last night,” said Carnes, the following morning, “that I entirely forgot to treat you to a beautiful little Trafton vagary I was saving for your benefit. They do say that the new doctor is suspected of being a detective!”

“What!” I said, in sincere amazement; “Carnes, that’s one of Jim Long’s notions.”

“Yis, but it isn’t,” retorted Carnes. “I haven’t seen Jim Long this day. D’ye mind the chap ye seen me in company with last evening early?”

“The loutish chap with red hair and a scarred cheek?”

“That’s him; well, his name is Tom Briggs, and he’s a very close-mouthed fellow when he’s sober; to-day he was drunk, and he told me in confidence that some folks looked upon Dr. Bethel as nothing more nor less than a detective, on the lookout for a big haul and a big reward.”

“What is this Briggs?”

“He’s a sort of a roust-about for ‘Squire Brookhouse, but the ‘squire don’t appear to work him very hard.”

“Carnes,” I said, after a moment of silence between us, “hadn’t you better cultivate Briggs?”

“Like enough I had,” he replied, nonchalantly. Then turning slowly until he faced me squarely “If I were you, I would give a little attention to *Dr. Bethel*.”

Chapter VIII

A Resurrection.

Two weeks passed, during which time Carnes and I worked slowly and cautiously, but to some purpose.

Having arrived at the conclusion that here was the place to begin our search for the robbers, we had still failed in finding in or about Trafton a single man upon whom to fix suspicion.

After thoroughly analyzing Trafton society, high and low, I was obliged to admit to Carnes, ‘spite of the statement made by the worthy farmer on board the railway train that “the folks as prospered best were those who did the least work,” that I

found among the poor, the indolent and the idle, no man capable of conducting or aiding in a prolonged series of high-handed robberies.

The only people in Trafton about whom there seemed the shadow of strangeness or mystery, were Dr. Bethel and Jim Long.

Dr. Bethel had lived in Trafton less than a year; he was building up a fine practice; was dignified, independent, uncommunicative. He had no intimates, and no one knew, or could learn, aught of his past history. He was a regularly authorized physician, a graduate from a well-known and reliable school. He was unmarried and seemed quite independent of his practice as a means of support.

According to Jim Long, he was "not Trafton style," and if Tom Briggs was to be believed, he was "suspected" of making one profession a cloak for the practice of another.

Jim Long had been nearly five years in Trafton. He had bought his bit of land, built thereon his shanty, announced himself as "Hoss Fysician," and had loafed or laughed, smoked or fished, hunted, worked and played, as best pleased him; and no one in Trafton had looked upon him as worthy of suspicion, until Carnes and I did him that honor.

Up to this time we had never once ventured to walk or drive over that suspected south road. This was not an accident or an oversight, but a part of our "programme."

We had lived and operated so quietly that Carnes began to complain of the monotony of our daily lives, and to long, Micawber-like, for something to turn up.

We had both fully recovered in health and vigor; and I was beginning to fear that we might be compelled to report at the agency, and turn our backs upon Trafton without having touched its mystery, when there broke upon us the first ripple that was the harbinger of a swift, onrushing tide of events, which, sweeping across the monotony of our days, caught us and tossed us to and fro, leaving us no moment of rest until the storm had passed, and the waves that rolled over Trafton had swept away its scourge.

One August day I received a tiny perfumed note bidding me attend a garden party, to be given by Miss Manvers one week from date. As I was writing my note of acceptance, Carnes suggested that I, as a gentleman of means, should honor this occasion by appearing in the latest and most stunning of Summer suits; and I, knowing the effect of fine apparel upon the ordinary society-loving villager, decided to profit by his suggestions. So, having sealed and despatched my missive, I bent my steps toward the telegraph office, intent upon sending an order to my tailor by the quickest route.

The operator was a sociable young fellow, the son of one of the village clergymen, and I sometimes dropped in upon him for a few moments' chat.

I numbered among my varied accomplishments, all of which had been acquired for *use* in my profession, the ability to read, by sound, the telegraph instrument.

This knowledge, however, I kept to myself, on principle, and young Harris was not aware that my ear was drinking in his messages, as we sat smoking socially in his little operating compartment.

After sending my message, I produced my cigar case and, Harris accepting a weed, I sat down beside him for a brief chat.

Presently the instrument called Trafton, and Harris turned to receive the following message:

New Orleans, Aug. ——

Arch Brookhouse—Hurry up the others or we are likely to have a balk.
F. B.

Hastily scratching off these words Harris enclosed, sealed, and addressed the message, and tossed it on the table.

The address was directly under my eye; and I said, glancing carelessly at it:

“Arch,—is not that a rather juvenile name for such a long, lean, solemn-visaged man as ‘Squire Brookhouse?’”

Harris laughed.

“That is for the son,” he replied; “he is named for his father, and to distinguish between them, the elder always signs himself *Archibald*, the younger *Arch*.”

“I see. Is Archibald Junior the eldest son?”

“No; he is the second. Fred is older by four years.”

“Fred is the absent one?”

“Fred and Louis are both away now. Fred is in business in New Orleans, I think.”

“Ah! an enterprising rich man’s son.”

“Well, yes, enterprising and adventurous. Fred used to be a trifle wild. He’s engaged in some sort of theatrical enterprise, I take it.”

Just then there came the sound of hurrying feet and voices mingling in excited converse.

In another moment Mr. Harris, the elder, put his head in at the open window.

“Charlie, telegraph to Mr. Beale at Swan Station; tell him to come home instantly; his little daughter’s grave has been robbed!”

Uttering a startled ejaculation, young Harris turned to his instrument, and his father withdrew his head and came around to the office door.

“Good-morning,” he said to me, seating himself upon a corner of the office desk. “This is a shameful affair, sir; the worst that has happened in Trafton, to my mind. Only yesterday I officiated at the funeral of the little one; she was only seven years old, and looked like a sleeping angel, and now—”

He paused and wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

“Mrs. Beale will be distracted,” said Charlie Harris, turning toward us. “It was her only girl.”

“Beale is a mechanic, you see,” said the elder, addressing me. “He is working upon some new buildings at Swan Station.”

“How was it discovered?” said his son.

“I hardly know; they sent for me to break the news to Mrs. Beale, and I thought it best to send for Beale first. The town is working into a terrible commotion over it.”

Just here a number of excited Traftonites entered the outer room and called out Mr. Harris.

A moment later I saw Carnes pass the window; he moved slowly, and did not turn his head, but I knew at once that he wished to see me. I arose quietly and

went out. Passing through the group of men gathered about Mr. Harris, I caught these words: "Cursed resurrectionist," and, "I knew he was not the man for us."

Hurrying out I met Carnes at the corner of the building.

"Have you heard—" he began; but I interrupted him.

"Of the grave robbery? Yes."

"Well," said Carnes, laying a hand upon my arm, "they are organizing a gang down at Porter's store. They are going to raid Dr. Bethel's cottage and search for the body."

"They're a set of confounded fools!" I muttered. "Follow me, Carnes."

And I turned my steps in the direction of "Porter's store."

Chapter IX

Mob Law.

Lounging just outside the door at Porter's was Jim Long, hands in pockets, eyes fixed on vacancy. He was smoking his favorite pipe, and seemed quite oblivious to the stir and excitement going on within. When he saw me approach, he lounged a few steps toward me, then getting beyond the range of Porter's door and window.

"Give a dough-headed bumpkin a chance to make a fool of himself an' he'll never go back on it," began Jim, as I approached. "Have ye come ter assist in the body huntin'?"

"I will assist, most assuredly, if assistance is needed," I replied.

"Well, then, walk right along in. I guess I'll go home."

"Don't be too hasty, Jim," I said, in a lower tone. "I want to see you in about two minutes."

Jim gave a grunt of dissatisfaction, but seated himself, nevertheless, on one of Porter's empty butter tubs, that stood just beside a window.

I passed in and added myself to the large group of men huddled close together near the middle of the long store, and talking earnestly and angrily, with excitement, fiercely, or foolishly, as the case might be.

The fire-brand had been dropped in among them, by whom they never could have told, had they stopped once to consider; but they did not consider. Someone had hinted at the possibility of finding the body of little Effie Beale in the possession of the new doctor, and that was enough. Guilty or innocent, Dr. Bethel must pay the penalty of his reticence, his newness, and his independence. Not being numbered among the acceptable institutions of Trafton, he need expect no quarter.

It seemed that the child had been under his care, and looking at the matter from a cold-blooded, scientific standpoint, it appeared to me not impossible that the doctor had disinterred the body, and I soon realized that should he be found guilty, or even be unable to prove his innocence, it would go hard with Dr. Bethel.

Among those who cautioned the overheated ones, and urged prudence, and calm judgment, was Arch Brookhouse; but, somehow, his words only served to

add fuel to the flame; while, chief among the turbulent ones, who urged extreme measures, was Tom Briggs, and I noted that he was also supported by three or four fellows of the same caliber, two of whom I had never seen before.

Having satisfied myself that there was not much time to lose if I wished to see fair play for Dr. Bethel, I turned away from the crowd, unnoticed, and went out to where Jim waited.

"Jim," I said, touching him on the shoulder, "they mean to make it hot for Bethel, and he will be one man against fifty—we must not allow anything like that."

"Now ye're talkin'," said Jim, knocking the ashes from his pipe, and rising slowly, "an' I'm with ye. What's yer idee?"

"We must not turn the mob against us, by seeming to co-operate," I replied. "Do you move with the crowd, Jim; I'll be on the ground as soon as you are."

"All right, boss," said Jim.

I turned back toward the telegraph office, that being midway between "Porter's" and my hotel.

The men were still there talking excitedly. I looked in at the window and beckoned to young Harris. He came to me, and I whispered:

"The men at Porter's mean mischief to Dr. Bethel; your father may be able to calm them; he had better go down there."

"He will," replied Harris, in a whisper, "and so will I."

Carnes was lounging outside the office. I approached him, and said:

"Go along with the crowd, Carnes, and stand in with Briggs."

Carnes winked and nodded, and I went on toward the hotel.

On reaching my room, I took from their case a brace of five-shooters, and put the weapons in my pockets. Then I went below and seated myself on the hotel piazza.

In order to reach Dr. Bethel's house, the crowd must pass the hotel; so I had only to wait.

I did not wait long, however. Soon they came down the street, quieter than they had been at Porter's, but resolute to defy law and order, and take justice into their own hands. As they hurried past the hotel in groups of twos, threes, and sometimes half a dozen, I noted them man by man. Jim Long was loping silently on by the side of an honest-faced farmer; Carnes and Briggs were in the midst of a swaggering, loud talking knot of loafers; the Harrises, father and son, followed in the rear of the crowd and on the opposite side of the street.

As the last group passed, I went across the road and joined the younger Harris, who was some paces in advance of his father, looking, as I did so, up and down the street. Arch Brookhouse came cantering up on a fine bay; he held in his hand the yellow envelope, which, doubtless, he had just received from Harris.

"Charlie," he called, reining in his horse. "Stop a moment; you must send a message for me."

We halted, Harris looking somewhat annoyed.

Brookhouse tore off half of the yellow envelope, and sitting on his horse, wrote a few words, resting his scrap of paper on the horn of his saddle.

"Sorry to trouble you, Charlie," he said, "but I want this to go at once. Were you following the mob?"

“Yes,” replied Charlie, “weren’t you?”

“No,” said Brookhouse, shortly, “I’m going home; I don’t believe in mob law.”

So saying, he handed the paper to Harris, who, taking it with some difficulty, having to lean far out because of a ditch between himself and Brookhouse, lost his hold upon it, and a light puff of wind sent it directly into my face.

I caught it quickly, and before Harris could recover his balance, I had scanned its contents. It ran thus:

No. — New Orleans.

Fred Brookhouse:—Next week L—— will be on hand.

A. B.

Harris took the scrap of paper and turned back toward the office. And I, joining the elder Harris, walked on silently, watching young Brookhouse as he galloped swiftly past the crowd; past the house of Dr. Bethel, and on up the hill, toward the Brookhouse homestead. I wondered inwardly why Frederick Brookhouse, if he were prominently connected with a Southern theater, should receive his telegrams at a private address.

Dr. Bethel occupied two pleasant rooms of a small house owned by ‘Squire Brookhouse. He had chosen these, so he afterwards informed me, because he wished a quiet place for study, and this he could scarcely hope to find either in the village hotel or the average private boarding houses. He took his meals at the hotel, and shared the office of Dr. Barnard, the eldest of the Trafton physicians, who was quite willing to retire from the practice of his profession, and was liberal enough to welcome a young and enterprising stranger.

Dr. Bethel was absent; this the mob soon ascertained, and some of them, after paying a visit to the stable, reported that his horse was gone.

“Gone to visit some country patient, I dare say,” said Mr. Harris, as we heard this announcement.

“Gone ter be out of the way till he sees is he found out,” yelled Tom Briggs. “Let’s go through the house, boys.”

There was a brief consultation among the leaders of the raid, and then, to my surprise and to Mr. Harris’s disgust, they burst in the front door and poured into the house, Carnes among the rest. Jim Long drew back as they crowded in, and took up his position near the gate, and not far from the place where we had halted.

Their search was rapid and fruitless; they were beginning to come out and scatter about the grounds, when a horse came thundering up to the gate, and Dr. Bethel flung himself from the saddle.

He had seen the raiding party while yet some rods away, and he turned a perplexed and angry face upon us.

“I should like to know the meaning of this,” he said, in quick, ringing tones, at the same moment throwing open the little gate so forcibly as to make those nearest it start and draw back. “Who has presumed to open my door?”

Mr. Harris approached him and said, in a low tone:

“Bethel, restrain yourself. Little Effie Beale has been stolen from her grave, and these men have turned out to search for the body.”

“Stolen from her grave!” the doctor’s hand fell to his side and the anger died out of his eyes, and he seemed to comprehend the situation in a moment. “And they accuse me—of course.”

The last words were touched with a shade of irony. Then he strode in among the searchers.

“My friends,” he said, in a tone of lofty contempt, “so you have accused me of grave robbing. Very well; go on with your search, and when it is over, and you find that you have brought a false charge against me, go home, with the assurance that every man of you shall be made to answer for this uncalled-for outlawry.”

The raiders who had gathered together to listen to this speech, fell back just a little, in momentary consternation. He had put the matter before them in a new light, and each man felt himself for the moment responsible for his own acts. But the voice of Tom Briggs rallied them.

“He’s bluffin’ us!” cried this worthy. “He’s tryin’ to make us drop the hunt. Boys, we’re gittin’ hot. Let’s go for the barn and garden.”

And he turned away, followed by the more reckless ones.

Without paying the slightest heed to them or their movements, Dr. Bethel turned again to Mr. Harris and asked when the body was disinterred.

While a part of the men, who had not followed Briggs, drew closer to our group, and the rest whispered together, a little apart, Mr. Harris told him all that was known concerning the affair.

As he listened a cynical half smile covered the doctor’s face; he lifted his head and seemed about to speak, then, closing his lips firmly, he again bent his head and listened as at first.

“There’s something strange about this resurrection,” said he, when Mr. Harris had finished. “Mr. Beale’s little daughter was my patient. It was a simple case of diphtheria. There were no unusual symptoms, nothing in the case to rouse the curiosity of any physician. The Trafton doctors know this. Drs. Hess and Barnard counselled with me. Either the body has been stolen by some one outside of Trafton, or—there is another motive.”

He spoke these last words slowly, as if still deliberating, and, turning, took his horse by the bridle and led him stableward.

In another moment there came a shout from Briggs’ party, their loud voices mingling in angry denunciations.

With one impulse the irresolute ones, forgetting self, swarmed in the direction whence the voices came.

We saw Dr. Bethel, who was just at the rear corner of the house, start, stop, then suddenly let fall the bridle and stride after the hurrying men, and at once, Mr. Harris, Jim Long and myself followed.

Just outside the stable stood Briggs, surrounded by his crew, talking loudly, and holding up to the view of all, a bright new spade, and an earth-stained pick ax. As we came nearer we could see that the spade too had clots of moist black earth clinging to its surface.

Chapter X

Two Fair Champions.

“Look, all of ye,” shouted Briggs. “So much fer his big words; them’s the things he did the job with.”

Illustration:

„Look, all of ye,” shouted Briggs. „So much fer his big words;
them’s the things he did the job with.”

The doctor stopped short at sight of these implements; stopped and stood motionless so long that his attitude might well have been mistaken for that of unmasked guilt. But his face told another story; blank amazement was all it expressed for a moment, then a gleam of comprehension; next a sneer of intensest scorn, and last, strong but suppressed anger. He strode in among the men gathered about Tom Briggs.

“Where did you get those tools, fellow?” he demanded, sternly.

“From the place where ye hid ‘em, I reckon,” retorted Briggs.

“Answer me, sir,” thundered the doctor. “*Where* were they?”

“Oh, ye needn’t try any airs on me; ye know well enough where we got ‘em.”

Dr. Bethel’s hand shot out swiftly, and straight from the shoulder, and Briggs went down like a log.

“Now, sir,” turning to the man nearest Briggs, “where were these things hidden?”

It chanced that this next man was Carnes, who answered quickly, and with well feigned self-concern.

“In the stable, yer honor, foreinst the windy, behind the shay.”

I heard a suppressed laugh behind me, and looking over my shoulder saw Charlie Harris.

“Things are getting interesting,” he said, coming up beside me. “Will there be a scrimmage, think you?”

I made him no answer, my attention being fixed upon Bethel, who was entering the stable and dragging Carnes with him. When he had ascertained the exact spot where the tools were found, he came out and turned upon the raiders.

“Go on with your farce,” he said, with a sarcastic curl of the lip. “I am curious to see what you will find next.”

Then turning upon Briggs, who had scrambled to his feet, and who caressed a very red and swollen eye, while he began a tirade of abuse—

“Fellow, hold your tongue, if you don’t want a worse hit. If you’ll walk into my house I’ll give you a plaster for that eye—after I have cared for your better.”

And he turned toward his horse, whistling a musical call. The well-trained animal came straight to its master and was led by him into its accustomed place.

And now the search became more active. Those who at first had been held in check by the doctor’s manner were once more spurred to action by the sight of

those earth-stained tools, and the general verdict was that "Bethel was bluffing, sure." When he emerged again from the stable, they were scattering about the garden, looking in impossible places of concealment, under everything, over everything, into everything.

Briggs, who seemed not at all inclined to accept the doctor's proffered surgical aid, still grasping in his hand the pick, and followed by Carnes, to whom he had resigned the spade, went prowling about the garden.

Bethel, who appeared to have sufficient mental employment of some sort, passed our group with a smile and the remark:

"I can't ask you in, gentlemen, until I have set my house in order. Those vandals have made it a place of confusion."

He entered the house through a rear door, which had been thrown open by the invaders, and a moment later, as I passed by a side window, I glanced in and saw him, not engaged in "setting his house in order," but sitting in a low, broad-backed chair, his elbows resting on his knees, his hands loosely clasped, his head bent forward, his eyes "fixed on vacancy," the whole attitude that of profound meditation.

The finding of the tools, the manner of Bethel, both puzzled me. I went over to Jim Long, who had seated himself on the well platform, and asked:

"How is this going to terminate, Jim?"

"Umph!" responded Jim, somewhat gruffly. "Twon't be long a comin' to a focus."

And he spoke truly. In a few moments we heard a shout from the rear of the garden. Tom Briggs and his party had found a spot where the soil had been newly turned. In another moment a dozen hands were digging fiercely.

Just then, and unnoticed by the exploring ones, a new element of excitement came upon the scene.

Mr. Beale, the father of the missing child, accompanied by two or three friends, came in from the street. They paused a moment, in seeming irresolution, then the father, seeing the work going on in the garden, uttered a sharp exclamation, and started hastily toward the spot, where, at that moment, half a dozen men were bending over the small excavation they had made, and twice as many more were crowding close about them.

"They have found something," said Harris, the elder, and he hastily followed Mr. Beale, leaving his son and myself standing together near the rear door of the house, and Jim still sitting aloof, the only ones now, save Dr. Bethel, who were not grouping closer and closer about the diggers, in eager anxiety to see what had been unearthed.

In another moment, there came a tumult of exclamations, imprecations, oaths; and above all the rest, a cry of mingled anguish and rage from the lips of the bereaved and tortured father.

The crowd about the spot fell back, and the diggers arose, one of them holding something up to the view of the rest. Instinctively, young Harris and myself started toward them.

But Jim Long still sat stolidly smoking beside the well.

As we moved forward, I heard a sound from the house, and looked back. Dr. Bethel had flung wide open the shutters of a rear window, and was looking out upon the scene.

Approaching the group, we saw what had caused the father's cry, and the growing excitement of the searchers. They had found a tiny pair of shoes, and a little white dress; the shoes and dress in which little Effie Beale had been buried.

And now the wildest excitement prevailed. Maddened with grief, rage, and sickening horror, the father called upon them to find the body, and to aid him in wreaking vengeance upon the man who had desecrated his darling's grave.

It was as fire to flax. Those who have witnessed the workings of a mob, know how swiftly, mysteriously, unreasonably, it kindles under certain influences.

How many men, with different, often opposing interests, make the cause of one their common cause, and forgetting personality, become a unit for vengeance, a single, dreadful, unreasoning force!

The air resounded with threats, imprecations, exclamations, oaths.

Some of the better class of Traftonites had followed after the first party, joining them by threes and fours. These made some effort to obtain a hearing for themselves and Mr. Harris, but it was futile.

"Hang the rascally doctor!"

"String him up!"

"Run him out of town!"

"Hanging's too good!"

"Let's tar and feather him!"

"Bring him out; bring him out!"

"Give us a hold of him!"

"We ain't found the body yet," cried one of the most earnest searchers. "Let's keep looking."

As some of the party turned toward the house I looked back to the open window.

Dr. Bethel still stood in full view, but Jim Long had disappeared from the pump platform.

The search now became fierce and eager, and while some started to go once again through the house and cellar, a number of Briggs' cronies began a furious onslaught upon a stack of hay, piled against the stable.

But those who approached the house met with an unlooked-for obstacle to their search,—the rear door was closed and barred against them. Failing in this quarter they hastened around to the front.

Here the door was open, just as they had left it, swinging on one broken hinge; but the doctor's tall form and stalwart shoulders barred the way.

"Gentlemen," he said, in low, resolute tones, "you can not enter my house, at least at present. You have done sufficient damage to my property already."

The men halted for a moment, and then the foremost of them began to mount the steps.

"Stand back," said Bethel. "I shall protect my property. I will allow my house to be inspected again by a committee, if you like, but I will not admit a mob."

"You'd better not try to stop us," said the leader of the party, "we are too many for ye." And he mounted the upper step.

"Stand down, sir," again said Bethel. "Did I not say I should protect my property?" and he suddenly presented in the face of the astonished searcher a brace of silver-mounted pistols.

The foremost men drew hastily back, but they rallied again, and one of them yelled out:

“Ye’d better not tackle us single-handed; an’ ye won’t get anyone to back ye *now!*”

“Jest allow me ter argy that pint with ye,” said Jim Long, as he suddenly appeared in the doorway beside Bethel. “I reckon I’m somebody.”

Jim held in his hand a handsome rifle, the doctor’s property, and he ran his eye critically along the barrel as he spoke.

“Here’s five of us, an’ we all say *ye can’t come in*. Three of us can *repeat* the remark if it ‘pears necessary.”

Then turning his eye upon the last speaker of the party, he said, affably:

“I ain’t much with the little shooters, Simmons; but I can jest make a rifle howl. Never saw me shoot, did ye? Now, jest stand still till I shoot that grasshopper off ye’r hat brim.”

Simmons, who stood in the midst of the group, and was taller than those about him by half a head, began a rapid retrograde movement, and, as Jim slowly raised his rifle to his shoulder, the group about the door-steps melted away, leaving him in possession of the out-posts.

“That,” said Jim, with a grin, as he lowered his rifle, “illyusterates the sooperiority of mind over matter. Doctor, did ye know the darned thing wasn’t loaded?”

While Bethel still smiled at this bit of broad comedy, a sharp cry, and then a sudden unnatural stillness, told of some new occurrence, and followed by Jim we went back to the rear window and looked out.

They were crowding close about something, as yet half hidden in the scattered hay; all silent, and, seemingly, awe-stricken. Thus for a moment only, then a low murmur ran through the crowd, growing and swelling into a yell of rage and fury.

Hidden in the doctor’s hay they had found the body of Effie Beale!

It was still encoffined, but the little casket had been forced open, and it was evident, from the position of the body, that the buried clothing had been hurriedly torn from it.

It would be difficult to describe the scene which followed this last discovery. While the father, and his more thoughtful friends, took instant possession of the little coffin, the wrath of the raiders grew hotter and higher; every voice and every hand was raised against Dr. Bethel.

Tom Briggs, with his blackened eye, was fiercely active, and his two or three allies clamored loudly for vengeance upon “the cursed resurrectionist.”

“Let’s give him a lesson,” yelled a burly fellow, who, having neither wife, child, nor relative in Trafton was, according to a peculiar law governing the average human nature, the loudest to clamor for summary vengeance. “Let’s set an example, an’ teach grave robbers what to look for when they come to Trafton!”

“If we don’t settle with him nobody will,” chimed in another fellow, who doubtless had good reason for doubting the ability of Trafton justice to deal with law-breakers.

Those who said little were none the less eager to demonstrate their ability to deal with offenders when the opportunity afforded itself. Over and again, in various ways, Trafton had been helplessly victimized, and now, that at last they

had traced an outrage to its source, Trafton seized the opportunity to vindicate herself.

A few of the fiercest favored extreme measures, but the majority of the mob seemed united in their choice of feathers and tar, as a means of vengeance.

Seeing how the matter would terminate, I turned to Harris, the younger, who had kept his position near me.

“Ask your father to follow us,” I said, “and come with me. They are about to attack the doctor.”

We went quietly around and entered the house from the front. The doctor and Jim were still at the open window, and in full view of the mob.

Bethel turned toward us a countenance locked in impenetrable self-possession.

“They mean business,” he said, nodding his head toward the garden. “Poor fools.”

Then he took his pistols from a chair by the window, putting one in each pocket of his loose sack coat.

“Gentlemen,” he said, addressing us, “pray don’t bring upon yourselves the enmity of these people by attempting to defend me. I assure you I am in no danger, and can deal with them single-handed. Out of regard for what they have left of my furniture, I will meet them, outside.”

And he put one hand upon the window sill and leaped lightly out, followed instantly by young Harris.

“Here’s the inconvenience of being in charge of the artillery,” growled Jim Long, discontentedly. “I’ll stay in the fort till the enemy opens fire,” and he drew the aforementioned rifle closer to him, as he squatted upon the window ledge.

The clergyman and myself, without consultation or comment, made our exit as we came, by the open front door, and arrived upon the scene just as Bethel, with his two hands in his coat pockets, halted midway between the house and rear garden to meet the mob that swarmed toward him, yelling, hooting, hissing.

If the doctor had hoped to say anything in his own defense, or even to make himself heard, he was speedily convinced of the futility of such an undertaking. His voice was drowned by their clamor, and as many eager hands were outstretched to seize him in their hard, unfriendly grasp, the doctor lost faith in moral suasion and drew back a step, while he suddenly presented, for their consideration, a brace of five-shooters.

The foremost men recoiled for a moment, and Mr. Harris seized the opportunity. Advancing until he stood almost before Dr. Bethel, he began a conciliatory speech, after the most approved manner.

But it came to an abrupt ending, the men rallied almost instantly, and, drowning the clergyman’s voice under a chorus of denunciations and oaths, they once more pressed forward.

“Stand down, parson,” cried Jim Long, now leaping from the window, rifle in hand, and coming to the rescue. “Your medicine ain’t the kind they’re hankerin’ after.”

Illustration:

„Stand down, parson,” cried Jim Long, rifle in hand.

“You fall back, Tom Briggs,” called Charlie Harris, peremptorily, “we want fair play here,” and he drew a pistol from his pocket and took his stand beside Bethel.

At the same moment I drew my own weapons and fell into line.

“Gentlemen,” I said, “let’s give Dr. Bethel a hearing.”

And now occurred what we had hardly anticipated. While some of the foremost of the raiders drew back, others advanced, and we saw that these comers to the front were armed like ourselves.

While we stood thus, for a moment, there was a breathless silence and then Jim Long’s deep voice made itself heard.

“Some of you fellers are giving yourselves away,” he said, with a sneer. “Now, jest look a here; ye mean bluff, we mean business. An’ you chaps as has been supplied with shooters by Tom Briggs and Simmons and Saunders hed better drop the things an’ quit.”

A moment’s silence, then a babel of voices, a clamor and rush.

There was the loud crack of a pistol, accompanied by a fierce oath,—a cry of “stop,” uttered in a clear female voice,—then another moment of breathless silence.

Two women were standing in our midst, directly between the doctor and his assailants, and Carnes still grasped the pistol hand of Tom Briggs, while the smoke of the averted charge yet hovered above their heads.

One of the two ladies, who had so suddenly come to the rescue, was Miss Adele Manvers. The other a tall, lithe, beautiful blonde, I had never before seen.

“Friends, neighbors,” said this fair stranger, in clear, sweet, but imperious tones, “you have made a terrible mistake. Dr. Bethel was with my father from sunset last night until one hour ago. They were together every moment, at the bedside of Mr. James Kelsey, on the Willoughby road.”

Evidently this fair young lady was an authority not to be questioned. The crowd fell back in manifest consternation, even Tom Briggs’ tongue was silent.

Miss Manvers stood for a moment casting glances of open contempt upon the crowd. Then, as the doctor’s fair champion ceased speaking and, seeing that her words had been effective, drew nearer to Mr. Harris, flushing and paling as if suddenly abashed by her own daring, the brilliant owner of the treasure-ship riches turned to Dr. Bethel.

“Doctor, you are our prisoner,” she said, smiling up at him. “Dr. Barnard is half frantic since hearing of this affair, and he commissioned us to bring you to him at once.”

Miss Manvers had not as yet noted my presence among the doctor’s handful of allies. Wishing to give my eyes and ears full play, I drew back, and, using Jim Long as a screen, kept near the group about the doctor; but out of view. I had noted the sudden flash of his eyes, and the lighting up of his face, when the fair unknown came among us. And now I saw him clasp her hand between his two firm palms and look down into her face, for just a moment, as I could have sworn he had never looked at any other woman.

I saw her eyes meet his for an instant, then she seemed to have withdrawn into herself, and the fearless champion was merged in the modest but self-possessed woman.

I saw the haughty Adele Manvers moving about among the raiders, bestowing a word here and there, and I saw Mr. Harris now making good use of the opportunity these two fair women had made. I noted that Tom Briggs and his loud-voiced associates were among the first to slink away.

Dr. Bethel was reluctant to quit the field, but the advice of Mr. Harris, the earnest entreaty of Miss Manvers, and, more than all the rest, the one pleading look from the eyes of the lovely unknown, prevailed.

“Long,” he said, turning to Jim, “here are my keys; will you act as my steward until—my place is restored to quiet?”

Jim nodded comprehensively.

“I’ll clear the premises,” he said, grimly. “Don’t ye have any uneasiness; I’ll camp right down here.”

“Bethel,” said Charlie Harris, “for the sake of the ladies, you had better go at once; those fellows in the rear there are trying to rally their forces.”

“Since my going will be a relief to my friends, I consent to retreat,” said the besieged doctor, smiling down at the two ladies.

They had driven thither in a dashing little pony phaeton, owned by Miss Manvers; and as they moved toward it the heiress said:

“Doctor, you must drive Miss Barnard home; I intend to walk, and enjoy the society of Mr. Harris.”

Dr. Bethel and the blonde lady entered the little carriage, and, after a few words addressed to Harris and Miss Manvers, drove away.

The heiress looked about the grounds for a moment, addressed a few gracious words to Harris, the elder, smiled at Jim Long, and then moved away, escorted by the delighted younger Harris.

“Wimmen air—wimmen,” said Jim Long, sententiously, leaning upon the rifle, which he still retained, and looking up the road after the receding plumes of Miss Manvers’ Gainsborough hat. “You can’t never tell where they’re goin’ ter appear next. It makes a feller feel sort a ornary, though, ter have a couple o’ gals sail in an’ do more business with a few slick words an’ searchin’ looks, then he could do with a first-class rifle ter back him. Makes him feel as tho’ his influence was weakening.”

“Jim,” I said, ignoring his whimsical complaint, “who was the fair haired lady?”

“Doctor Barnard’s only darter, Miss Louise.”

“I never saw her before.”

“Spose not; she’s been away nigh onto two months, visitin’ her father’s folks. Old Barnard must a had one of his bad turns this morning, so’s he couldn’t git out, or he’d never a sent his gal into such a crowd on such an errand. Hullo, what’s that Mick o’ your’n doin’?”

Glancing in the direction indicated by Jim, I saw that Carnes was engaged in a fisticuff bout with Tom Briggs, and hastened to interpose; not through solicitude for Carnes so much as because I wished to prevent a serious rupture between the two.

Illustration:

Glancing in the direction indicated by Jim, I saw that Carnes was engaged in a fisticuff bout with Tom Briggs.

“Barney,” I said, severely, “you have been drinking too much, I am sure. Stop this ruffianism at once.”

“Is it ruffianism yer callin’ it, ter defend yerself aginst the murtherin’ shnake; and ain’t it all bekase I hild up his fist fer fear the blundherin’ devil ud shoot yees by mishtake! Och, then, didn’t I make the illigant rhyme though?”

“You have made yourself very offensive to me, sir, by the part you have taken in this affair,” I retorted, with additional sternness; “and so long as you remain in my service you will please to remember that I desire you to avoid the society of loafers and brawlers.”

“Meanin’ me, I suppose?” snarled Tom Briggs.

“Meaning you in *this* instance,” I retorted, turning away from the two, with all the dignity I could muster for the occasion.

“Bedad, he’s got his blood up,” muttered Carnes, ruefully, as I walked away. “Old Red Top, shake! Seein’ as I’m to be afther howldin’ myself above yees in future, I won’t mind yer airs jist now, an’ if iver I git twenty dollars ahead I’ll discharge yon blood an’ be me own bye.”

Satisfied that this bit of by-play had had the desired effect, and being sure that Carnes would not leave the premises so long as there remained anything or any one likely to prove interesting, I turned my steps townward, musing as I went.

I had made, or so I believed, three discoveries.

Dr. Carl Bethel was the victim of a deep laid plot, of which this affair of the morning was but the beginning.

Dr. Carl Bethel was in love with the fair Miss Barnard.

And the brilliant owner of the treasure-ship jewels was in love with Dr. Carl Bethel.

Whether Bethel was aware of the plot, or suspected his enemies; whether he was really what he seemed, or only playing a part like myself; whether to warn him and so risk bringing myself under suspicion, or to let matters take their natural course and keep a sharp lookout meantime;—were questions which I asked myself again and again, failing to find a satisfactory answer.

On one thing I decided, however. Bethel was a self-reliant man. He was keen and courageous, quite capable of being more than he seemed. He was not a man to be satisfied with half truth. I must give him my fullest confidence or not seek his.

Chapter XI

A Cup of Tea.

It was growing dusk before I saw Carnes again that day. I had remained in my room since dinner, wishing to avoid as much as possible the gossip and natural inquiry that would follow the denouement of the raid against Dr. Bethel, lest some

suspicious mind should think me too much interested, considering the part I had taken in the affair.

Carnes came in softly, and wearing upon his face the peculiar knowing grin that we at the office had named his "Fox smile." He held in his hand a folded slip of paper, which he dropped upon my knee, and then drew back, without uttering a comment, to watch my perusal of the same.

It was very brief, simply a penciled line from Dr. Barnard, asking me to tea at seven o'clock. It was almost seven as I read.

"Where did you get this?" I asked, rising with sudden alacrity, and beginning a hurried toilet. "Read it Carnes, if you haven't already; I should have had it earlier."

Carnes took up the note, perused it, and tossed it on the bed, then, seating himself astride a chair, he told his story, watching my progressing toilet with seeming interest the while.

"After my tender parting with Briggs, I sherried over and made myself agreeable to Jim Long, and as I was uncommon respectful and willin' to be harangued, he sort o' took me as handy boy, an' let me stay an help him tidy up Bethel's place. He cleared out the multitude, put the yard into decent order, and then, while he undertook to rehang the doctor's front door, I'm blest if he didn't set me to pilin' up the hay stack. Don't wear that beast of a choker, man, it makes you look like a laughing hyena."

I discarded the condemned choker, swallowed the doubtful compliment, and Carnes continued, lapsing suddenly into broad Irish:

"Prisintly he comes out to the shtack, as I was finishin' the pile, tellin' me as he must have some new hinges to the doctor's door, an' axin would I shtay an' kape house till he wint up fer the iron works. I consinted."

"Yes!" eagerly.

"And I made good use of the opportunity. I wint over that place in a way to break the heart of a jenteel crook, an' I'm satisfied."

"Of what, Carnes?"

"That there's no irregularity about the doctor. If there was a track as big as a fly's foot wouldn't I have hit it? Yes, sir! There ain't no trace of the detective-in-ambush about those premises, Tom Briggs to the contrary notwithstanding. He's a regular articulated medical college graduate; there's plenty of correspondence to prove him Dr. Carl Bethel, and nothing to prove him anything else."

"Quite likely," I replied, not yet wholly convinced; "Bethel is not the man to commit himself; he'd be very sure not to leave a trace of his 'true inwardness' about the premises, if he *were* on a still hunt. How about the note, Carnes?"

"Oh, the note! Well, when Jim came back, about fifteen minutes ago, or so, he gave me that, saying that he called at Dr. Barnard's to ask for instructions from Bethel, and was handed that note to leave for you. Jim says that he forgot to stop with the note; but I'm inclined to think that he wanted to dispose of me and took this way to avoid hurting my feelings."

"Well, I shall be late at Dr. Barnard's, owing to Jim's notions of delicacy," I said, turning away from the mirror and hurriedly brushing my hat. "However, I can explain the tardiness. By-by, Carnes; we will talk this day's business over when I have returned."

Dr. Barnard's pleasant dwelling was scarce five minutes' walk from our hotel; and I was soon making my bow in the presence of the doctor, his wife and daughter, Miss Manvers, and Dr. Bethel.

As I look back upon that evening I remember Louise Barnard as at once the loveliest, the simplest and most charmingly cultivated woman I have ever met. Graceful without art, self-possessed without ostentation, beautiful as a picture, without seeming to have sought by artifices of the toilet to heighten the effect of her statuesque loveliness.

Adele Manvers was also beautiful; no, handsome is the more appropriate word for her; but in face, form, coloring, dress, and manner, a more decided contrast could not have been deliberately planned.

Miss Barnard was the lovely lady; Miss Manvers, the daintily clad, fair woman of fashion.

Miss Barnard was tall, slender, dazzlingly beautiful, with soft fair hair and the features of a Greek goddess. Miss Manvers was a trifle below the medium height, a piquant brunette, plump, shapely, a trifle haughty, and inclined to self-assertion.

Miss Barnard wore soft flowing draperies, and her hair as nature intended it to be worn. Miss Manvers wore another woman's hair in defiance of nature, and her dress was fashion's last conceit,—a "symphony" in silks and ruffles and bewildering draperies.

Miss Barnard was dignified and somewhat reticent. Miss Manvers was talkative and vivacious.

They had learned from Jim Long all that he could tell them concerning the part I had taken in the affair of the morning. The elder physician desired to express his approbation, the younger his gratitude. They had sent for me that I might hear what they had to say on the subject of the grave robbery, and to ask my opinion and advice as to future movements.

All this was communicated to me by the voluble old doctor, who was sitting in an invalid's chair, being as yet but half recovered from his neuralgic attack of the morning. We had met on several occasions, but I had no previous knowledge of his family.

"There will be no further trouble about this matter," said Dr. Barnard, as we sat in the cool, cosy parlor after our late tea. "Our people have known me too long to doubt my word, and my simple statement of my absolute knowledge concerning all of Bethel's movements will put out the last spark of suspicion, so far as he is concerned—but," bringing the palm of his large hand down upon the arm of his chair with slow emphasis, "it won't settle the question next in order. *Who are the guilty ones?*"

"That I shall make it my business to find out," said Dr. Bethel, seriously, "I confess that at first I was unreasonably angry, at the thought of the suspicion cast upon me. On second thought it was but natural. I am as yet a stranger among you, and Trafton evidently believes it wise to 'consider every man a rogue until he is proved honest.'"

"From what I have heard since coming here," I ventured, "I should say Trafton has some reason for adopting this motto."

"So she has; so she has," broke in the old doctor. "And some one had a reason for attempting to throw suspicion upon Bethel."

“Evidently,” said Bethel. “I am puzzled to guess what that reason can be, and I dispose of the theory that would naturally come up first, namely, that it is a plot to destroy the public confidence in me, set on foot by rival doctors, by saying, at the outset, that I don’t believe there is a medical man in or about Trafton capable of such a deed. I have all confidence in my professional brethren.”

“Why,” interposed Miss Manvers, “the sentiment does you honor, Dr. Bethel, but—I should think the other doctors your most natural enemies. Who else could,”—she broke off abruptly with an appealing glance at Louise Barnard.

“I think Dr. Bethel is right,” said Miss Barnard, in her low, clear contralto. “I cannot think either of our doctors capable of a deed so shameful.” Then turning to address me, she added, “You, as a stranger among us, may see the matter in a more reasonable light. How does it look to you?”

“Taking the doctor’s innocence as a foregone conclusion,” I replied, “it looks as though he had an enemy in Trafton,” here I turned my eyes full upon the face of Bethel, “who wished to drive him out of the community by making him unpopular in it.”

Bethel’s face wore the same expression of mystified candor, his eyes met mine full and frankly, as he replied:

“Taking that as a foregone conclusion, we arrive at the point of starting, Who are the guilty ones? Who are my enemies? I have been uniformly successful in my practice; I have had no differences, disagreement, or disputes with any man in Trafton. Up to to-day I could have sworn I had not an enemy in the town.”

“And so could I,” said Dr. Barnard. “It’s a case for a wiser head than mine.”

“It’s a case for the detectives,” said Dr. Bethel, firmly. “If this unknown foe thinks to drive me from Trafton, he must try other measures. I intend to remain, and to solve this mystery.”

A moment’s silence followed this decided announcement.

The old doctor nodded his approval, his daughter looked hers.

Miss Manvers sat with eyes fixed upon a spot in the carpet, biting nervously at her full red under lip, and tapping the floor with the toe of her dainty boot.

I had no desire to take a prominent part in the discussion which followed, and became as much as I could a mere observer, but, as after events proved, I made very good use of my eyes that night.

Having exhausted the subject of the grave robbery without arriving at any new conclusions, the social old doctor proposed a game of whist, cards being his chief source of evening pastime. The game was made up, Miss Manvers taking a seat opposite Dr. Barnard, and Dr. Bethel playing with Mrs. Barnard.

After watching their game for a time, Miss Barnard and myself retired to the piano. She sang several songs in a tender contralto, to a soft, well-rendered accompaniment, and as I essayed my thanks and ventured to praise her singing, she lifted her clear eyes to mine, saying, in an undertone:

“Don’t think me odd, or too curious—but—will you answer a question—frankly?”

I promised, recklessly; and she ran her pretty fingers over the keys, drowning our voices, for other ears, under the soft ripple of the notes, while she questioned and I replied.

“As a stranger, and an unprejudiced person,” she began, “how does this shameful charge against Dr. Bethel appear to you? Judging him as men judge men, do you think he *could* be guilty of such a deed?”

“Judging him by my limited knowledge of human nature,” I replied, “I should say that Dr. Bethel is incapable of baseness in any form. In this case, he is certainly innocent.”

She looked thoughtfully down at the white, gliding fingers, and said:

“We have seen so much of Dr. Bethel since he came to Trafton, that he seems quite like an old friend, and because of his being associated with father, it makes his trouble almost a personal matter. I do hope it will end without further complications.”

She looked up in my face as if hoping that my judgment accorded with her wish, but I made no reply, finding silence easier and pleasanter than equivocation when dealing with a nature so frank and fearlessly truthful.

The game of whist being at an end, Miss Manvers arose almost immediately and declared it time to go. She had sent her phaeton home, her house being less than a quarter of a mile from Dr. Barnard’s, and according to the custom of informal Trafton, I promptly offered myself as escort, and was promptly and smilingly accepted.

“What a day this has been,” said Miss Manvers, as the doctor’s iron gate closed behind us. “Such a terrible charge to bring against Dr. Bethel. Do you really think,” and, spite her evident intention to make the question sound commonplace, I could detect the genuine anxiety in it, “Do you really think that it will—injure his practice to the extent of—driving him from Trafton?”

“You heard what he said, Miss Manvers.”

“Oh, yes—but if I am rightly informed, Dr. Bethel is, in a measure at least, dependent on his practice. Is not this so?”

“You are better advised than I, Miss Manvers; I know so little of Dr. Bethel.”

“And yet you were his warmest champion to-day.”

“I assure you I felt quite cool,” I laughed. “I should have done as much for the merest stranger, under the same circumstances.”

“Then you are not prejudiced in his favor?”

“I am not prejudiced at all. I like Bethel.”

“And so do I,” replied the heiress, heartily, “and I like the spirit he shows in this matter. Is not this—a—exhuming of a subject, a frequent occurrence?”

“Undoubtedly.”

“I mean—is it not often done by medical men?”

“By them, or persons employed by them. I suppose so.”

She drew a little nearer, lifting an earnest face to meet my gaze.

“Candidly, now,” she said, “as if I were not Miss Manvers, but a man to be trusted. Do you think it impossible that Dr. Bethel has done this thing? Viewed from a scientific and practical standpoint, does such a deed appear to you to be the horrible thing *some* seem to think it?”

Illustration:

„Candidly, now,” she said, „as if I were not Miss Manvers,
but a man to be trusted. ”

What spirit prompted my answer? I never knew just what impelled me, but I looked down into the pretty, upturned face, looked straight into the dark, liquid eyes, and answered:

“Candidly, Miss Manvers—as you are certainly as much to be trusted as if you were a man—when I went to Bethel’s defense, I went supposing that, for the benefit of science and the possible good of his fellow-beings, he had exhumed the body.”

She drew a short, quick breath.

“And you have changed your opinion?” she half asserted, half inquired.

I laid the fingers of my gloved left hand lightly upon hers, as it rested on my arm, and bent lower toward the glowing brunette face as I answered:

“I have not said so.”

She dropped her eyes and mused for a moment, then—

“Do you think he will actually call in a detective—to—to make his innocence seem more probable?”

“I hope he will not,” I replied, sincerely this time, but with a hidden meaning.

“I don’t think that Mr. Beale will desire further investigation. The matter will die out, undoubtedly. Mr. Barnard is a man of powerful influence in the community, and ‘Squire Brookhouse will use his influence in behalf of Dr. Bethel, I am sure.” Then, looking up again, quickly: “Do you not admire Miss Barnard?”

“Miss Barnard is ‘a thing of beauty,’” I rejoined, sententiously; then, with a downward glance that pointed my sentence, “I admire all lovely women.”

She laughed lightly, but said no more of Miss Barnard, or Dr. Bethel, and we parted with some careless badinage, supplemented by her cordial hope that I would prolong my stay in Trafton, and that she should see me often at The Hill.

Going slowly homeward, through the August darkness, I mentally voted the treasure-ship heiress a clever, agreeable, and charming young lady, and spent some time in trying to decide whether her delightful cordiality was a token that I had pleased, or only amused her. Such is the vanity of man!

I found Carnes wide awake, smoking and waiting.

“Have ye done wid yer gallivantin?” queried he, the instant I made my appearance. “Now, thin, be shquare; which is the purtyest gurl?”

“How do you know there were two, sir?”

“Inshtinct,” he retorted, shamelessly. “I knew by the peculiar feelin’ av the cords av me arums. I say, what a thunderin’ lot o’ snarly bushes old Barnyard kapes about his windys!”

“What! you were up there?” I cried, in astonishment.

“Worrunt I,” he retorted, complacently. “An’ I wasn’t the only one!”

“Carnes!”

“Och, take off yer mittens an’ sit down,” he said, grinning offensively at my mighty efforts to draw off a pair of tight and moist kid gloves. “Warn’t I up there, an’ I could ave told ye all about the purty gals mysilf, an’ what sort av blarney ye gave till em both, if it had not been fer the murtherin’ baste of a shnake as got inter the scrubbery ahead av me.”

I threw aside the damp gloves, and seated myself directly in front of him.

“Now, talk business,” I said, impatiently. “It’s getting late, and there’s a good deal to be said.”

Carnes reached out for the pipe which he had laid aside at my entrance, lighted it with due deliberation, and then said, with no trace of his former absurdity:

“I don’t know what sent me strolling and smoking up toward Dr. Barnard’s place, but I did go. My pipe went out, and I stopped to light it, stepping off the sidewalk just where the late lilacs hang over the fence at the foot of the garden. While I stood there, entirely hidden by the darkness and the shade, a man came walking stealthily down the middle of the road. His very gait betrayed the sneak, and I followed him, forgetting my pipe and keeping to the soft grass. He seemed to know just where to go for, although he moved cautiously, there was no hesitation. Well, he passed the gate, climbed the fence, sneaked up to the front of the house, skulking between the trees and rose bushes directly underneath the parlor window. I took the bearings as well as I could from a distance, and I made up my mind that the fellow, if he heard anything, could hardly catch the thread of the discourse, and I reckon I was right in my conclusions for, after a good deal of prospecting around, he sneaked away as he came, and I followed him back to Porter’s store.”

Illustration:

Well he passed the gate, climbed the fence, sneaked up to the front of the house, skulking between the trees.

“And you knew him?” I questioned, hastily.

“I used to know him,” said Carnes, with a comical wink, “but recently I’ve cut his acquaintance.”

For a moment we stared at each other silently, then I asked, abruptly:

“Old man, do you think it worth our while to go into this resurrection business?”

“What for?”

“To satisfy ourselves as regards Bethel’s part in it.”

“You needn’t go into it on my account,” replied Carnes, crossing his legs and clasping his two hands behind his head; “I’m satisfied.”

“As how?”

“He never did it.”

“Ah! how do you reason the case?”

“First, he isn’t a fool; second, if he had taken the body he would have made use of it that night; it was fast decomposing, and before to-night would be past pleasant handling. Then he, being called away, if he had instructed others to disinter the body, would never have instructed them to hide it on his own premises, much less to disrobe it for no purpose whatever. Then, last and most conclusive, there’s the pick and spade.”

“And what of them?”

“This of them,” unclasping his hands, setting his two feet squarely on the floor, and bringing his palms down upon his knees. “You know old Harding, the hardware dealer?”

I nodded. Old Harding was the elder brother of the Trafton farmer who had excited my eagerness to see Trafton by discussing its peculiarities on the railway train.

“Well,” leaning toward me and dropping out his words in stiff staccato. “After the crowd had left Jim Long and myself in possession of the doctor’s premises, old Harding came back. I saw that he wanted to talk with Jim, and I went out into the yard. Presently the two went into the barn, and I skulked around till I got directly behind the window where those tools were found. And here’s what I heard, stripped of old Harding’s profanity, and Jim’s cranky comments. Last year Harding’s store was visited by burglars, and those identical tools were taken out of it along with many other things. You observed that they were quite new. Harding said he could swear to the tools. Now, if others had exhumed the body for the doctor, they would not have left their tools in his stable and in so conspicuous a place. If the doctor exhumed it, how did he obtain those tools? They were stolen before he came to Trafton.”

“Then here is another thing,” I began, as Carnes paused. “A man of Bethel’s sense would not take such a step without a sufficient reason. Now, Dr. Barnard, who certainly is authority in the matter, says positively that there were no peculiar symptoms about the child’s sickness; that it was a very ordinary case; therefore, Dr. Bethel, who can buy all his skeletons without incurring disagreeable labor and risk, could have had no motive for taking the body.”

“Then you think——”

“I think this,” I interrupted, being now warm with my subject. “Dr. Bethel, who is certainly not a detective, is suspected of being one, or feared as one. And this is the way his enemies open the war upon him. I think if we can find out who robbed that little girl’s grave and secreted the body so as to throw suspicion upon Bethel, we shall be in a fair way to find out what we came here to learn, viz., what, and where, and who, are the daring, long existing successful robbers that infest Trafton. This is their first failure, and why?”

“It’s easy to guess *why*,” said Carnes, gravely. “The old head was out of this business; for some reason it has been entrusted to underlings, and bunglers.”

“But won’t old Harding give these rascals warning by claiming his stolen property?” I asked, dubiously.

“Not he,” replied Carnes. “Harding’s too cute and too stingy for that. He reasons that the thieves, having begun to display their booty, may grow more reckless. He is one of the few who think that the body was not placed in the hay by the doctor’s hirelings; he intends to keep silent for the present and look sharp for any more of his stolen merchandize.”

“Then, Carnes, we have no bars to our present progress. To-morrow we get down to actual business.”

Again we sat late into the night discussing and re-arranging our plans, only separating when we had mapped out a course which we, in our egotistical blindness, felt assured was the true route toward success; and seeking our slumbers as blissfully unconscious of what really was to transpire as the veriest dullard in all Trafton.

Chapter XII

A Big Haul.

When I awoke next morning, I was surprised to find my erratic body-servant not in attendance.

Carnes, for convenience, and because of lack of modern hotel accommodations, occupied a cot in my room, which was the largest in the house, and sufficiently airy to serve for two. Usually, he was anything but a model serving man in the matter of rising and attending to duty, for, invariably, I was out of bed an hour before him, and had made my toilet to the music of his nasal organ, long before he broke his morning nap.

This morning, however, Carnes was not snoring peacefully on his cot underneath the open north window, and I arose and made a hasty toilet, feeling sure that something unusual had called him from his bed this early.

Wondering much, I descended to the office, where an animated buzz warned me that something new and startling was under discussion.

Usually at that hour this sanctum was untenanted, save for the youth who served as a combination of porter and clerk, and perhaps a stray boarder or two, but this morning a motley crowd filled the room. Not a noisy, blustering crowd, but a gathering of startled, perplexed, angry looking men, each seeming hopeful of hearing something, rather than desirous of saying much.

Jim Long, the idle, every-where-present Jim, stood near the outer door, looking as stolid and imperturbable as usual, and smoking, as a matter of course.

I made my way to him at once.

“What is it, Long,” I asked, in a low tone; “something new, or—”

“Nothin’ *new*, by any means,” interrupted Jim, sublimely indifferent to the misfortune of his neighbors. “Nothin’ new at all, Cap’n; the Trafton Bandits have been at it again, that’s all.”

Illustration:

„Nothin’ new at all, Cap’n; the Trafton Bandits have been
at it again that’s all.”

“Trafton Bandits! you mean—”

“Thieves! Robbers! Ku Klux! They’ve made another big haul.”

“Last night?”

“Last night, Cap’n.”

“Of what sort?”

Jim chuckled wickedly.

“The right sort to git money out of. Hopper’s two-forty’s, that was in trainin’ for the races. Meacham’s matched sorrels. ‘Squire Brookhouse’s bay Morgans.”

“What! six blooded horses at one haul!”

“Eggszactly.”

Jim's coolness was aggravating; I turned away from him, and mingled with the group about the clerk's desk.

"Meacham'll suicide; he refused a fancy price for them sorrels not two weeks ago."

"Wonder what old Brookhouse will do about it?"

"There'll be some tall rewards offered."

"Much good that'll do. We don't get back stolen horses so easy in this county."

"It'll break Hopper up; he had bet his pile on the two-forty's, and bid fair to win."

"One of 'em was goin' to trot against Arch Brookhouse's mare, Polly, an' they had big bets up. Shouldn't wonder if Arch was glad to be let out so easy. Polly never could outgo that gray four-year-old."

"Think not?"

"Brookhouse has telegraphed to his lawyers already, to send on a couple of detectives."

"Bully for Brookhouse."

"Don't yell till yer out of the woods. Detectives ain't so much more'n common folks. I don't go much on 'em myself. What we want is vigilants."

"Pooh! neither detectives nor vigilants can't cure Trafton."

These and like remarks greeted my ears in quick succession, and furnished me mental occupation. I lingered for half an hour among the eager, excited gossippers, and then betook myself to the dining-room and partook of my morning meal in solitude. With my food for the body, I had also food for thought.

Here, indeed, was work for the detective. I longed for the instant presence of Carnes, that we might discuss the situation, and I felt no little annoyance at the thought of the two detectives who might come in upon us at the bidding of 'Squire Brookhouse.

Carnes was in the office when I again entered it, and giving him a sign to follow me, I went up to my room. It was situated in a wing of the building most remote from the office, and the hum of many voices did not penetrate so far.

The stillness seemed more marked by contrast with the din I had just left, as I sat waiting.

Presently Carnes came in, alert, quick of movement, and having merged the talkative Irishman in the active, cautious detective.

"This looks like business;" he began, dragging a chair forward, and seating himself close to me. "I chanced to wake up a little after sunrise, and heard some men talking outside, near my window. They were going through the lane, and I only caught the words: "Yes, sir; stolen last night; six of them." Somehow the tone, quite as much as the words, convinced me that something was wrong. I got up and hurried out, thinking it hardly worth while to disturb you until I had learned more of the fellow's meaning. Well, sir, it's a fact; six valuable pieces of horseflesh have been taken from under our very noses."

"Have you got any particulars?"

"Well, yes, as much as is known, I think. Hopper, as you remember, lives on the hill just at the edge of the town. His man sleeps in the little office adjoining the stable. It seems the fellow, having no valuables to lose, let the window swing open and slept near it. He was chloroformed, and is under the doctor's care this

morning. Meacham's stable is very near the house, but no one was disturbed by the robbers; they threw his dog a huge piece of meat that kept his jaws occupied. I heard Arch Brookhouse talking with a lot of men; he says the Morgans were in a loose box near the rear door of the stable, and that two men were sleeping in the room above the front wing. He says they have telegraphed to the city for detectives."

"Yes, I'm sorry for that, but it's to be expected."

"What shall we do about it?"

"As we are working for our own satisfaction and have little at stake, I am in favor of keeping quiet until we see who they bring down. If it's some of our own fellows, or any one that we know to be skillful, we can then turn in and help them, or retire from the field without making ourselves known, as we think best. If the fellows are strangers—"

"Then we will try the merits of the case with them," broke in Carnes. "I tell you, old man, I hate to quit the field now."

"So do I," I acknowledged. "We must manage to know when these new experts arrive, and until we have found them out, can do little but keep our eyes and ears open. It won't do to betray too much interest just yet."

Carnes wheeled about in his chair and turned his eyes toward the street.

"I wish this thing had not happened just yet," he said, moodily. "Last night our plans were laid so smoothly. I don't see how we can even follow up this grave-robbing business, until these confounded detectives have shown their hand."

"Carnes," I replied, solemnly, "do be a philosopher. If ever two conceited detectives got themselves into a charming muddle, we're those two, at present. If we don't come out of this escapade covered with confusion, we shall have cause to be thankful."

My homily had its intended effect. Carnes wheeled upon me with scorn upon his countenance.

"The mischief fly away wid yer croakin'," he cried. "An' it's lyin' ye know ye are. Is it covered wid confusion ye'd be afther havin' us, bad cess to ye? Av we quit this nest we'd be drappin' the natest job two lads ever tackled. Ye can quit av ye like, but I'm shtayin', avan if the ould boy himself comes down to look intil the bizness."

By "the ould boy," Carnes meant our Chief, and not, as might be supposed, his Satanic majesty.

I smiled at the notion of our Chief in the midst of these Trafton perplexities, and, letting Carnes' tirade remain unanswered, took from my pocket the before mentioned note book and began a new mental calculation.

"There goes the ould identical Mephistophiles I used to see in my fairy book," broke out Carnes from his station by the window, where he had stood for some moments silently contemplating whatever might present itself to view in the street below. "Look at 'im now! Av I were an artist, wouldn't I ax 'im to sit for 'Satan'."

I looked out and saw 'Squire Brookhouse passing on the opposite side of the street, and looking closer, I decided that Carnes' comparison was not inapt.

In the days of his youth 'Squire Brookhouse might have been a handsome man, when his regular features were rounded and colored by twenty-two Summers, or perhaps more; but he must have grown old while yet young, for his cadaverous

cheeks were the color of most ancient parchment; his black eyes were set in hollow, dusky caverns; his mouth was sunken, the thin lips being drawn and colorless. His upper lip was smooth shaven, but the chin was decorated by a beard, long but thin, and of a peculiar lifeless black. His eyebrows were long and drooped above the cavernous eyes. His hair was straight and thin, matching the beard in color, and he wore it so long that it touched the collar of his coat, the ends fluttering dismally in the least gust of wind. He was tall, and angular to emaciation, with narrow, stooping shoulders, and the slow, gliding gait of an Indian. He was uniformly solemn, it would be a mistake to say dignified; preternaturally silent, going and coming like a shadow among his loquacious neighbors; always intent upon his own business and showing not the least interest in anything that did not in some way concern himself. Living plainly, dressing shabbily, hoarding his riches, grinding his tenants, superintending the business of his large stock-farm, he held himself aloof from society, and had never been seen within the walls of a church.

And yet this silent, unsocial man was a power in Trafton; his word of commendation was eagerly sought for; his frown was a thing to be dreaded; his displeasure to be feared. Whom he would be elected to office, and whom he would not, came somehow to be disapproved by all Trafton.

"He has certainly an uncommon ensemble," I said, looking out over Carnes' shoulder, "not a handsome man, to be sure, but one toward whom you would turn in a crowd to take the second look at. I wonder where Jim Long would place him in the scale of Trafton weights and measures?"

"Not under the head of the model Traftonite," replied Carnes, still gazing after the receding figure. "He's guiltless of the small hands and feet, perfumed locks and 'more frill to the square yard of shirt front' required by Jim for the making of his model. By-the-by, what the 'Squire lacks is amply made up by the son. When Jim pictured the model Traftonite, I think he must have had Arch Brookhouse in his eye."

"I think so, too; a nature such as Jim's would be naturally antagonistic to any form of dandyism. Young Brookhouse is a fastidious dresser, and, I should say, a thoroughly good fellow."

"As good fellows go," said Carnes, sententiously. "But dropping the dandy, tell me what are we going to do with Jim Long?"

"It's a question I've been asking myself," responded I, turning away from the window, "Jim is not an easy conundrum to solve."

"About as easy as a Chinese puzzle," grumbled Carnes, discontentedly. "Nevertheless, I tell you, old man, before we get much further on our way we've got to take his measure."

"I quite agree with you, and the moment the way seems clear, we must do something more."

"What's that?"

"We must explore that south road, every foot of it, for twenty miles at least."

Chapter XIII

Squire Brookhouse Makes a Call.

The first train due from the city, by which, supposing 'Squire Brookhouse's message to be promptly received, and his commission promptly executed, it would be possible for the looked-for detectives to arrive, would be due at midnight. It was a fast, through express, and arriving so late, when the busy village gossips were, or should be, peacefully sleeping, it seemed to us quite probable that they would come openly by that train.

Of course we expected them to assume disguise, or to have some plausible business in the town, quite foreign to their real errand thither; but, equally, of course we expected to be able to penetrate any disguise that might be assumed by parties known to us, or to see beneath any business subterfuge adopted by strangers.

Until midnight then we had only to wait, and employ our time profitably, if we could, which seemed hardly probable.

I remained in my room for the remainder of the morning, and Carnes went out among the gossipers, in search of any scrap that he might seize upon and manipulate into a thing of meaning.

At the dinner table I met Dr. Bethel. He was his usual calm, courteous self, seeming in no wise ruffled or discomposed by the events of the previous day.

We chatted together over our dinner, and together left the table. In the hall the doctor turned to face me, saying:

"If you have nothing better to occupy your time, come down to my house with me. I shall enjoy your company."

I could scarcely have found a way of passing the afternoon more to my taste, just then, and I accepted his invitation promptly.

Outside the doctor's dwelling, quiet and order reigned, thanks to Jim Long's officious friendliness, but within was still the confusion of yesterday; Jim, seemingly, having exhausted himself in the hanging of the doctor's front door.

Bethel looked about the disordered rooms, and laughed the laugh of the philosopher.

"After all, a man can not be thoroughly angry at the doings of a mob," he said, stooping to gather up some scattered papers. "It's like scattering shot; the charge loses its force; there is no center to turn upon. I was in a rage yesterday, but it was rather with the author of the mischief credited to me, than these fanatical would-be avengers, and then—after due reflection—it was quite natural that these village simpletons should suspect me, was it not?"

"Candidly, yes," I replied; "and that only proves the cunning of the enemy who planned this business for your injury."

Bethel, who was stooping to restore a chair to its proper position, lifted his head to favor me with one sharp glance. Then he brought the chair up with a jerk; and, taking another with the unoccupied hand, said:

"This is hardly a picture of comfort. Fortunately, there is a condensed lawn and excellent shade outside. Let's smoke a cigar under the trees, and discuss this matter comfortably."

In another moment we were sitting cosily, vis-à-vis, on the tiny grass plot, styled by the doctor a "condensed lawn," with a huge clump of lilacs at our backs, and the quivering leaves of a young maple above our heads.

The doctor produced some excellent cigars, which we lighted, and smoked for a time in silence. Then he said:

"I scarcely flatter myself that I have seen the end of this business. I quite expected the raid of yesterday to be followed by a formal accusation and a warrant to-day, in which case—"

"In which case," I interrupted, "I will be responsible for your future good behavior, and go your bail."

"Thank you," he said, quite seriously. "I appreciate your championship, but confess it surprises me. Why have you voted me guiltless, in opposition to the expressed opinions of two-thirds of Trafton?"

"Perhaps," I replied, "it is because I am not a Traftonite, and am therefore without prejudice. To be perfectly frank, I did suppose you to be implicated in the business when I came here yesterday; when I witnessed your surprise, and heard your denial, I wavered; when I saw the buried clothing, I doubted; when the body was discovered, I was convinced that a less clever head and more bungling hand than yours, had planned and executed the resurrection; it was a blunder which I could not credit you with making. If I had a doubt, Barnard's testimony would have laid it."

"Thank you," said Bethel, with real warmth. "But—I might have had confederates."

"No. Doctor Barnard's statement as to the manner of the child's death deprives you of a motive for the deed; then the too-easily found tools, and the stripped-off clothing could hardly be work of your planning or ordering. Depend upon it, when Trafton has done a little calm thinking, it will see this matter as I see it."

"Possibly," with a shade of skepticism in his voice. "At least, when I have unearthed these plotters against me, they will see the matter as it is, and that day I intend to bring to pass."

The fire was nearly extinct on the tip of his cigar, he replaced it in his mouth and seemingly only intent upon rekindling the spark; this done, he smoked in silence a moment and then said:

"As to the author of the mischief, or his motive, I am utterly at a loss. I have given up trying to think out the mystery. I shall call in the help of the best detective I can find, and see what he makes of the matter."

Gracious heavens! here was another lion coming down upon myself and my luckless partner! Trafton was about to be inundated with detectives. My brain worked hard and fast. Something must be done, and that speedily, or Carnes and I must retreat mutely, ingloriously.

While I smoked in a seemingly careless reverie, I was weighing the *pros* and *cons* of a somewhat uncertain venture. Should I let this third detective come and risk a collision, or should I make a clean breast of it, avow my identity, explain the

motive of my sojourn in Trafton, and ask Bethel to trust his case to Carnes and myself? Almost resolved upon this latter course, I began to feel my way.

"A good detective ought to sift the matter, I should think," I said. "I suppose you have your man in view?"

"Candidly, no," he replied, with a dubious shake of the head. "I'm afraid I am not well posted as regards the police, never expecting to have much use for the gentry. I must go to the city and hunt up the right man."

I drew a breath of relief.

"That will consume some valuable time," I said, musingly.

"Yes, a day to go; another, perhaps, before I find my man. I shall go in person, because I fancy that I shall be able to give something like a correct guess as to the man's ability, if I can have a square look at his face."

I blew a cloud of smoke before my own face to conceal a smile.

"You are a physiognomist, then?"

"Not a radical one; but I believe there is much to be learned by the careful study of the human countenance."

"Give me a test of your ability," I said, jestingly, and drawing my chair nearer to him. "Have I the material in me for a passable detective?"

"My dear sir," he replied, gravely, "if I had not given you credit for some shrewdness, I should hardly have made you, even in a slight degree, my confidante; if you were a detective I think you might be expected to succeed."

"Thanks, doctor; being what I am I can, perhaps, give you the key to this mystery."

"You?"

"Yes, I," tossing away my cigar and now fully resolved to confide in the doctor. "I think I have stumbled upon the clue you require. I will tell you how."

There was a sharp click at the gate; I closed my lips hurriedly, and we both turned to look.

'Squire Brookhouse, if possible a shade more solemn of countenance than usual, was entering the doctor's door-yard.

My host arose instantly to receive, but did not advance to meet, his latest guest.

'Squire Brookhouse accepted the chair proffered him, having first given me a nod of recognition, and, while Bethel entered the house for another chair, sat stiffly, letting his small, restless black eyes rove about, taking in his surroundings with quick, furtive glances, and I fancied that he felt a trifle annoyed at my presence.

"You seem quite serene here, in spite of yesterday's fracas," he said to me, in what he no doubt intended for the ordinary affable conversational tone.

He possessed a naturally harsh, rasping voice, not loud, but, none the less, not pleasant to the ear, and this, coupled with his staccato manner of jerking out the beginnings of his sentences, and biting off the ends of them, would have given, even to gentle words, the sound of severity.

While I replied, I was inwardly wondering what had called out this unusual visit, for I saw at once, by the look on Bethel's face, that it was unusual, and, just then, a trifle unwelcome.

We were not left long in the dark. Scarcely had the doctor rejoined us and been seated before the 'squire gave us an insight into the nature of his business.

"I am sorry our people gave you so much trouble yesterday, doctor," he began, in his stiff staccato. "Their conduct was as discreditable to the town as it was uncomplimentary to you."

"One should always take into consideration the character of the elements that assails him," replied Bethel, coolly. "I was comforted to know that my assailants of yesterday were notably of the canaille of the town; the majority, of the rough, vulgar excitable, who, while not being, or meaning to be, absolutely vicious, are, because of their inherent ignorance, easily played upon and easily led, especially toward mischief. The leaders most certainly were not of the *lower* classes, but of the *lowest*. On the whole, I have experienced no serious discomfort, 'Squire Brookhouse, nor do I anticipate any lasting injury to my practice by this attempt to shake the public faith in me."

This reply surprised me somewhat, and I saw that the 'squire was, for the moment, nonplussed. He sat quite silent, biting his thin under lip, and with his restless eyes seemed trying to pierce to the doctor's innermost thought.

The silence became to me almost oppressive before he said, shifting his position so as to bring me more prominently within his range of vision:

"I hope you are right; I suppose you are. Arch displeased me very much by not coming to your aid; he might, perhaps, have had some influence upon a portion of the mob. I regret to learn that one or two of my men were among them. I believe Arch tried to argue against the movement before they came down upon you; he came home thoroughly disgusted and angry. For myself, I was too much indisposed to venture out yesterday."

He drew himself a trifle more erect; this long speech seeming to be something well off his mind.

"I was well supported, I assure you," replied Bethel, courteously. "But I appreciate your interest in my welfare. Your influence in Trafton is considerable, I know."

"Hardly that; hardly that, sir. However, such as it is, it is yours, if you need it. My call was merely to ask if you anticipated any further trouble, or if I could serve you in any way, in case you desired to make an investigation."

Bethel hesitated a moment, seemingly at a loss for a reply.

In that moment, while the 'squire's sharp eyes were fixed upon him, I lifted my hand, removed my cigar from my mouth with a careless gesture, and, catching the doctor's eye, laid a finger on my lip. In another instant I was puffing away at my weed, and the keen, quick eyes of 'Squire Brookhouse were boring me clean through.

"Thank you," said Bethel, after this pause, and without again glancing at me. "You are very good."

"We seem to be especially honored by rogues of various sorts," went on the 'squire. "Of course you have heard of last night's work, and of my loss."

The doctor bowed his head.

"This thing is becoming intolerable," went on the usually silent man, "and I intend to make a stanch fight. If it's in the power of the detectives, I mean to have my horses back."

"You will bestow a blessing upon the community if you succeed in capturing the thieves," said Bethel.

Then the 'squire turned toward me, saying:

"We are a victimized community, sir. I suppose you have found that out?"

Illustration:

"We are a victimized community, sir.
I suppose you have found that out?"

"Judging from the events of yesterday and last night, I should think so," I replied, with an air of indifferent interest. "From the conversation I heard at the hotel to-day, I infer that this thieving business is no new thing."

"No new thing, sir."

I had no desire to participate in the conversation, so made no further comment, and the 'squire turned again to Bethel.

"I suppose you intend to investigate this matter?"

Bethel looked up to the maple, and down at the grass.

"I have scarcely decided," he replied, slowly. "I have hardly had time to consider."

"Ah! I supposed, from what I heard in the town, that you had made a decided stand."

"So far as this, I have," replied Bethel, gravely. "I am determined not to let these underminers succeed in their purpose."

"Then you have fathomed their purpose?"

"I suppose it is to drive me from Trafton?"

"You intend to remain?"

"Most assuredly. I shall reside and practice in Trafton so long as I have one patient left who has faith in me."

"That would be an unprofitable game—financially."

"I think not, in the end."

Again the 'squire seemed at a loss for words.

I hugged myself with delight. The dialogue pleased me.

"I like your spirit," he said, at length. "I should also like to see this matter cleared up." He rose slowly, pulling his hat low down over his cavernous eyes. "I have sent for detectives," he said, slightly lowering his tone. "Of course I wish their identity and whereabouts to remain a secret among us. If you desire to investigate and wish any information or advice from them, or if I can aid you *in any way*, don't hesitate to let me know."

Dr. Bethel thanked him warmly, assuring him that if he had need of a friend he would not forget his very generously proffered service, and, with his solemn face almost funereal in its expression, 'Squire Brookhouse bowed to me, and, this time escorted by Bethel, walked slowly toward the gate.

A carriage came swiftly down the road from the direction of the village. It halted just as they had reached the gate.

I saw a pale face look out, and then 'Squire Brookhouse approached and listened to something said by this pale-faced occupant. Meantime Bethel, without waiting for further words with 'Squire Brookhouse, came back to his seat under the trees.

In a moment the carriage moved on, going rapidly as before, and the 'squire came back through the little gate and approached the doctor, wearing now upon his face a look of unmistakable sourness.

"Doctor," he said, in his sharpest staccato, "my youngest scapegrace has met with an accident, and is going home with a crippled leg. I don't know how bad the injury is, but you had better come at once; he seems in great distress."

The doctor turned to me with a hesitating movement which I readily understood. He was loth to leave our interrupted conversation unfinished for an indefinite time.

I arose at once.

"Don't let my presence interfere with your duties," I said. "You and I can finish our smoke to-morrow, doctor."

He shot me a glance which assured me that he comprehended my meaning.

Five minutes later, Dr. Bethel and 'Squire Brookhouse were going up the hill toward the house of the latter, while I, still smoking, sauntered in the opposite direction, lazily, as beseemed an idle man.

I felt very well satisfied just then, and was rather glad that my disclosure to the doctor had been interrupted. A new thought had lodged in my brain, and I wished to consult Carnes.

Just at sunset, while I sat on the piazza of the hotel, making a pretence of reading the *Trafton Weekly News*, I saw Charlie Harris, the operator, coming down the street with a yellow envelope in his hand.

He came up the steps of the hotel, straight to me, and I noted a mischievous smile on his face as he proffered the envelope, saying:

"I am glad to find you so easily. I should have felt it my duty to ransack the town in order to deliver that."

I opened the telegram in silence, and read these words:

The widow B. is in town and anxious to see you.

T. C.

Then I looked up into the face of young Harris, and smiled in my turn.

"Harris," I said, "this is a very welcome piece of news, and I am much obliged to you."

"I knew you would be," laughed the jolly fellow. "I love to serve the ladies. And what shall I say in return?"

"Nothing, Harris," I responded. "I shall go by the first train; the widow here referred to, is a particular friend of mine."

Harris elevated his eyebrows.

"In dead earnest, aren't you? Tell me—I'll never, never give you away, is she pretty?"

"Pretty!" I retorted; "Harris, I've a mind to knock you down, for applying such a weak word to her. She's *magnificent*."

"Whew," he exclaimed, "It's a bad case, then. When shall we see you again in Trafton?"

"That depends upon the lady. I'll never leave the city while she desires me to stay."

After a little more banter of this sort, Harris returned to his duties, and I went up-stairs, well pleased with the manner in which he had interpreted my Chief's

telegram, and wondering not a little what had brought the widow Ballou to the city.

Carnes and I had another long talk that night, while waiting the time for the arrival of the city express.

I told him that I was called to the city in the interest of the case I had abandoned after getting my wound, and that unless my continued presence there was absolutely indispensable, I would return in three days, at the farthest.

I gave him a detailed account of my visit to Bethel, with its attendant circumstances.

“Bethel will hardly make a decided move in the matter for a day or two, I think,” I said, after we had discussed the propriety of taking the doctor into our counsel. “I will write him a note which you shall deliver, and the rest must wait.”

I wrote as follows:

Dr. Carl Bethel,

Dear Sir—Am just in receipt of a telegram which calls me to the city. I go by the early train, as there is a lady in the case. Shall return in a few days, I trust, and then hope to finish our interrupted conversation. I think your success will be more probable and speedy if you delay all action for the present.

This is in confidence.

Yours fraternally, etc., etc.

“There,” I said, folding the note, “That is making the truth tell a falsehood.” And I smiled as I pictured the “lady in the case,” likely to be conjured up by the imaginations of Harris and Dr. Bethel, and contrasted her charms with the sharp features, work-hardened hands, and matter-of-fact head, of Mrs. Ballou.

Just ten minutes before twelve o’clock Carnes and myself dropped noiselessly out of our chamber window, leaving a dangling rope to facilitate our return, and took our way to the depot to watch for the expected experts.

Ten minutes later the great fiery eye of the iron horse shone upon us from a distance, disappeared behind a curve, reappeared again, and came beaming down to the little platform.

The train halted for just an instant, then swept on its way.

But no passengers were left upon the platform; our errand had been fruitless; the detectives were still among the things to be looked for.

The next morning, before daybreak, I was en route for the city.

Chapter XIV

Mrs. Ballou’s Pistol Practice.

Half an hour after my arrival in the city, I was seated in the private office of our Chief, with Mrs. Ballou opposite me.

I had telegraphed from a way station, so that no time might be lost. I found the Chief and the lady awaiting me; and, at the first, he had signified his wish that I should listen to her story, and then give him my version of it.

“She seems ill at ease with me,” he said, “and frankly told me that she preferred to make her statement to you. Go ahead, Bathurst; above all we must retain her confidence.”

Mrs. Ballou looked careworn, and seemed more nervous than I had supposed it in her nature to be.

She looked relieved at sight of me, and, as soon as we were alone, plunged at once into her story, as if anxious to get it over, and hear what I might have to say.

This is what she told me in her own plain, concise, and very sensible language, interrupted now and then by my brief questions, and her occasional moments of silence, while I transferred something to my note-book.

“I presume you have wanted to know what I did with that letter I took,” she began, smiling a little, probably in recollection of her adroit theft. “I will tell you why I took it. When you first showed it to me, the printed letters had a sort of familiar look, but I could not think where I had seen them. During the night it seemed to come to me, and I got up and went into the parlor.” Here she hesitated for a moment, and then went on hurriedly: “Grace—my girl, you know—has a large autograph album; she brought it home when she came from the seminary, and everybody she meets that can scratch with a pen, must write in it. I found this precious album, and in it I found—this.”

She took from her pocket-book a folded paper and put it in my hand. It was a leaf torn from an album, and it contained a sentimental couplet, printed in large, bold letters.

I looked at the bit of paper, and then muttering an excuse, went hurriedly to the outer office. In a moment I was back; holding in my hand the printed letter of warning, which I had confided to the care of my Chief.

I sat down opposite Mrs. Ballou with the two documents before me, and scrutinized them carefully.

They were the same. The letter of warning was penciled, and bore evidence of having been hastily done; the album lines were in ink carefully executed and elaborately finished, but the lettering was the same. Making allowances for the shading, the flourishes, and the extra precision of the one, and looking simply at the formation of the letters, the height, width, curves, and spacing of both, and the resemblance was too strong to pass for a mere coincidence.

I studied the two papers thoughtfully for a few moments, then looked at Mrs. Ballou.

“You should have told me of this at once,” I began; but she threw up her hand impatiently.

“Wait,” she said, with almost her ordinary brusqueness, seeming to lose her nervousness as she became absorbed in the task of convincing me that she thoroughly understood herself. “There was no time to compare the writing that night. I had not decided what to do, and I was not sure then that they were the same. I left the album, just as I found it, and went out and harnessed the horses. While I was helping you with your coat, I managed to get the letter.”

"You were certainly very adroit," I said. "Even now I can recall no suspicious movements of yours."

"I made none," she retorted. "I saw where you put the letter, and it was easy to get it while helping you."

She paused a moment, then went on:

"When I went home, after driving you to the station, everybody was asleep. I knew they would be; I always have to wake them all, from Fred to the hired girl. I waked them as usual that morning, told them that I had discharged you for impertinence, and for abusing the horses, and that settled the matter. In the afternoon the girls went over to Morton's; it's only a mile across the fields, and a clear path. I made up my mind that I'd have them safe back again before dark, and I know where I could get a good man to take your place; he was high-priced, but I knew he was to be trusted, and I had made up my mind to keep a close eye on the girls, and to send some one with them wherever they went. After they were gone, I took the album to my room, locked Fred out, and compared the letter with the album verse. I thought the writing was the same."

She hesitated a moment, brushed her handkerchief across her lips, and then went on.

"I didn't know what to do, nor what to think—my first thought was to send for you, then I became frightened. I did not know what you might trace out, with this clue, and I did not know how it might affect my daughter. Grace is lively, fond of all kinds of gayety, especially of dancing. She is always surrounded with beaux, always has half a dozen intimate girl friends on hand, and is constantly on the go. There are so many young people about Groveland that picnics, neighborhood dances, croquet parties, buggy rides, etc., are plenty; and then, Grace often has visitors from Amora."

"Where is Amora?" I interrupted.

"It is about twenty-five miles from Groveland. Grace went to school at Amora."

I made an entry in my note-book, and then asked:

"Is there a seminary in Amora?"

"Yes."

"How long since your daughter left Amora, Mrs. Ballou?"

"She was there during the Winter term."

"Yes. Did Nellie Ewing ever attend school at Amora?"

"Yes."

"When?"

Mrs. Ballou moved uneasily.

"Nellie and Grace were room-mates last Winter," she replied.

"And Mamie Rutger? Was she there, too?"

"She began the Winter term, but was expelled."

"Expelled! For what?"

"For sauciness and disobedience. Mamie was a spoiled child, and not fond of study."

I wrote rapidly in my note-book, and mentally anathematized myself, and my employers in the Ewing-Rutger case. Why had I not learned before that Nellie Ewing and Mamie Rutger were together at Amora? Why had their two fathers neglected to give me so important a piece of information?

Evidently they had not thought of this fact in connection with the disappearance of the two girls, or the fact that Mamie was expelled from the school may have kept Farmer Rutger silent.

I closed my note-book and asked:

“Did any other young people from Groveland attend the Amora school? Try and be accurate, Mrs. Ballou.”

“Not last Winter,” she replied; “at least, no other girls. Johnny La Porte was there.”

“Who is Johnny La Porte?”

“His father is one of our wealthiest farmers. Johnny is an only son. He is a good-looking boy, and a great favorite among the young people.”

“Do you know his age?”

“Not precisely; he is not more than twenty or twenty-one.”

“Where is Johnny La Porte at present?”

“At home, on his father’s farm.”

“Now, Mrs. Ballou, tell me who is Miss Amy Holmes?”

She started and flushed.

“Another school friend,” she replied, in a tone which said plainly, “the bottom is reached at last.”

Evidently she expected some comment, but I only said:

“One more, Mrs. Ballou, why have you held back this bit of paper until now?”

“I am coming to that,” she retorted, “when you have done with your questions.”

“I have finished. Proceed now.”

Once more she began:

“I was worried and anxious about the papers, but, on second thought, I determined to know something more before I saw or wrote you. I did not think it best to ask Grace any questions; she is an odd child, and very quick to suspect anything unusual, and it would be an unusual thing for me to seem interested in the autographs. It was two days before I found out who wrote the lines in the album. I complained of headache that day, and Grace took my share of the work herself. Amy was in the parlor reading a novel. I went in and talked with her a while, then I began to turn over the leaves of the album. When I came to the printed lines, I praised their smoothness, and then I carelessly asked Amy if she knew what the initials A. B. stood for. She looked up at me quickly, glanced at the album, hesitated a moment as if thinking, and then said: ‘Oh, that’s Professor Bartlett’s printing, I think, his first name is *Asa*. He is an admirable penman.’

“I don’t think Amy remembered the lines, or she would not have said that. I don’t think Professor Bartlett would begin an album verse: ‘I drink to the eyes of my schoolmate, Grace.’ I knew that Amy had told a falsehood, and I watched her. She took the first opportunity, when she thought I did not see her, to whisper something to Grace. I saw that Grace looked annoyed, but Amy laughed, and the two seemed to agree upon something.

“I thought I would come to the city the next day, but in the morning my boy was very sick; he was sick for more than two weeks, and I had no time to think of anything else. Amy helped Grace, and was so kind and useful that I almost forgave her for telling me a fib. I had sent your letter back during Fred’s illness, and, when he began to mend, I thought the matter over and over. I knew it would be useless

to question Grace, and I did not know what harm or scandal I might bring upon my own daughter by bringing the matter to your notice. I tried to convince myself that the similarity of the printing was accidental, and, as I had not the letter to compare with the album, it was easier to believe so. I concluded to wait, but became very watchful.

“One night Fred brought in the mail; there was a letter for Amy; she opened it and began to read, then she uttered a quick word, and looked much pleased. I saw an anxious look on my girl’s face and caught a glance that passed between them. By-and-by they both went up-stairs, and in a few minutes I followed, and listened at the door of their room.

“Amy was reading her letter to Grace. I could tell that by the hum of her voice, but I could not catch a word, until Grace exclaimed, sharply, ‘What! the 17th?’ ‘Yes, the 17th, hush,’ Amy answered, and then went on with her reading. I could not catch a single word more, so I went back down-stairs. It was then about the ninth of the month, and I thought it might be as well to keep my eyes open on the 17th, though it might have meant last month, or any other month, for all I could guess. After that Amy seemed in better spirits than usual, and Grace was gay and nervous by turns. On the 17th the girls stayed in their room, as usual—that was four days ago.”

She paused a moment, during which my eyes never left her face; she sighed heavily, and resumed:

“I felt fidgety all day, as if something was going to happen. I expected to see the girls preparing for company, or to go somewhere, but they did no such thing. When evening came, they went to their room earlier than usual, but I sat up later than I often do. It was almost eleven o’clock when I went up-stairs, and then I could not sleep. I stopped and listened again at the door of the girls’ room, but could hear nothing. They might both have been asleep.

“It was very warm, and I threw open my shutters, and sat down by the window, thinking that I was not sleepy, and, of course, I fell asleep. All at once something awoke me. I started and listened; in a moment I heard it again; it was the snort of a horse. There was no moon, and the shrubbery and trees made the front yard, from the gate to the house, very dark. As I heard no wheels nor hoofs, of course I knew that the horse was standing still, and the sound came from the front. I sat quite still and listened hard. By-and-by I heard something else. This time it was a faint rustling among the bushes below—it was not enough to have aroused even a light sleeper, but I was wide awake, and all ears. ‘Somebody is creeping through my rose bushes,’ I said to myself, then tip-toed to my bureau, got out the pistol you gave me, and slipped out, and down-stairs, as still as a mouse.

“The girls slept in a room over the parlor, and their windows faced west and south; mine faced north and west, so you see I had no view, from my bed-room, of the south windows of their room. The croquet ground was on the south side of the house, and there was a bit of vacant lawn in front of the parlor, also. The windows below were all closed and so I could not hear the rustling any more.

“I sat down by one of the parlor windows and peeped out. Presently I saw something come out from among the bushes; it was a man; and he came into the open space *carrying a ladder*. Then I knew what the rustling meant. He had taken

the ladder from the big harvest-apple tree in front, where the girls had put it that afternoon, and was bringing it toward the house.

“The man stopped opposite the south windows of the girls’ room, and began to raise the ladder. Then I knew what to do. I slipped the pistol into my pocket, went out through the dining-room, unbolted the back door as quietly as I could, crept softly to the south corner of the house, and peeped around. The ladder was already up, and somebody was climbing out of the window, while the man steadied the ladder. It was one of the girls, but I could not tell which, so I waited. When she stood upon the ground not ten feet away from me, I knew by her height that it was Grace, and Amy had started down before Grace was off the ladder. Just then the man stepped back, so that I had a fair chance at him. I took aim as well as I could, and fired.

Illustration:

„Just then the man stepped back, so that I had a fair chance at him.”

“The man yelled. Grace screamed and tumbled over on the grass, just as I expected her to. Amy Holmes jumped from the ladder, ran to the man, and said, “quick! come!” I fired again, and Grace raised herself suddenly with such a moan that I thought in my haste I had hit her.

“I threw down the pistol, ran and picked her up as if she were a baby, and took her around to the back door. By the time I found out that she was not hurt, and had got back to the ladder, the man and Amy were gone, and I heard a buggy going down the road at a furious rate.”

She paused and sighed deeply, looked at me for a moment, and then, as I made no effort to break the silence, she resumed:

“It’s not a pleasant story for a mother to tell concerning her own daughter, but when I think of Nellie Ewing I know that it might accidentally have been worse.

“I commanded Grace to tell me the whole truth. She cried, and declared that she was under oath not to tell. After a little she grew calmer, and then told me that she meant no harm. Amy had a lover who was not a favorite with her guardian, who lives somewhere South. Amy was about to run away and be married, and Grace was to accompany her as a witness. They both expected to be safely back before daylight. Of course I did not believe this, and I told her so. Her actions after that made me wish that I had not disputed her story. I have used every argument, and I am convinced that nothing more can be got out of Grace. She is terribly frightened and nervous, but she is stubborn as death. Whatever the truth is, she is afraid to tell it.”

“And Miss Holmes; what more of her?”

“Nothing more; she went away in the buggy with the others.”

“The others?”

“Yes; I am sure there were two, for I found the place where the buggy stood waiting. It was not at the gate, but further south. There was a ditch between the wheel marks and the fence, and nothing to tie to. Some one must have been holding the horses.”

“And this is all you know about the business?”

“Yes, everything.”

"Where is your daughter now?"

"At home, under lock and key, with a trusty hired man to stand guard over her and the house until I get back, and with Freddy and the hired girl for company."

"Does she know why you came to the city?"

"Not she. I told her I was coming to make arrangements for putting her to school at a convent, and I intend to do it, too."

Making no comment on this bit of maternal discipline, I again had recourse to my note-book.

"You are fixed in your desire not to have your daughter further interviewed?" I asked, presently.

"I am," she replied. "I don't think it would do any good, and she is not fit to endure any more excitement. I expect to find her sick in bed when I get home."

"Do you think your shot injured the man?"

"I know it did," emphatically. "I aimed at his legs, intending to hit them, and I did it. He never gave such a screech as that from sheer fright; there was pain in it. Amy must have helped him to the carriage."

"Is this escapade known among your neighbors?"

"No. I hushed it up at home, giving my girl and hired man a different story to believe. I could not get away by the morning train from Sharon, and so started the next evening. I left them all at home with Grace, and drove alone to Sharon, leaving my horse at the stable there."

"You certainly acted very wisely, although I regret the delay. Miss Holmes and her two cavaliers have now nearly four days the start of us. Did you notice the size of the man at the ladder?"

"Yes; he was not a large man, if anything a trifle below the medium height."

"You think, then, that Miss Holmes made a willful effort to deceive you, when she told you that the album verse was written by Professor Bartlett? By-the-by, is there a Professor Asa Bartlett at Amora?"

"Yes, he is the Principal. If you could see him, you would never accuse him of having written a silly verse like that. I am sure Amy meant to deceive me, and I am sure that she posted Grace about it, in case I should ask her."

"But you did not ask her?"

"No. One does not care to make one's own child tell an unnecessary lie. Grace would have stood by Amy, no doubt."

It was growing late in the afternoon. There was much to do, much to think over, and no time to lose. I was not yet prepared to give Mrs. Ballou the benefit of my opinion, as regarded her daughter's escapade, so I arranged for a meeting in the evening, promising to have my plans decided upon and ready to lay before her at that time.

She wished, if possible, to return home on the following day, and I told her that I thought it not only possible, but advisable that she should do so.

Then I called a carriage, saw her safely ensconced therein, en route for her hotel, and returned to my Chief.

I had now two interests. I much desired to arrive at the bottom of the Groveland mystery, and thought, with the information now in hand, that this was quite possible; and I also desired to remain at my post among the Traftonites. I at once decided upon my course. I would tell my Chief Mrs. Ballou's story, and then I

would give him a brief history of our sojourn in Trafton and its motive. After that, we would decide how to act.

There was no pause for rest or food, or thought, until I had given my Chief a history of Mrs. Ballou's vigil and excellent pistol exploit, and followed this up by the story of my Trafton experience.

His first comment, after he had listened for an hour most attentively, brought from my lips a sigh of relief; it was just what I longed to hear.

"Well, you need have no fear so far as this office is concerned. 'Squire Brookhouse has not called for its services."

Chapter XV

Preparations of War.

"Bathurst," my Chief said, settling back in his chair, and eyeing me with great good humor, "I don't see but that you are getting on swimmingly, and I don't feel inclined to dictate much. Your Groveland affair is looking up. You may have as many men as you need to look after that business. As for Trafton, I think you and Carnes have made good use of your holiday. I think you have struck something rich, and that you had better remain there, and work it up; or, if you prefer to go to Groveland yourself, return there as soon as possible."

"I am glad to hear you talk as I think," I replied. "I believe that Trafton is ripe for an explosion, and I confess that, just at present, I am more interested in Trafton than in Groveland, besides——. In my report from Groveland, you may remember that I mentioned going to the station to fetch Miss Amy Holmes?"

"Yes."

"And that this young lady was accompanied on that day by a handsome young gentleman?"

"Yes."

"Well, I have since made the acquaintance of this young man."

"Ah!"

"At first I thought it only a coincidence, and dismissed the matter from my mind. Since I have heard Mrs. Ballou's story, a queer thought has entered my head."

"Explain."

"This young gallant, whom I first saw in the company of the runaway Miss Holmes, is Mr. Arch, or Archibald Brookhouse, of Trafton."

"I see," thoughtfully.

"And the initials following that album verse are A. B."

"A. B.! Archibald Brookhouse! There may be something in it, but should you feel justified in suspecting this young man as the possible author of *your* anonymous letter?"

"If he is the writer of the album lines, yes."

"What do you propose to do?"

"First," said I, "we must call in the dummy."

"Yes."

"Then I want a good man to go to Groveland in search of information. I want him to find out all that he can concerning the character of this Johnny La Porte, who attended school at Amora, and was a fellow-student with Nellie Ewing, Mamie Rutger, and Grace Ballou."

"Good."

"Then he must learn if any of the Groveland youths have become lame since last Sunday, and if any of these same gentry was missing, or absent from home, during the night of the 17th, for, of course, Miss Amy Holmes being on his hands, the driver of the carriage which Mrs. Ballou routed that night must have been absent sometime, if he belonged in the community. He surely had to dispose of Miss Holmes in some way."

"Do you think it probable that some Groveland Lothario was mixed up in this elopement business?"

"I think it not improbable. The first search was made, seemingly, upon the supposition that all Groveland was above suspicion, and that search failed. I intend to hold all Groveland Lotharios upon my list of suspected criminals until they are individually and collectively proven innocent."

"Quite right."

"On second thought we had better let the dummy remain until we have put a new man in the field; by this time he must know something about the people he is among. Who can you send to Groveland?"

"Wyman, I think."

"Capital; Wyman is good at this sort of thing. He had better present himself in person to our dummy, hear all that he can tell, and then deliver your letter of recall, and see him safely on his way to the city before he has time to open his mouth for the benefit of any one else."

"Very good; Wyman is at your disposal."

I drew toward me a large portfolio containing State and county maps. It lay at all times upon the office table, convenient for reference.

While I was tracing the eccentric course of a certain railroad, I could feel my Chief's eyes searching my countenance.

"Bathurst," he said, after some moments of silence, and leaning toward me as he spoke, "I believe you have a theory, or a suspicion, that is not entirely based upon Mrs. Ballou's revelation."

"You are right," I replied, "and it is a suspicion of so strange a sort that I almost hesitate to give it utterance, and yet I think it worthy of attention. I want to shadow this cavalier, Arch Brookhouse."

"Yes."

"I find by this map that the town of Amora is situated twenty-five miles from Groveland, and thirty miles from Trafton. Sharon, the nearest railroad communication with Groveland, is thirty miles from Amora, so that the distance from Trafton to Sharon is sixty miles, and the seminary town is midway between."

My Chief made a sign which meant "I comprehend; go on."

"Now, it is possible that accident or business brought Mr. Arch Brookhouse to Sharon, and that his meeting with Miss Holmes was quite accidental, and his

attendance upon Miss Holmes and Grace Ballou merely a chance bit of gallantry. But when you consider that he seemed equally well known to both young ladies, that Sharon is a small town, and a dull one, and that Miss Holmes came from Amora that morning, is it not just as probable that Mr. Brookhouse traveled from Trafton to Amora for the purpose of escorting Miss Holmes to Sharon? Now, young men of our day are not much given to acts of courtesy extending over sixty miles of railroad; therefore, if Arch Brookhouse visited Sharon for the sole purpose of meeting these two young ladies, and basking in their society for a brief half hour, it is fair to presume that he is more than ordinarily interested in one of them."

"You are right, Bathurst; at least it would seem so."

"Now let me tell you all that I know concerning the Brookhouses."

Once more I gave a minute description of my first meeting with Arch Brookhouse, and of the second, when I recognized him at Trafton. Then I told him of my interview with the telegraph operator, of the telegram sent by Fred Brookhouse from New Orleans, and of the reply sent by Arch, and last I told him how Louis Brookhouse had come home, accompanied by another young man, *on the day after the attempted flight of Grace Ballou*, and how Dr. Bethel had been called upon to attend him, he having met with an accident.

My Chief stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"I see," he said, slowly, "you have some nice points of circumstantial evidence against these young gentlemen. How do you propose to use them?"

"First, I must know what motive took Arch Brookhouse to Sharon, and find out if either of the Brookhouse brothers have been students at Amora. I want therefore to send a second man to Amora."

"Very good."

"If I find that either, or both, of the younger brothers have been fellow-students with Grace Ballou, and the missing girls, then I shall wish to extend my search."

"To New Orleans?"

"To New Orleans."

"Is there anything more?"

"Yes; one thing. If Carnes goes to New Orleans I shall want a telegraph operator in Trafton."

"Then you wish to remain in Trafton?"

"Yes, and this takes me back to the other matter. I quite expected that a man like 'Squire Brookhouse would have called upon you for help. If he has employed men from either of the other offices, we can easily find out who they are."

"Easily."

"I shall wish to inform myself on this point, and if possible, return to Trafton to-morrow night. I am to see Mrs. Ballou again to-night; now I think I will have some supper."

I arose, but stood, for a moment, waiting for any word of command or suggestion my Chief might have to offer.

He sat for many seconds, seemingly oblivious of my presence. Then he looked up.

"I shall make no suggestions," he said, waving his hand as if to dismiss both the subject and myself. "I will instruct Wyman and Earle at once. When you come in

after seeing Mrs. Ballou, you will find them at your disposal, and give yourself no trouble about those other detectives. I will attend to that.”

I thanked him and withdrew. This curt sentence from the lips of my Chief was worth more to me than volumes of praise from any other source, for it convinced me that he not only trusted me, but that he approved my course and could see none better.

I saw Mrs. Ballou again that evening, and put to her some questions that not only amazed her, but seemed to her most irrelevant, but while she answered without fully comprehending my meaning or purpose, some of her replies were, to me, most satisfactory.

After I had heard all that she could tell me concerning Mr. Johnny La Porte, I gave her a minute description of Arch Brookhouse, and ended by asking if she had ever seen any one who answered to that description.

I was puzzled, but scarcely surprised, at her answer, which came slowly and after considerable reflection.

Yes, she had seen such a young man; I had described him exactly. She had seen him twice. He came to her house in company with Ed. Dwight. Dwight was an agent for various sewing machines; he was a jolly, good-natured fellow, very much liked by all the young Grovelanders; he had traveled the Groveland route for two years, perhaps three. He was quite at home at Mrs. Ballou's, and, in fact, anywhere where he had made one or two visits. The young man I had described had been over the Groveland route twice with Ed. Dwight, each time stopping for dinner at Mrs. Ballou's. His name, she believed, was *Brooks*, and he had talked of setting up as an agent on his own responsibility.

Did she know Mr. Dwight's place of residence?

He lived on the C. & L. road, somewhere between Sharon and Amora. Mrs. Ballou could not recall the name of the town.

I did not need that she should; a sewing machine agent whose name I knew, and who lived somewhere between Amora and Sharon, would not be difficult to find.

“How did Mr. Dwight travel?”

“In a very nice covered wagon, and with a splendid team.”

“How long since Mr. Brooks and Mr. Dwight paid a visit to Groveland?”

Mrs. Ballou thought it was fully six months since their last visit.

“That would be nearly two months before Mamie Rutger and Nellie Ewing disappeared?”

“Yes.”

“Have you seen Dwight since?”

“Oh, yes; he comes at stated times, as usual.”

It was growing late, and I was more than satisfied with my interview with Mrs. Ballou. I advised her to keep Grace for the present under her own eye and, promising that she should see or hear from me soon, took my leave.

Mrs. Ballou had announced her intention to return by the morning train.

We could not be traveling companions, as I was not to leave the city until afternoon.

Reaching my room I sat into the small hours looking over my notes, jotting down new ones, smoking and thinking.

The next morning I saw Wyman and Earle, gave them full instructions, and arranged to receive their reports at the earliest possible moment, by express, at Trafton.

At noon I was in possession of all that could be learned concerning the identity of the detectives employed by 'Squire Brookhouse. No officer of any of the regular forces had been employed. Mr. Brookhouse had probably obtained the services of private detectives.

Private detectives, of more or less ability, are numerous in the city, and I was personally known to but few of these independent experts. Most of those could be satisfactorily accounted for, and I turned my face toward Trafton, feeling that there was little danger of being "spotted" by a too knowing brother officer.

Chapter XVI

Fly Crooks in Trafton.

My train, which left the city early in the afternoon, would arrive in Trafton at midnight. Foreseeing a long and, in my then state of mind, tedious ride, I had armed myself with a well-filled cigar case, and several copies of the latest editions of the city papers, and we had not been long on the wing before I turned my steps toward the smoking car, biting off the end of a weed as I went.

A group of four, evidently countrymen, were just beginning a game of cards. I took a seat opposite them and idly watched their progress, while I enjoyed my cigar.

Presently a gentleman from the front, seemingly attracted by their hilarity, arose and sauntered down the aisle, taking up his station behind the players, and quietly overlooking the game.

He did not glance at me, as he passed, but, from my lounging position, I could watch his face and study it at my leisure. At the first glance it struck me as being familiar; I had seen the man before, but where? Slowly, as I looked, the familiarity resolved itself into identity, and then I watched him with growing interest, and some wonder.

Seven months ago, while working upon a criminal case, I had made the acquaintance of this gentleman at a thieves' tavern, down in the slums. I was, of course, safely disguised at the time, and in an assumed character; hence I had no fear of being recognized now.

"Dimber⁽¹⁴⁻¹⁾ Joe" had been doing Government service, in consequence of his connection with a garroting escapade, and had but just been released from "durance vile." His hair was then somewhat shorter than was becoming; his face was unshaven, and his general appearance that of a seedy, hard-up rascal. The person before me wore his hair a little longer than the ordinary cut; his face was clean shaven, his linen immaculate, and his dress a well-made business suit, such as a merchant or banker abroad might wear. But it was Dimber Joe.

Evidently fortune had dropped a few, at least, of her favors at Dimber Joe's feet, but it was quite safe to conjecture that some one was so much the worse off for his present prosperity.

What new mischief was on foot? for it was hardly likely that Dimber Joe, late the associate of river thieves, was now undertaking an honest journey.

I resolved to watch him closely while our way was the same, and to give my Chief an account of our meeting, together with a description of Joe's "get up," at the first opportunity.

Accordingly, I remained in the smoking car during the entire journey, but no suspicious or peculiar movement, on the part of Dimber Joe, rewarded my vigilance, until the brakeman called Trafton, and we pulled into that station.

Then Dimber Joe arose, stretched himself, flung a linen duster across his arm, and, swinging in his hand a small valise, quitted the car, stepped down upon the shadowy platform just ahead of me; and, while I was looking about for Carnes, vanished in the darkness.

Illustration:

Then Dimber Joe arose, stretched himself, flung a linen duster across his arm, and, swinging in his hand a small valise, quitted the car.

"Well, Carnes," I said, when we were once more alone in our room at the hotel, "what has happened? Have you seen anything that looks like a detective?"

"Niver a wan," he replied. "I've kept an open eye on every train from both ways, but the only arrival in this city, worth making mintion of, has been—who d'ye think?"

"Myself, I suppose."

"No, sir! Not a bit of it. It's a cove that means no good to Trafton, you may depend. It's Blake Simpson, and he's rooming in this very house."

"Blake Simpson! are you *sure*?"

"Av coorse I'm sure! Did ye ever know me to miss a face? I never saw the fellow before he came here, but I've made the acquaintance of his phiz in the rogue's gallery. He came yesterday; he wears good togs, and is playing the gentleman; you know he is not half a bad looking fellow, and his manner is above suspicion. He is figuring as a patent-right man, but he'll figure as something else before we see the last of him in Trafton, depend upon it."

Blake Simpson was known, at least by name, to every man on the force. He was a mixture of burglar, street robber, and panel-worker; and was a most dangerous character.

"Carnes," I said, slowly, "I am afraid some new misfortune menaces Trafton, if, as you say, Blake Simpson is already here, for Dimber Joe came down on the train to-night, and is in Trafton."

Carnes uttered a long, low whistle.

"Blake and Dimber Joe!" he said. "A fine pair, sure enough; and in what shape does the Dimber come?"

"He comes well-dressed, and looking like a respectable member of society."

“Well,” with a prodigious yawn, “we got here first, and we will try and sleep with one eye open while they stay in Trafton. What did you learn about the Brookhouse investigation, Bathurst?”

I told him the result of our search among the city detectives, and finished by saying:

“Probably the new debutants will be strangers, and will not interfere with our movements. I wish I knew whether Bethel will eventually decide to employ a detective. I don’t think he is the man to let such a matter drop.”

“He won’t take it up for the present, I fancy. Dr. Barnard is dangerously ill; was taken yesterday, very suddenly. They depend entirely upon Bethel; he is in constant attendance. I heard Porter say that the old gentleman’s case was a desperate one, and that a change for the worse might be expected at any moment.”

I was sorry to hear such news of the jovial old doctor. His was a life worth something to the community; but I was not sorry to learn that an immediate interview with Dr. Bethel could be staved off, without exciting wonder or suspicion in his mind; for, since my visit to the city, I had reconsidered my intention to confide in the doctor, and resolved to keep my own counsel, at least for the present.

Previous to my visit to the city, we had decided that it was time to explore the south road, and also that it was desirable to “get the measure” of Jim Long at the earliest opportunity.

We settled upon the best method by which to accomplish the former, and undertake the latter, object. And then Carnes, who had been very alert and active during my absence, and who was now very sleepy, flung himself upon his bed to pass the few hours that remained of darkness in slumber.

I had not yet opened up to him the subject of the Groveland operations, thinking it as well to defer the telling until I had received reports from Wyman and Earle.

We had now upon our hands a superabundance of raw material from which to work out some star cases. But, just now, the Groveland affair seemed crowding itself to the front, while the Trafton scourges, and the villainous grave-robbers, seemed to grow more and more mysterious, intangible, and past finding out.

The presence of Blake Simpson and Dimber Joe gave me some uneasiness; but, guessing that their stay in Trafton would be short, I resolved not to bring myself into prominence by notifying the authorities of the presence of two such dangerous characters, but rather to trust them to Carnes’ watchfulness while I passed a day, or more if need be, in exploring the south road.

As I settled my head upon my pillow after a long meditation, I remembered that to-morrow would be Sunday, and that Tuesday was the day fixed for Miss Manvers’ garden party.

Chapter XVII

Southward to Clyde.

Early on the following morning I visited Trafton's best livery stable, and procuring a good team and light buggy, drove straight to Jim Long's cabin, intending to solicit his companionship on my ride. But the cabin was deserted; there was no sign of Jim about the premises; and, after waiting impatiently for a few moments, and uttering one or two resounding halloos, I resumed my journey alone.

I had manufactured a pretext for this journey, which was to be confided to Jim by way of setting at rest any wonder or doubt that my maneuvers might otherwise give rise to, and I had intended to seize this opportunity for sounding him, in order the better to judge whether it would be prudent to take him into our confidence, in a less or greater degree, as the occasion might warrant.

Such an ally as Jim would be invaluable, I knew; but, spite of the fact that we had been much in his society, and that we both considered ourselves, and were considered by others, very good judges of human nature, neither Carnes nor myself could say truly that we understood Jim Long.

His words were a mass of absurd contradictions, betraying no trait of his individuality, save his eccentricity; and his face was, at all times, as unreadable as the sphinx. When you turned from his contradictory words to read his meaning in his looks, you felt as if turning from the gambols of Puck to peer into a vacuum.

Regretting the loss of Jim's society, as well as the opportunity it might possibly have afforded, I urged my horses swiftly over the smooth sun-baked road, noting the aspect of the country as we flew on.

Straight and level it stretched before me, with field, orchard, and meadow on either hand; a cultivated prairie. There were well-grown orchards, and small artificial groves, rows of tall poplars, clumps of low-growing trees, planted as wind breaks, hedges high and branching, low and closely trimmed. But no natural timber, no belts of grove, no thick undergrowth; nothing that might afford shelter for skulking outlaws, or stolen quadrupeds.

The houses were plentiful, and not far apart. There were the pretentious new dwellings of the well-to-do farmers, and the humbler abodes of the unsuccessful land tiller, and the renter. There were stacks, and barns, and granaries, all honest in their fresh paint or their weather-beaten dilapidation; no haven for thieves or booty here.

So for ten miles; then there was a stretch of rolling prairie, but still no timber, and as thickly settled as before.

Fifteen miles from Trafton I crossed a high bridge that spanned a creek almost broad enough and deep enough to be called a river. On either side was a fringe of hazel brush and a narrow strip of timber, so much thinned by the wood cutter that great gaps were visible among the trees, up and down, as far as the eye could see.

I watered my horses here, and drawing forth a powerful field glass, which I had made occasional use of along the route, surveyed the country. Nothing near or remote seemed worthy of investigation.

Driving beneath some friendly green branches, I allowed my horses to rest, and graze upon the tender foliage, while I consulted a little pocket map of the country.

I had been driving directly south, and the C. & L. railroad ran from Trafton a little to the southwest. At a distance of eighteen miles from that town the railroad curved to the south and ran parallel with the highway I was now traveling, but at a distance of eight miles. Ten miles further south and I would come upon the little inland village of Clyde, and running due west from Clyde was a wagon road straight to the railroad town of Amora.

I had started early and driven fast; consulting my watch I found that it was only half-past ten.

I had intended to push my investigation at least twenty-five miles south, and although I was already convinced that no midnight raiders would be likely to choose as an avenue of escape a highway so thickly dotted with houses, many of them inconveniently near the road, and so insufficient in the matter of hills and valleys, forest and sheltering underbrush. I decided to go on to Clyde, hoping, if I failed in one direction, to increase my knowledge in another.

I put away map and field glass, lit a fresh cigar, turned my horses once more into the high road and pursued my journey.

It was a repetition of the first ten miles; broad fields and rich meadows, browsing cattle and honest-eyed sheep; thickly scattered farm buildings, all upright and honest of aspect; the whole broad face of the country seemed laughing my investigations to scorn.

When I found myself within sight of Clyde I stopped my team, having first assured myself that no spectator was in sight and selected from the roadside a small, round pebble. Looking warily about me a second time, I inserted it between the hoof and shoe of the most docile of the two horses.

It was an action that would have brought me into disfavor with the great Bergh, but in the little game I was about to play, the assistance which a lame horse could render seemed necessary.

I promised the martyr a splendid rub down and an extra feed as a compensation, and we moved on slowly toward our destination, the near horse limping painfully, and his comrade evidently much amazed, and not a little disgusted, at this sudden change of gait.

The little village of Clyde was taking its noontide nap when I drove down its principal street, and I felt like a wolf in Arcadia; all was so peaceful, so clean, so prim and so silent.

A solitary man emerging from a side street roused me to action. I drove forward and checked my horses directly before him.

Could I find a livery stable in the town? And was there such a thing as a hotel?

Yes, there was a sort of a stable, at least anybody could get a feed at Larkins' barn, and he kept two or three horses for hire. As for a hotel, there it was straight ahead of me; that biggish house with the new blinds on it.

Being directed to Larkins', I thanked my informant, and was soon making my wants known to Larkins himself.

Thinking it quite probable that the hired team which I drove might be known to some denizen of Clyde, I at once announced myself as from Trafton; adding, that I had driven out toward Clyde on business, and, being told that I could reach Baysville by a short cut through or near Clyde, I had driven on, but one of my horses having suddenly become lame, I had decided to rest at Clyde, and then

return to Trafton. I had been told that Baysville was not more than seven miles from Clyde.

It is scarcely necessary to state that I had really no intention of visiting Baysville, and that my map had informed me as to its precise location.

The truth was that I had dropped for the moment the Trafton case, and had visited Clyde in the interest of Groveland, thinking it not unlikely that this little hamlet, being so near Amora, might be within the area traversed by Mr. Ed. Dwight, the sewing machine agent.

He was said to live somewhere between Amora and Sharon, perhaps here I could learn the precise location of his abiding place.

Leaving my tired horses to the care of Larkins, I next bent my steps towards the commodious dwelling which did duty as hotel. There was no office, but the sitting-room, with its homely rag carpet, gaudy lithographs, old fashioned rocker, and straight-backed "cane seats," was clean and cool. There was a small organ in one corner, a sewing machine in another, and an old fashioned bureau in a third.

A little girl, of fourteen years or less, entered the room timidly, followed by two younger children. She took from the bureau a folded cloth, snowy and smooth, and left the room quietly, but the younger ones, less timid, and perhaps more curious, remained.

Perching themselves uncomfortably upon the extreme edges of two chairs, near together but remote from me, they blinked and stared perseveringly, until I broke the silence and set them at their ease by commencing a lively conversation.

The organ was first discussed, then the sewing machine furnished a fresh topic. After a time my dinner was served: but, during the half-hour of waiting, while my hostess concocted yellow soda biscuit, and fried monstrous slices of ham, I had gathered, from my seemingly careless chatter with the children, some valuable information. While I ate my dinner, I had leisure to consider what I had heard.

My hostess had not purchased her sewing machine of Ed. Dwight, but he had been there to repair it; besides, he always stopped there when making his regular journeys through Clyde. They all liked Dwight, the children had declared; he could play the organ, and he sang such funny songs. He could dance, too, "like anything." He lived at *Amora*, but he had told their mother, when he had paid his last visit, that he intended to sell out his route soon, and go away. He was going into another business.

If Mr. Dwight lived at Amora, then Mrs. Ballou had misunderstood or been misinformed. She was the reverse of stupid, and not likely to err in understanding. If she had been misinformed, had it not been for some purpose?

The machine agent had talked of abandoning his present business, and leaving the country shortly.

If this was true, then it would be well to know where he was going, and what his new occupation was to be.

Before I had finished doing justice to my country dinner, I had decided how to act.

Returning to Larkins' stable I found that he had discovered the cause of my horse's lameness, and listened to his rather patronizing discourse upon the subject of "halts and sprains," with due meekness, as well as a profound

consciousness that he had mentally set me down as a city blockhead, shockingly ignorant of "horse lore," and wholly unfit to draw the ribbons over a decent beast.

He had been assisted to this conclusion by a neighboring Clydeite, who, much to my annoyance, had sauntered in, and, recognizing not only the team, but myself, had volunteered the information that:

"Them was Dykeman's bays," and that I was "a rich city fellow that was stayin' at Trafton;" he had "seen me at the hotel the last time he hauled over market stuff."

Having ascertained my position in the mind of Mr. Larkins, I consulted him as to the propriety of driving the bays over to Amora and back that afternoon.

Larkins eyed me inquisitively.

"I s'pose then you'll want to get back to Trafton to-night?" he queried.

Yes, I wanted to get back as soon as possible, but if Larkins thought it imprudent to drive so far with the team, I would take fresh horses, if he had them to place at my disposal. And then, having learned from experience that ungratified curiosity, especially the curiosity of the country bumpkin with a taste for gossip, is often the detective's worst enemy, I explained that I had learned that the distance to Baysville was greater than I had supposed, and I had decided to drive over to Amora to make a call upon an acquaintance who was in business there.

Mr. Larkins manifested a desire to know the name of my Amora acquaintance, and was promptly enlightened.

I wanted to call on Mr. Ed. Dwight, of sewing machine fame.

And now I was the helpless victim in the hands of the ruthless and inquisitive Larkins.

He knew Ed. Dwight "like a book." Ed. always "put up" with him, and he was a "right good fellow, any way you could fix it." In short, Larkins was ready and willing to act as my pilot to Amora; he had "got a flyin' span of roans," and would drive me over to Amora in "less than no time"; he "didn't mind seeing Ed. himself," etc., etc.

There was no help for it. Larkins evidently did not intend to trust his roans to my unskilled hands, so I accepted the situation, and was soon bowling over the road to Amora, *tête-à-tête* with the veriest interrogation point in human guise that it was ever my lot to meet.

Larkins did not converse; he simply asked questions. His interest in myself, my social and financial standing, my occupation, my business or pleasure in Trafton, my past and my future, was something surprising considering the length, or more properly the brevity of our acquaintance.

Even my (supposed) relatives, near and remote, came in for a share of his generous consideration.

To have given unsatisfactory answers would have been to provoke outside investigation.

A detective's first care should be to clear up all doubt or uncertainty concerning himself. Let an inquisitive person think that he knows a little more of your private history than do his neighbors, and you disarm him; he has now no incentive to inquiry. He may ventilate his knowledge very freely, but by so doing he simply plays into your hands.

If the scraps of family history, which I dealt out to Larkins during that drive, astonished and edified that worthy, they would have astonished and edified my most intimate friend none the less.

By the time we had reached our destination, I was bursting with merriment, and he, with newly acquired knowledge.

I had made no attempt to extract information concerning Ed. Dwight, on the route. I hoped soon to interview that gentleman in *propriae personæ*, and any knowledge not to be gained from the interview I could “sound” for on the return drive.

Chapter XVIII

A Sewing Machine Agent.

On arriving within sight of Amora, I had reason to congratulate myself that I had brought Larkins along as convoy.

Amora was by no means a city, but it was large enough to make a search after Mr. Dwight a proceeding possibly lengthy, and perhaps difficult.

Larkins knew all about it. We drove past the Seminary, quite a large and imposing structure, surrounded by neat and tastefully laid out grounds, through a cheery-looking business street, and across a bridge, over a hill, and thence down a street which, while it was clean, well built, and thrifty of aspect, was evidently not the abode of Amora's *la beau monde*.

In another moment Larkins was pulling in his reins before a large, unpainted dwelling, in front of which stood a pole embellished with the legend, “Boarding House.”

Several inquiring faces could be seen through the open windows, and the squeak of an untuneful violin smote our ears, as we approached the door.

Larkins, who seemed very much at home, threw open the street door; we turned to the right, and were almost instantly standing in a large, shabbily-furnished parlor.

Two of the aforementioned faces, carried on the shoulders of two blowzy-looking young women, were vanishing through a rear door, through which the tones of the violin sounded louder and shriller than before. Three occupants still remained in the room, and to one of these, evidently the “landlady,” Larkins addressed himself.

“Good evening, Mrs. Cole. We want to see Ed. I hear his fiddle, so I s'pose he can be seen?”

Proffering us two hard, uninviting chairs, Mrs. Cole vanished, and, through the half-closed door, we could hear her voice, evidently announcing our presence, but the violin and “Lannigan's Ball” went on to the end. Like another musical genius known to fame, Mr. Dwight evidently considered “music before all else.”

With the last note of the violin came the single syllable, “Eh?” in a voice not unpleasant, but unnecessarily loud.

Mrs. Cole repeated her former sentence; there was the sound of some one rising, quick steps crossed the floor and, as the door swung inward to admit Mr. Dwight, I advanced quickly and with extended hand.

When he halted before me, however, I stepped back in feigned surprise and confusion.

Illustration:

When he halted before me, however,
I stepped back in feigned surprise and confusion.

But Dwight was equal to the occasion. Before I could drop or withdraw my hand, he seized it in his own large palm, and shook it heartily, the most jovial of smiles lighting his face meanwhile.

“You’ve got the advantage of me, just now,” he said, in the same loud, cheery tone we had heard from the kitchen, “but I’m glad to see you, all the same. Larkins! hallo, Larkins, how are you,” and, dropping my hand as suddenly as he had grasped it, Dwight turned to salute Larkins.

When their greeting was over, I stammered forth my explanation.

I had made a mistake. Mr. DeWhyte must pardon it. Hearing at Clyde that a Mr. DeWhyte was living in Amora, and that he was engaged in the sale of sewing machines, I had supposed it to be none other than an old school friend of that name, who, when last I heard of him, was general agent for a city machine manufactory. It was a mistake which I trusted Mr. DeWhyte would pardon. I then presented my card and retired within myself.

But the genial Dwight was once more “happy to know me.” Shifting his violin, which he had brought into the room, from underneath his left elbow, he rested it upon his knee, and launched into a series of questions concerning my suppositious friend, which resulted in the discovery that their names, though similar, were not the same, and that the existence of a Mr. Edward DeWhyte and of Ed. Dwight, both following the same occupation, was not after all a very remarkable coincidence, although one liable to cause mistakes like the one just made by me.

After this we were more at our ease. I proffered my cigar case, and both Larkins and Dwight accepted weeds, Dwight remarking, as he arose to take some matches from a card-board match safe under the chimney, that, “smoking was permitted in the parlor,” adding, as he struck a match on the sole of his boot, that he “believed in comfort, and would not board where they were too high-toned to allow smoking.”

Conversation now became general; rather Larkins, Dwight, and the two hitherto silent “boarders” talked, and I listened, venturing only an occasional remark, and studying my “subject” with secret interest.

“When are you comin’ our way again, Dwight?” asked Larkins, as, after an hour’s chat, we rose to take our leave.

“I don’t know, Lark.; I don’t know,” said Dwight, inserting his hands in his pockets and jingling some loose coin or keys as he replied. “I don’t think I’ll make many more trips.”

“Sho! Ye ain’t goin’ to take a new route, I hope?”

“N-no; I think I’ll try a new deal. I’ve got a little down on the S. M. biz., and talk of taking up my old trade.”

“What! the show business?”

“Yes; I’ve got a pretty good chance for salary, and guess I’ll go down south and do a little of the heel and toe business this Winter,” rattling his heels by way of emphasis.

This fragment of conversation was a mine which I worked faithfully during our Clydeward drive, manifesting an interest in Mr. Ed. Dwight which quite met with the approval of Larkins, and which he was very ready to build up and gratify.

I remained in Clyde that night, and before retiring to rest in the tiny room assigned me in the “hotel,” I made the following entry in my note-book:

Ed. Dwight, sewing machine agent, living at Amora, is taller than the medium, but slender, and of light weight, being narrow of chest, with slim and slightly bowed legs, and long arms that are continually in motion; large, nervous hands; small head, with close-cropped curly black hair; fine regular features, that would be handsome but for the unhealthy, sallow complexion, and the look of dissipation about the eyes; said eyes very black, restless and bold of expression; mouth sensual, and shaded by a small, black mustache; teeth, white and rather prominent.

He is full of life and animation; an inveterate joker, his “chaff” being his principal conversational stock in trade. He is loud of speech, somewhat coarse in manner, rakish in dress, and possesses wonderful self-confidence. He is considered a dangerous fellow among the country girls, and gets credit for making many conquests. Is fickle in his fancies, and, like the sailor, seems to have a sweetheart in every port.

He is a singer of comic songs, a scraper upon the violin, and a some time song and dance man.

Has sold sewing machines for nearly three years in Amora and vicinity, and is now preparing to return to the stage and to go South.

Early the next morning I bade Larkins a friendly farewell, and turned my face toward Trafton.

Nothing noteworthy had occurred during my absence. Blake and Dimber Joe had observed Sunday in the most decorous fashion, attending divine worship, but not together, and remained in and about the hotel all the rest of the day and evening, treating each other as entire strangers, and, so far as Carnes could discover, never once exchanging word or glance.

One thing Carnes had noted as peculiar: Jim Long had haunted the hotel all day, manifesting a lively interest in our city birds, watching them furtively, entering into conversation with one or the other as opportunity offered, and contriving, while seeming to lounge as carelessly as usual, to keep within sight of them almost constantly during the day and evening.

Dr. Barnard was still in a critical condition; Carnes had not seen Bethel since Saturday.

“And what elephant’s tracks did ye’s find till the south av us?” queried Carnes, after he had given me the foregoing information. “Any ‘nish’ lairs, quiet fences, or cosy jungles, eh?”

Whereupon I gave him a full description of the journey over the south road, reserving only the portion of my yesterday's experience that concerned, for the present, only Mr. Ed. Dwight and myself.

"So there's nothing to get out of that," said Carnes, after listening to my recital with a serious countenance. "What do you think now, old man? If they don't run their booty over that road, where the mischief do they take it?"

"That we must find out," I replied. "And in order to do that we must investigate in a new direction."

"How?"

"Think a moment. We decided at the first that these systematic thieves had, *must have*, a rendezvous within half a night's ride from Trafton."

"Yes; an' I stick to that theory."

"So do I. All these robberies have been committed at distances never more than twenty-five miles from Trafton; often less, but never more."

"Just so."

"Within a radius of twenty-five miles around Trafton, east, north, and west, and at all intermediate points, it has not been safe to own a good horse. There is but one break in this unsafe circle and that is to the south. Now, that south road, one day, or *two* days, after a robbery, would be anything but safe for a midnight traveler, who rode a swift going horse or drove with a light buggy. Carnes, get your map and study out my new theory thereon."

Carnes produced his map and spread it out upon his knee, and I followed his example with my own.

"Now, observe," I began, "the south road runs straight and smooth for twenty miles, intersected regularly by the mile sections."

"Yes."

"Until a little north of Clyde, two miles, I believe they call it, a more curving irregular road runs southeast. Now, follow that road."

"I'm after it."

"It continues southeast for nearly ten miles, then the road forks."

"Yes."

"One fork, running directly south, takes you straight to some coal beds at Norristown—"

"Aye, aye!"

"The other runs beyond the county line and it is not on our maps; it takes an easterly course for nearly twenty miles, terminating at the river."

"Ah! I begin to see!"

"From Trafton to the river, then, is a little more than forty miles. You cross the river and are in another State. Up and down the river, for many miles, you have heavy timber; not far inland you find several competing railroads. Now, my belief is, that after the excitement following these robberies has had time to die out, the horses are hurried over this fifty miles of country, and across the river, and kept in the timber until it is quite safe to ship them to a distant market."

"But meantime, before they are taken to the river, where are they ambushed, then?"

"Under our very noses; here in Trafton!"

Carnes stared at me in consternation.

“Old man,” he said, at last, drawing a long, deep breath, “you are either insane—or inspired.”

“I believe I have caught an inspiration. But time will test my idea, ‘whether it be from the gods or no.’ These outlaws have proven themselves cunning, and fertile of brain. Who would think of overhauling Trafton for these stolen horses? The very boldness of the proceeding insures its safety.”

“I should think so. And how do you propose to carry out your search?”

“We must begin at once, trusting to our wits for ways and means. In some way we must see or know the contents of every barn, stable, granary, store-house, outbuilding, and abandoned dwelling, in and about Trafton. No man’s property, be he what he may, must be held exempt.”

“Do you think, then, that the stolen horses, the last haul of course, are still in Trafton?”

“It is not quite a week since the horses were taken; the ‘nine days’ wonder’ is still alive. If my theory is correct, they are still in Trafton!”

Chapter XIX

Haunted by a Face.

It was the day of Miss Manvers’ garden party, and a brighter or more auspicious one could not have dropped from the hand of the Maker of days.

Never did the earth seem fairer, and seldom did the sun shine upon a lovelier scene than that presented to my gaze as I turned aside from the dusty highway, and paced slowly up the avenue leading to the Hill House.

Even now the picture and the scenes and incidents of the day, rise before my mental vision, a graceful, sunlit, yet fateful panorama.

I see the heiress, as she glides across the lawn to greet me, her brunette cheeks glowing, her lips wreathed in smiles. She wears a costume that is a marvel of diaphanous creamy material, lighted up here and there with dashes of vivid crimson. Crimson roses adorn the loops and rippling waves of her glossy hair, and nestle in the rich lace at her throat. And, as I clasp her little hand, and utter the commonplaces of greeting, I note that the eye is even more brilliant than usual, the cheek and lip tinged with the vivid hue left by excitement, and, underneath the gay badinage and vivacious hospitality, a suppressed something:—anxiety, expectation, displeasure, disappointment; which, I can not guess. I only see that something has ruffled my fair hostess, and given to her thoughts, even on this bright day, an under current that is the reverse of pleasant.

The grounds are beautiful and commodious, tastefully arranged and decorated for the occasion, and the élite of Trafton is there; all, save Louise Barnard and Dr. Bethel.

“Have you heard from Dr. Barnard since noon?” queries my hostess, as we cross the lawn to join a group gathered about an archery target. “I have almost regretted

giving this party. It seems unfeeling to be enjoying ourselves here, and poor Louise bowed down with grief and anxiety beside a father who is, perhaps, dying.”

“Not dying, I hope.”

“Oh, we all shall hope until hope is denied us. I suppose his chance for life is one in a thousand. I am so sorry, and we shall miss Louise and Dr. Bethel so much.”

“Bethel is in close attendance?”

“Yes, Dr. Barnard has all confidence in him; and then—you know the nature of his relation with the family?”

“His relation; that of family physician, I suppose?”

Miss Manvers draws back her creamy skirts as we brush past a thorny rose tree.

“That of family physician; yes, and prospective son-in-law.”

“Ah! I suspected an attachment there.”

“It appears they have been privately engaged for some time, with the consent of the Barnards, of course. It has only just been publicly announced; rather it will be; I had it from Mrs. Barnard this morning. Dr. Barnard desires that it should be made known. He believes himself dying, and wishes Trafton to know that he sanctions the marriage.”

Her voice has an undertone of constraint which accords with her manner, and I, remembering the scene of a week before, comprehend and pity. In announcing her friend’s betrothal she proclaims the death of her own hope.

I do not resume the subject, and soon we are in the midst of a gay group, chattering with a bevy of fair girls, and receiving from one or two Trafton gallants, glances of envious disfavor, which I, desiring to mortify vanity, attributed to my new Summer suit rather than to my own personal self.

Arch Brookhouse is the next arrival, and almost the last. He comes in among us perfumed and smiling, and is received with marked favor. My new costume has now a rival, for Arch is as correct a gentleman of fashion as ever existed outside of a tailor’s window.

He is in wonderful spirits, too, adding zest to the merriment of the gay group of which he soon becomes the center.

After a time bows and quivers come more prominently into use. Archery is having its first season in Trafton. Some of the young ladies have yet to be initiated into the use of the bow, and presently I find myself instructing the pretty sixteen-year-old sister of my friend, Charlie Harris.

She manages her bow gracefully, but with a weak hand; her aim is far from accurate, and I find ample occupation in following the erratic movements of her arrows.

Brookhouse and Miss Manvers are both experts with the bow. They send a few arrows flying home to the very center of the target, and then withdraw from the sport, and finally saunter away together, the hand of the lady resting confidently upon her escort’s arm.

“Arn’t they a pretty couple?” exclaims my little pupil, twanging her bow-string as she turns to look after them. “I do wonder if they are engaged.”

“So do I,” I answer, with much fervor.

She favors me with a quick roguish glance, and laughs blithely.

“I don’t know,” turning back to her momentarily forgotten pastime. “Mr. Brookhouse has been very attentive, and for a long time we all thought him the favored one, until Dr. Bethel came, and since you appeared in Trafton. Ah! I’m afraid Adele is a bit of a flirt.”

And astute Miss sixteen shoots me another mischievous glance, and poises her arrow with all the nonchalance of a veteran.

Again I glance in the direction taken by my hostess and her cavalier, but they have disappeared among the plentiful shrubbery.

I turn back to my roguish little pupil, now provokingly intent upon her archery practice.

Once more the arrow is fixed; she takes aim with much deliberation, and puts forth all her strength to the bending of the bow. Twang! whizz! the arrow speeds fast and far—and foul. It finds lodgment in a thicket of roses, that go clambering over a graceful trellis, full ten feet to the right of the target.

There is a shout of merriment. Mademoiselle throws down the bow with a little gesture of despair, and I hasten toward the trellis intent upon recapturing the missent arrow.

As I am about to thrust my hand in among the roses, I am startled by a voice from the opposite side; startled because the voice is that of my hostess, thrilling with intensest anger, and very near me.

“It has gone far enough! It has gone *too* far. It must stop now, or—”

Illustration:

„It has gone far enough! It has gone *too* far. It must stop now, or—”

“Or you will make a confounded fool of yourself.”

The voice is that of Arch Brookhouse, disagreeably contemptuous, provokingly calm.

“No matter. What will it make of you?”

The words begin wrathful and sibilant, and end with a hiss. Can that be the voice of my hostess?

Making a pretense of search I press my face closer to the trellis and peer through.

I see Adele Manvers, her face livid with passion, her eyes ablaze, her lips twitching convulsively. There is no undercurrent of feeling now. Rage, defiance, desperation, are stamped upon her every feature.

Opposite her stands Arch Brookhouse, his attitude that of careless indifference, an insolent smile upon his countenance.

“If I were you, I would drop that nonsense,” he says, coolly. “You might make an inning with this new city sprig, perhaps. He looks like an easy fish to catch; more money than brains, I should say.”

“I think his brains will compare favorably with yours; he is nothing to me—”

Brookhouse suddenly shifts his position.

“Don’t you see the arrow?” calls a voice behind me, and so near that I know Miss Harris is coming to assist my search.

I catch up the arrow and turn to meet her.

No rustle of the leaves has betrayed my presence; the sound of our voices, and their nearness, is drowned by the general hilarity.

We return to our archery, and the two behind the screen finish their strange interview. How, I am unable to guess from their faces, when, after a time, they are once more among us, Brookhouse as unruffled as ever, Miss Manvers flushed, nervous, and feverishly gay.

Throughout the remainder of the *fête*, the face of my hostess is continually before me; not as her guests see it, fair, smiling, and serene, but pallid, passionate, vengeful, as I saw it from behind the rose thicket. And I am haunted by the thought that somewhere, sometime, I have seen just such a face; just such dusky, gleaming, angry eyes; just such a scornful, quivering mouth; just such drawn and desperate features.

Now and then I find time to chuckle over the words, uncomplimentary in intent, but quite satisfactory to me—"a city sprig with more money than brains."

So this is the ultimatum of Mr. Brookhouse? Some day, perhaps, he may cherish another opinion, at least so far as the money is concerned.

Then, while the gayety goes on, I think of Groveland and its mystery; of the anonymous warning, the album verse, the initials A.B. Again I take my wild John Gilpin ride, with one arm limp and bleeding.

"Ah," I say to myself, thinking wrathfully of his taunting words and insolent bearing, which my hostess had seemed powerless to resent, "Ah, my gentleman, if I *should* trace that unlucky bullet to you, then shall Miss Manvers rejoice at your downfall!"

What was the occasion of their quarrel? What was the meaning of their strange words?

Again and again I ask myself the question as I go home through the August darkness, having first seen pretty Nettie Harris safely inside her father's cottage gate.

But I find no satisfactory answer to my questions. I might have dismissed the matter from my thoughts as only a lover's quarrel, save for the last words uttered by Brookhouse. But lovers are not apt to advise their sweethearts to "make an inning" with another fellow. If jealousy existed, it was assuredly all on the side of the lady.

Having watched them narrowly after their interview behind the rose trellis, I am inclined to think it was not a lover's quarrel; and if not that, what was it?

I give up the riddle at last, but I can not dismiss the scene from my mental vision, still less can I banish the remembrance of the white, angry face, and the tormenting fancy that I have not seen it to-day for the first time.

I am perplexed and annoyed.

I stop at the office desk to light a cigar and exchange a word with "mine host." Dimber Joe is writing ostentatiously at a small table, and Blake Simpson is smoking on the piazza.

The sight of the two rogues, so inert and mysterious, gives me an added twinge of annoyance. I cut short my converse with the landlord and go up to my room.

Carnes is sitting before a small table, upon which his two elbows are planted; his fingers are twisted in his thick hair, and his head is bent so low over an open book that his nose seems quite ready to plow up the page.

Coming closer, I see that he is glowering over a pictured face in his treasured “rogues’ gallery.”

“If you want to study Blake Simpson’s cranium,” I say, testily, “why don’t you take the living subject? He’s down-stairs at this moment.”

“I’ve been studying the original till my head got dizzy,” replies Carnes, pushing back the book and tilting back in his chair. “The fact is, the fellow conducts himself so confoundedly like a decent mortal, that I have to appeal to the gallery occasionally to convince myself that it is Blake himself, and not his twin brother.”

I laugh at this characteristic whim, and, drawing the book toward me, carelessly glance from page to page.

Carnes prides himself upon his “gallery.” He has a large and motley collection of rogues of all denominations: thieves, murderers, burglars, counterfeiters, swindlers, fly crooks of every sort, and of both sexes.

“They’ve been here four days now,” Carnes goes on, plaintively, “and nothing has happened yet. It’s enough to make a man lose faith in ‘Bene Coves.’ I wonder—”

“Ah!” The exclamation falls sharply from my lips, the “gallery” almost falls from my hands.

Illustration:

„Ah!” The exclamation falls sharply from my lips,
the „gallery” almost falls from my hands.

Carnes leaves his speech unfinished and gazes anxiously at me, while I sit long and silently studying a pictured face.

By-and-by I close the book and replace it upon the table.

One vexed question is answered; I know now why the white, angry face of Adele Manvers has haunted me as a shadow from the past.

I arise and pace the floor restlessly; like Theseus, I have grasped the clue that shall lead me from the maze.

After a time, Carnes goes out to inform himself as to the movements of Blake and Dimber Joe.

Midnight comes, but no Carnes.

The house is hushed in sleep. I lock the door, extinguish my light, and, lowering myself noiselessly from the window to the ground, turn my steps toward the scene of the afternoon revel.

In the darkness and silence I reach my destination, and scaling a high paling, stand once more in the grounds of The Hill.

Chapter XX

Some Bits of Personal History.

While Miss Manvers was bidding farewell to the latest of her guests, and the "average Traftonite" was making his first voyage into dreamland, Dr. Barnard closed his eyes upon Trafton forever, and slept that long, sound, last, best sleep that comes once to all of us, and I, as well as numerous other restless sleepers, was awakened in the early morning by the sound of the tolling bell.

It was sad news to many, for Dr. Barnard was an old and well-beloved citizen.

It afforded a new subject for gossip to many more, who now learned for the first time that Louise Barnard was affianced to Dr. Carl Bethel, and that Dr. Barnard, with almost his latest breath, had proclaimed his entire faith in the young man's honor, by formally sanctioning his engagement with Louise.

I had not seen Bethel since my return from the city, until we met that day, and exchanged a few words across the dinner table.

He looked worn and weary, and seemed to have forgotten his own annoyances and interests in the absorption of his regret for the loss of his old friend and associate, and sympathy with the sorrow of his beloved.

I had spent the entire morning in writing a long letter to my Chief, giving a detailed account of my acquaintance with Miss Manvers, and a description of the lady, her style of living, and, above all, more graphic than all, my experience of the previous day, up to the moment when I closed the "rogues' gallery" and opened my eyes to a new and startling possibility.

This document I addressed to a city post-office box, and, having sealed it carefully, registered and dispatched it through the Trafton post-office.

In the afternoon I received an express package from Baysville. It was a book, so the agent said. Innocent enough, no doubt, nevertheless I did not open it until I had closed and locked my door upon all intruders.

It was a book. A cheap volume of trashy poems, but the middle leaves were cut away, and in their place I found a bulky letter.

It was Earle's report from Amora.

It was very statistical, very long, and dry because of its minuteness of detail, and the constant recurrence of dates and figures. But it was most interesting to me.

Arch Brookhouse and his brother, Louis, had both been students at Amora.

Grace Ballou and Nellie Ewing had been fellow-students with them one year ago. Last term, however, Arch had not been a student, but Louis Brookhouse, Grace Ballou, Nellie Ewing, Mamie Rutger, Amy Holmes, and Johnny La Porte, had all been in attendance.

For the last three named this was their first term.

Mamie Rutger had been expelled for misconduct, during the last half of the term.

Johnny La Porte and Louis Brookhouse had been "chums" and were, accordingly, pretty wild.

Very little could be learned concerning Amy Holmes, previous to her coming to Amora. She was said to be an orphan, and came from the South. Nothing more definite could be learned concerning her abiding place. She was lively, dashing and stylish, not particularly fond of study; in fact was considered one of the "loudest" girls in the school. Her escapades had been numerous and she had, on more than one occasion, narrowly escaped expulsion. She was particularly

intimate with Nellie Ewing, Mamie Rutger, and Grace Ballou; and had been seen, on several occasions, in the company of Arch Brookhouse, who was very often at Amora.

Concerning Ed. Dwight, Earle could say very little.

Dwight had left town with his team early on Monday morning, and had not yet returned. Earle had managed, however, to obtain lodgings at Dwight's boarding-house, and had made the acquaintance of one of the "girls," who had contributed the information that Arch Brookhouse had several times dined there with Dwight.

This is an abbreviated account of what Earle's report contained. Accompanying said report was an autograph obtained from Professor Asa Bartlett, and it bore not the slightest resemblance to the printed album lines.

Considering the time consumed in the investigation, Earle had done remarkably well. He had done well, too, in going to Baysville to send the letter.

How many threads were now in my hands, and yet how powerless I was for the time!

Only yesterday I had made, or so I believed, two most important discoveries, and yet I could turn them to no account for the present.

Upon the first, it would be unwise to act until further information had been forwarded me by my Chief.

As for the second, there was nothing to do but watch. I could not take the initiative step. Action depended solely upon others, and as to the identity of these others I scarce could give a guess.

Louis Brookhouse had not been seen outside his home since his arrival, in a crippled condition, the day after Grace Ballou's escapade. I must see Louis Brookhouse. I must know the nature of that "injury" which Dr. Bethel had been called upon to attend.

For the first, I must bide my time until the youth was sufficiently recovered to appear in public. For the second, I must rely on Bethel, and, until the last sorrowful tribute of respect and affection had been paid the dead, I could scarcely hope for an interview with him.

A crisis must come soon, but it was not in our power to hasten it.

So long as Dimber Joe and Blake Simpson continued inert and seemingly aimless, so long as the days brought no new event and the nights brought neither discovery on our part nor movement on the part of the horse-thieves, Carnes and I had only to wait and watch—watch—watch.

Our days, to the onlooker, must have seemed only idle indeed, but still they were busy days.

Carnes roamed about the town, inspecting the barns and buildings closely, when he could venture a near approach without arousing suspicion or objection; at a distance, when intrusion would be unsafe or unwelcome.

Dr. Barnard was buried on Thursday, and on the afternoon of that day, as I was returning from the funeral in fact, I received a report from Wyman.

Stripped of its details, and reduced to bare facts, it amounted to this:

The "dummy" had proven of actual service. Wyman had found him with very little trouble, and in just the right place. He was domiciled with the La Porte family, and had been since the first week of his advent among the Grovelanders,

and Wyman was indebted to him for much of the information contained in his report.

Acting according to our instructions, or, rather, as we had expected and desired, overacting them, the “dummy” had soon contrived to let the Grovelanders know that he was a detective, sent out from the city to occupy the premises and keep his eyes open. He talked freely of the missing girls, always frankly avowing that it was his opinion, as well as the opinion of his superiors, that the two girls had been murdered. Indeed, he darkly hinted that certain facts corroborative of this theory had been discovered, and then he lapsed into vagueness and silence. When questioned as to his system or intentions regarding the investigation he became profoundly mysterious, oracular, and unsatisfactory.

The result was all that we could have wished. The less intelligent among his critics looked upon him as a fountain of wisdom and cunning and skill. The more acute and observant fathomed his shallowness, but immediately set it down as a bit of clever acting, and, joining with their less penetrating neighbors, voted our “dummy” “wise as a serpent” underneath his “harmless as a dove” exterior, and looked confidently forward to something startling when he should finally arouse to action.

To which class of critics Johnny La Porte belonged, Wyman had been unable to discover, for during his stay in Groveland he had not seen young La Porte.

Whatever his opinion may have been, the young man had been among the first to seek our “dummy’s” acquaintance, which he had cultivated so persistently that within less than a fortnight the two had become most friendly, and apparently appreciative of each other’s society, and the “dummy” had found an abiding place underneath the hospitable roof of La Porte *pere*.

Johnny La Porte was a spoiled son. He seemed to have had his own way always, and it had not been a way to wisdom. He was not dissipated; had none of the larger and more masculine vices, but he was idle, a shirk at school and at home. He had no business tact, and seemed as little inclined to make of himself a decent farmer as he was incapable of becoming a good financier, merchant, or mechanic.

He was short of stature, and girlishly pretty, having small oval features, languid black eyes, black curly hair, and a rich complexion of olive and red.

He drove a fine span of blacks before a jaunty light carriage, and was seldom seen with his turnout except when accompanied by some one of the many pretty girls about Groveland.

In fact, he was that most obnoxious creature, a male flirt. He had roved from one bright Groveland flower to another, ever since his graduation from jackets to tail coats. During the previous Autumn and Winter, he had been very devoted to Nellie Ewing; but, since their return from school, in the Spring, his attentions had not been quite so marked, although Nellie had several times been seen behind the blacks and in company with the fickle Johnny.

In short, after reading all that Wyman could say of him, I summed Johnny La Porte up, and catalogued him as follows:

Vain, weak, idle, handsome, fickle, selfish, good-natured when not interfered with, over fond of pleasure, easily influenced, and a spendthrift.

What might or might not be expected of such a character?

He was, as Mrs. Ballou had said, popular among the young people, especially the young ladies; and where do you find a young man that drives a fine turnout, carries a well-filled purse, dances a little, sings a fair tenor and plays his own accompaniment, is handsome, and always ready for a frolic, who is *not* popular with the ladies?

Wyman had not seen La Porte, and for this reason:

On the evening of the 17th, young La Porte had driven away from home with his black horses, telling our “dummy,” in confidence, that he was “going to take a pretty girl out riding.”

La Porte and the “dummy” “roomed together,” in true country fashion; and, at midnight, or later, the “dummy” could not be precise as to the lateness of the hour, he returned. Entering the room with evident caution, he nevertheless awoke the “dummy,” who, turning lazily on his pillow, saw La Porte taking from a drawer something white, which our “dummy” supposed to be a handful of handkerchiefs, and from a shelf a bottle of brandy.

Illustration:

Entering the room with evident caution, he nevertheless
awoke the „dummy.”

On seeing the open eyes of our “dummy,” La Porte had explained as follows:

One of his horses went lame a bit, and he intended to give him a little treatment. The “dummy” must not disturb himself, as the hired man was on hand to render all the necessary help.

Then, as he was leaving the room, La Porte had added:

“By-the-by, if the horse comes out all right, and I am gone when you turn out in the morning, tell the old man that I am off for Baysville to see about the club excursion.”

Wondering vaguely what species of lameness it was that must be treated with brandy and bandaged with linen handkerchiefs, the “dummy” fell asleep, and finding the young man absent on the following morning, delivered his message as directed.

It was received without comment, as such excursions were of frequent occurrence, and as no one presumed to question the movements of the spoiled young pleasure seeker.

He did not return on the next day, but the morning of the 19th brought him home, not, however, as he went, but in company with a sewing-machine agent whom he called Ed., and whose full name was Edward S. Dwight.

La Porte stated that his horse was lame again, and that he had left his team at Amora, and returned with Dwight in the machine wagon.

During that day La Porte accompanied Dwight on his rounds among the farmers, and early the following morning the two returned together to Amora.

That was a week ago. The following Sunday, La Porte and Dwight had again visited Groveland, this time with La Porte’s own turnout. During the day they had made several calls upon young ladies, and this time our “dummy,” being cordially invited, accompanied them on their rounds.

On Monday morning, as before, they returned to Amora, and since then had not reappeared in Groveland.

Wyman, according to instructions, had visited Mrs. Ballou. She had nothing new to communicate, but she gave into his hands a small package, which Wyman had inclosed with his report.

It contained three photographs; one of Miss Amy Holmes, one of Johnny La Porte, and a third of the same gentleman and Mr. Ed. Dwight, a rather rakish-looking duo.

I read and re-read Wyman's long, complete descriptive report. I studied the photographed faces again and again, and that evening, before the sunset had fairly faded from the west, I told Carnes the whole story, and placed before him the printed letter and the autographs, photographs and reports.

Chapter XXI

„Evolving a Theory.“

“And you want me to go to New Orleans?” says Carnes, as he rises slowly, and stretches himself up to his fullest height, following up his words with an immense yawn. “What for, now?”

He has listened so attentively, so silently, with such moveless, intelligent eagerness, that I forgive him the yawn, and treat myself to a long breath of restfulness and relief, at being at last unburdened of this great secret, and he crosses the room and drops into his favorite attitude beside the window that overlooks the fast darkening street.

“I hardly know just what I expect you to unearth in New Orleans,” I answer, after a pause of some moments. “But I have a notion that the links we have failed to find here may be in hiding down there.”

Carnes plunges his hands deep down into his pockets. I know, from the intentness of his face, and the unwinking fixedness of the eyes that stare yet see nothing beyond the panorama conjured by his own imagination, that he is studying diligently at the Groveland problem; and I sit silently, waiting his first movement, that I feel sure will be speedily followed by something in the way of an opinion.

“It's a queer muddle,” he says at last, coming back to his chair and dropping into his former attitude of interested attention. “It's a queer muddle; and, it seems to me, you have got hold of the wrong end of the business.”

“How the wrong end?”

“Why, you have your supposed principals and accessories, and, perhaps, the outline of a plot; but where is your motive?”

“Where, indeed! I have not even found a theory that suits me, although I have pondered over various suppositions. You are good at this sort of analysis, Carnes. Can't you help me to some sort of a theory that won't break of its own weight?”

Carnes bit his under lip and pondered.

"How far have you got?" he asked, presently.

"I will tell you how I have reasoned thus far. Experience and statistics have proved that, of all the missing people, male and female, whose dead bodies are never found, or whose deaths are never satisfactorily proven, more than three-fourths have eventually turned up alive, or it is found they have lived many years after they were numbered among the missing. In the majority of cases, say four to one, where missing persons, supposed to have been dead, are proved to be alive, it is also proved that they have 'disappeared' of their own free will. In the list of missing young girls, the police records show that two-thirds of those supposed to have been murdered or abducted, have eloped or forsaken their friends of their own free will. Let us keep in mind these statistics and begin with Nellie Ewing. Was she murdered? Was she forcibly abducted? Did she run away?"

"Umph! If *she* were a man I might venture an opinion," broke in Carnes.

"Let us see. She left her house at sunset, riding a brown pony, and intent, or seeming so, upon visiting her friend, Grace Ballou."

"Grace Ballou—oh!" Carnes lifts his head, then drops it again, quickly.

I note the gesture and the ejaculation, and smile as I proceed.

"She had announced her intention of spending the night with her friend Grace, but instead of so doing, she is suddenly afflicted with a headache, and, at dusk, or perhaps even later, she sets out, on her brown pony, for home, a distance of about four miles."

"Um—ah!" from Carnes.

"She is not seen after that. Neither is the brown pony. Was she murdered? If so, no trace of her body, no clue to her murderer, no motive for the deed, has been discovered. And the horse; if she was murdered, was the horse slaughtered also? And were they both buried in one grave? She was riding alone, after nightfall, over a country road. She might have been assailed by tramps or stragglers of some sort, but the first investigation proved that nothing in the form of tramp, or stranger of any sort, had been seen about Groveland, neither on that day nor for many days previous. And again, a tramp who might have killed her to secure the horse, would hardly have tarried to conceal the body so effectually that the most thorough search could not bring it to light. Nor would he have carried it with him beyond the reach of search. Was she murdered for revenge, or from motives of jealousy? Then, in all probability, the brown horse would have been found wandering somewhere at large."

"It won't do," mutters Carnes, half to himself, and with a slow wag of the head; "it won't do."

"That's what I said to myself, after reviewing the pros and cons of the 'murder theory.' Now, was Nellie Ewing abducted? She may have been, but, again, there's the missing horse. If a tramp or a horse-thief would take the horse, and leave the girl, a desperate lover would just as surely take the girl and leave the horse. Again, an avaricious lover might, with some difficulty, secure both horse and rider, but he could hardly travel far with an unwilling girl and a stolen horse, without becoming uncomfortably conspicuous. Did the young lady elope? If so, then it is my belief that she and her horse parted company very soon after she left the widow Ballou's. And here ends my theorizing. How, and why, and whither, the horse was spirited away, I can not guess."

"If the thing had occurred in Trafton," says Carnes, thoughtfully, "one might account for the horse."

"True; but as it did not occur within the limit of the Trafton operations, I naturally concluded that, if the young lady really did abscond, her lover must have had a confederate who took charge of the horse. But, at first, this seemed to me improbable."

"Why improbable?"

"Because I did not view the matter, as you do now, in the light of after discoveries and developments."

"Then you think now that Miss Ewing eloped?"

"I think she was not murdered; and the elopement theory is much more plausible, more reasonable, all things considered, than that of abduction. First of all, there are the movements of the girl herself. Supposing her quartered for the night with her friend Grace, 'Squire Ewing felt no uneasiness at her absence, even when it was prolonged into the second day. Might she not have considered all this when she planned her flight? When she was actually missed, she had two days the start of her inquiring friends."

"True."

"Then, not long after, Mamie Rutger, a friend and schoolmate of the missing Nellie, also disappears. While it is yet daylight, or at least hardly dark, she vanishes from her father's very door-step, and is seen no more. Now, let me call your attention to some facts. Farmer Rutger's house stands on a bit of rising ground; the road runs east and west. To the east of the house is a thick grove of young trees planted as a wind-break for the cattle. This belt of trees begins at the front of the house and extends northward, the house being on the north side of the highway, past the barns, cow stables, and sheep pens. So while a person in the front portion of the house, on the porch or in the door-yard, can obtain a clear view of the road to the west, those farther back, in the kitchen, the stables, or the milking sheds, are shut off from a view of the road by the wind-break on the one hand, by a high orchard hedge on the other, and by the house and thick door-yard shrubbery in front. For over an hour, on the night of her disappearance, Mamie Rutger was the only person within view of this highway. The hired girl was in the kitchen washing up the supper things. Mrs. Rutger, who, by-the-by, is Miss Mamie's step-mother, was skimming milk in the cellar, and Mr. Rutger, with the two hired men, were watering and feeding the stock and milking the cows. When the work for the night was done and the lamps were lighted, if they thought of Mamie at all it was as sitting alone on the front piazza, or perched in her chamber window up-stairs, enjoying the quiet of the evening. It was only when their early bed-time came that the girl's absence, and more than that, her unusual silence, was noted, and that a search proved her missing. Was *she* murdered? That theory in this case is so unreasonable that I discard it at once."

Carnes nodded his head approvingly.

"Was she abducted? Possibly; but to my mind, it is not probable. Mamie Rutger was a gypsyish lassie, pretty as a May blossom, skittish as a colt, hard to govern and prone to adventurous escapades. Her father was kind and her step-mother meant to be so, but the latter perpetually frowned down the girl's innocent hilarity, and curbed her gayety, when she could, with a stern hand. They sent her to school

to tame her, and the faculty, after bearing with her, and forgiving her many mischievous pranks because of her youth, at last sent her home in disgrace, expelled. If this girl, wearied of a humdrum farmhouse existence and thirsting for a broader glimpse of the gay outer world, had planned an elopement or runaway escapade, she could have chosen no better time. While all the others are busy at their evening task, she, from the front, watches for a swift horse and a covered buggy, which comes from the west. Sure that no eyes are looking, she awaits it at the gate, springs in, with a backward glance, and when she is missed, is miles away."

"Yes, I see," comments Carnes, dryly; "it's a pity your second sight couldn't keep 'em in view till ye see where they land."

I curb my imagination. That useful quality is deficient in the cranium of my comrade; he can neither follow nor sympathize.

"Well, here is the condensed truth for you," I reply, amiably: "for this much we have ocular and oral testimony: Four young ladies attend school at Amora; all are pretty, under the age of discretion, and, with perhaps one exception, little versed in the ways of the world and its wickedness. During their sojourn at school, where they are not under constant discipline owing to the fact that they all board outside of the Seminary, and all together, they are much in the society of four young men, two of whom are students of the Seminary. This quartette of youths are more or less good looking, and all of them notably 'gay and festive,' after the manner of the stereotyped young man of the period."

"Right you are now," ejaculated Carnes.

"Just how these gentlemen divided their affections or attentions," I continue, "it is difficult to say, in regard to all. We know that Mr. Johnny La Porte was the chosen cavalier of Miss Ewing, and that Arch Brookhouse and Amy Holmes were frequently seen in each other's society. We are told that the eight young people formed frequent pleasure parties; riding, picnicking, passing social evenings together.

"They leave school; their jolly companionship is over. By-and-by, Nellie Ewing disappears; a little later, Mamie Rutger is also missing; after a little time the other two young ladies are caught in the act of escaping from home, by the means of a ladder placed at their chamber window by an unknown man, while a second, it is supposed, awaits their coming with horses and vehicle. This much for the ladies of this octette. Now, upon inquiring after the whereabouts of the gentlemen, we find that upon the night of this last named escapade, Johnny La Porte, with his buggy and horses, was absent from home from sunset until after midnight. That he returned when all the household was asleep, and securing some clean handkerchiefs and a flask of brandy, ostensibly to doctor a sick horse, he again goes, and returns after an absence of two days, accompanied by another member of the octette, Mr. Ed. Dwight."

"That's a point," assented Carnes.

"Now, we have previously learned," I resume, "that said Dwight is about to abandon his old trade and quit the country. We also remember that Mrs. Ballou shot at, and believes she hit, the man who was assisting her daughter and guest to escape from the house. Very good. During the time that Johnny La Porte is

absent from his home, Mr. Louis Brookhouse is brought home to Trafton, in a covered buggy, by some unknown friend, with a crippled limb!"

"I see; that's a clincher," muttered Carnes.

"This much for three of the gay Lotharios," I continue. "Now for Arch Brookhouse. In Grace Ballou's autograph album is a couplet, very neatly printed and signed A. B. It bears date one year back, and one year ago Grace Ballou and Arch Brookhouse were both students at Amora. Not long since I received an interesting letter of warning, and I believe it was written by the same hand that indited the lines beginning 'I drink to the eyes of my schoolmate, Grace.'"

Carnes opened his lips, but I hurried on.

"I have noted one other thing, which, if you like, you may call coincidence of latitude. The eldest of the Brookhouse brothers is a resident of New Orleans. At about the time of Nellie Ewing's disappearance, Louis Brookhouse went to New Orleans, returning less than two weeks ago. Amy Holmes is vaguely described as being 'somewhere South,' and Ed. Dwight meditates a Southern journey soon."

"It looks like a league," says Carnes, scratching his head, and wrinkling his brows in perplexity. "Are they going to form a colony of some new sort? What's your notion?"

"My notion is that we had better not waste our time trying to guess out a motive. Consider the language of the telegram sent by Fred Brookhouse to his brother, and the reply to it, and then reflect upon the possible meaning of both. The New Orleans brother says:

Hurry up the others, or we are likely to have a balk.

"Arch answers:

Next week L—— will be on hand.

"Hurry up the others! What others? Why are they likely to have a 'balk?' Are the two missing girls *there*, in charge of Fred Brookhouse, and are they becoming restive at the non-appearance of the others? If they had succeeded in escaping, would Grace Ballou and Amy Holmes have gone to New Orleans in company with Louis Brookhouse?"

"By Saint Patrick, I begin to see!" cried Carnes.

"The telegram sent by Arch," I resume, "implies that Louis was already here, or near here. Yet he made his first appearance at his father's house two days later. Is Ed. Dwight going to New Orleans to embrace the 'heel and toe business,' under the patronage of Fred Brookhouse, who, it is said, is connected with a theater? Is Johnny La Porte in hiding at Amora? or has he already 'gone to join the circus?'"

Carnes springs suddenly to his feet.

"By the powers, old man, I see how it looks to you;" he cries, "an' ye've got the thing by the right end at last. I'll go to New Orleans; only say when. But," here his face lengthens a little, "ye must get Wyman, or some one else, here in my place. I wish we had got that horse rendezvous hunted down."

"As to that," I respond, "give yourself no uneasiness; I believe that I have found the right place, and to-night I mean to confirm my suspicion."

Carnes stares astonished.

"How did you manage it?" he asks, "and when?"

"Two days ago, and by accident. You will be surprised, Carnes. It is a barn."

"It is?"

“A lead-colored barn, finished in brown.”

“*What?*”

“It is large, and nearly square,” I hasten to say, enjoying his marked amazement. “A large stack of hay is pitched against the rear end, running the length of it. It has a cupola and a flagstaff.”

Carnes simply stares.

“I will send for Wyman if I need his help. What I am studying upon now is a sufficient pretext for sending you away suddenly.”

“I’ll furnish that,” Carnes says, with a droll roll of his eye. “To-morrow I’ll get drunk—beastly drunk. You shall inquire after me about the hotel and at Porter’s. By-and-by I will come into the office too drunk to be endurable. You must be there to reprimand me. I grow insolent; you discharge me. I go away somewhere and sleep off the effects of my spree. You pay me my wages in the presence of the clerk, and at midnight I board the train *en route* for the Sunny South. You shall hear from me——”

“By telegraph,” I interrupt. “We shall have a new night operator here within the week. I arranged for that when I was in the city, and wrote the old man, yesterday, to send him on at once.”

“All right; that’s a good move,” approved Carnes.

“And now,” I said, rising hastily, and consulting my watch, “I must go. To-night, or perhaps in the ‘small hours,’ we will talk over matters again, and I will explain myself further. For the present, good-by; I am expected to-night at the Hill; I shall pass the evening in the society of Miss Manvers.”

Chapter XXII

Two Departures.

On the ensuing morning, Carnes and I enacted the “quarrel scene,” as planned by him the previous night.

A more aggravated case of drunkenness than that presented by Carnes, a little before noon, could not well be imagined. He was a marvel of reeling stupidity, offensive hiccoughs, and maudlin insolence.

Quite a number of people were lounging about the office when Carnes staggered in, thus giving me my cue to commence. Among the rest were Dimber Joe and Blake Simpson. Our scene went off with considerable *eclat*; and, having paid Carnes at the office desk, with a magnificent disregard for expense, I turned to leave the room, looking back over my shoulder, to say with my grandest air:

“If you think yourself sufficiently sober, you may come up-stairs and pack your things. The sooner you, and all that belongs to you, are out of my sight, the better I shall be pleased.”

Illustration:

„If you think yourself sufficiently sober, you may come

up-stairs and pack your things.”

I had been in my room less than half an hour, when I heard Carnes come stumbling noisily through the passage.

When he was fairly within the room, he straightened himself suddenly, and uttered a sound midway between a laugh and a chuckle.

Illustration:

I had been in my room less than half an hour, when I heard Carnes.

“Old man,” he said, coming slowly toward me, “I don’t think I’ll take the down train.”

“Why not?”

“Because,” winking absurdly, and then staring up at the ceiling while he finished his sentence, “the snakes are beginning to crawl. Blake Simpson has just paid his bill, and ordered his baggage to be sent to the 4:30 train.”

“Ah! And you will take the same train?”

“Exactly; I’m curious to see where he is going, and to find out why. We must not remain together long, old man. Do you go down-stairs and tell them that I am sleeping off my booze up here. I shan’t be very sober by 4:30, but I’ll manage to navigate to the depot.”

I went down to the office, after a few more words with Carnes.

Simpson and Dimber Joe had both disappeared. Two or three men were smoking outside, and a man by the window was falling asleep over a newspaper three days old. Mine host, in person, was lounging over the desk. He was idle, and inclined to be talkative.

“You weren’t trying to give Barney a scare, I suppose?” he said, as I approached the desk. “Do you really mean to let him go?”

“I certainly do,” I replied, as I lounged upon the desk.

Then, coming nearer mine host, and increasing the distance between myself and the old man by the window; “I have been tolerably patient with the fellow. He has his good points, but he has tired me out. Patience has ceased to be a virtue. I can do very well without him now. He never was much of a valet. But I thought him quite necessary as a companion on my fishing, hunting, and pedestrian excursions. However, I have become pretty well acquainted with places and people, and I find there are plenty of guides and companions to be picked up. I can do very well without Barney, especially as of late he is drunk oftener than he is sober.”

Mine host smiled fraternally. It was not my custom to be so communicative. Always, in my character of the wealthy aristocrat, I had maintained, for the benefit of those about me, an almost haughty reserve, only unbending when, because of my supposed financial importance, I “was made much of” in the social circles of the Traftonélite. To-day, however, I had an object to gain, and I did not bestow my condescending confidence without the expectation of “value received.”

“You’ll have no trouble about finding company,” said mine host, with a benign smile. “As you say, Barney has been a good many times off. He hasn’t kept the best of company. He’s been too much with that Briggs.”

"Yes," I assented, carelessly; "I have repeatedly warned him to let the fellow alone. Has he no occupation?"

"Briggs? he's a sort of extra hand for 'Squire Brookhouse; but, he plays more than he works," trifling with the leaves of his register, and then casting his eye slowly down the page before him. "Here's an odd thing, you might say," laughing, as he lifted his eye from the book, "I'm losing my most boisterous boarder and my quietest one at the same time."

"Indeed; who else is going?"

My entertainer cast a quick glance towards the occupant of the window, and lowered his voice as he replied:

"The gentleman in gray."

"In gray?" absently. "Oh! to be sure, a—a patent-right agent, is he not?"

Another glance toward the window, then lowering his voice an additional half tone, and favoring me with a knowing wink, he said:

"Have you heard anything concerning him?"

"Concerning the gentleman in gray?"

My entertainer nodded.

"Assuredly not," said I, affecting languid surprise. "Nothing wrong about the gentleman, I hope?"

"Nothing wrong, oh, no," leaning over the desk, and speaking slowly. "They say he is a *detective*."

"A detective!" This time my surprise was not entirely feigned. "Oh—is not that a sensationalism?"

"Well," said my host, reflectively, "I might think so if I had heard it from any of the ordinary loungers;—the fact is, I had no right to mention the matter. I don't think it is guessed at by many."

He was beginning to retire within himself. I felt that I must not lose my ground, and became at once more interested, more affable.

"Oh, I assure you, Mr. Holtz, I am quite interested. Do you really think the man a detective? Pray, rely on my discretion."

There were two hard, unpainted chairs behind the office desk, and some boxes containing cheap cigars, upon a shelf against the wall. I insinuated myself into one of the chairs, and presently, Mr. Holtz was seated near me in the other, smoking one of his own cigars, at my expense, while I, with a similar weed between my lips, drew from him, as best I could, all that he had heard and thought concerning Mr. Blake Simpson, the gentleman in gray.

It was not much when all told, but Mr. Holtz consumed a full hour in telling it.

Jim Long had been so frequently at the hotel since the advent of Blake and Dimber Joe, that mine host had remarked upon the circumstance, and, only two days ago, had rallied Jim upon his growing social propensities.

Whereupon, Jim had taken him aside, "quite privately and mysteriously," and confided to him the fact that he, Jim, had very good reason for believing Blake and Dimber, or, as my informer put it, "The gent in gray and the other stranger," to be detectives, who were secretly working in the interest of 'Squire Brookhouse.

What these very good reasons were, Jim had declined to state. But he had conjured Mr. Holtz to keep silent about the matter, as to bring the "detectives" into notice would be to impair their chances of ultimate success.

Mr. Holtz had promised to keep the secret, and he had kept it—two days. He should never think of mentioning the matter to any of his neighbors, he assured me fervently, as they, for the most part, being already much excited over the recent thefts, could hardly be expected to keep a discreet silence; but I, “being a stranger, and a different person altogether,” might, in Mr. Holtz’s opinion, be safely trusted.

I assured Mr. Holtz that he might rely upon me as he would upon himself, and he seemed quite satisfied with this rather equivocal statement.

Having heard all that mine host could tell, I remained in further conversation with him long enough to avoid any appearance of abruptness, and then, offering the stereotyped excuse, “letters to write,” I took a second cigar, pressed another upon my companion, and nodding to him with friendly familiarity, sauntered away to meditate in solitude upon what I had just learned.

And so, if Mr. Holtz had not exaggerated, and Jim Long was not mistaken, Blake Simpson and Dimber Joe, two notorious prison birds, were vegetating in Trafton in the character of detectives!

What a satire on my profession! And yet, absurd and improbable as it seemed, it was not impossible. Indeed, did not this theory account for their seemingly aimless sojourn here?

Jim Long was not the man to perpetrate a causeless jest. Neither was he one to form a hasty conclusion, or to make an assertion without a motive.

Whether his statement were true or false, what had been his reason for confiding it to Mr. Holtz? It was not because of any especial friendship for, or attachment to, that gentleman. Jim had no intimates, and had he chosen such, Mr. Holtz, gossiping, idle, stingy, and shallow of brain, would scarcely have been the man.

Why, then, had he confided in the man?

Did he wish the report to circulate, and himself remain unknown as its author? Was there some individual whose ears he wished it to reach through the talkative landlord?

I paused in my reflections, half startled by a sudden thought.

Had this shrewd, incomprehensible Yankee guessed my secret? And was Mr. Holtz’s story intended for *me*?

I arose to my feet, having formed a sudden resolution.

I *would* know the truth concerning Jim Long. I *would* prove him my friend or my enemy, and the story told by Mr. Holtz should be my weapon of attack.

As for Blake and Dimber, if they *were* figuring as dummy detectives, who had instigated their masquerade?

Again I started, confronted by a strange new thought.

‘Squire Brookhouse had telegraphed to an agent to employ for him two detectives. My Chief had been unable to discover what officers had been employed. Carnes and myself, although we had kept a faithful lookout, had been able to discover no traces of a detective in Trafton. Indeed, except for ourselves and the two crooks, there were no strangers in the village, nor had there been since the robbery.

If Blake and Dimber were playing at detectives, why was it? Had the agent employed by 'Squire Brookhouse played him a trick, or had he been himself duped?

'Squire Brookhouse had telegraphed to his lawyer, it was said. A lawyer could have no motive for duping a wealthy client, nor would he be likely to be imposed upon or approached by such men as Blake and Dimber.

Had 'Squire Brookhouse procured the services of these men? And if so, why?

Carnes was endeavoring to sustain his rôle by taking a much needed nap upon his cot, but I now roused him with eager haste, and regaled his sleepy ears with the story I had just listened to below stairs.

At first he seemed only to see the absurdity of the idea, and he buried his face in the pillow, to stifle the merriment which rose to his lips at the thought of the protection such detectives would be likely to afford the innocent Traftonites.

Then he became wide awake and sufficiently serious, and we hastily discussed the possibilities of the case.

There was not much to be done in the way of investigation just then; Carnes would follow after Blake so long as it seemed necessary, or until he could inform me how to guard against any evil the crook might be intent upon.

Meantime I must redouble my vigilance, and let no movement of Dimber's escape my notice.

To this end I abandoned, for the present, my hastily formed resolution, to go at once in search of Jim Long, and bring about a better understanding between us. That errand, being of less importance than the surveillance of the rascal Dimber, could be left to a more convenient season, or so I reasoned in my pitiful blindness.

Where was my professional wisdom then? Where the unerring foresight, the fine instinct, that should have warned me of danger ahead?

Had these been in action, one man might have been saved a shameful stigma, and another, from the verge of the grave.

Chapter XXIII

A Shot in the Dark.

That afternoon dragged itself slowly away.

I left Carnes in our room, and went below to note the movements of the two crooks.

They were both upon the piazza; Blake smoking a well-colored meerschaum and seemingly half asleep, and the Dimber, with his well-polished boot heels elevated to the piazza railing, reading from a brown volume, with a countenance expressive of absorbed interest.

I seated myself where I could observe both without seeming to do so, and tilting my hat over my nose, dropped into a lounging attitude. I suppose that I looked the personification of careless indolence. I know that I felt perplexed, annoyed, uncomfortable.

Perplexed, because of the many mysteries that surrounded me. Annoyed, because while I longed to be actively at work upon the solution of these mysteries, I could only sit like a sleepy idiot, and furtively watch two rascals engaged in killing time, the one with a pipe, the other with a French novel. Uncomfortable, because the day was sultry, and the piazza chairs were hard, and constructed with little regard for the ease of the forms that would occupy them.

But there comes an end to all things, or so it is said. At last there came an end to my loitering on the warm piazza.

At the proper time Carnes came lumbering down-stairs seeming not yet sobered, but fully equipped for his journey. He took an affectionate leave of the landlord, receiving some excellent advice in return. And, after favoring me with a farewell speech, half maudlin, half impertinent, wholly absurd, and intended for the benefit of the lookers-on, who certainly enjoyed the scene, he departed noisily, and, as Barney Cooley, was seen no more in Trafton.

A few moments later, "the gentleman in gray" also took his leave, bestowing a polite nod upon one or two of the more social ones, but without so much as glancing toward Dimber Joe or myself. He walked sedately away, followed by the hotel factotum, who carried his natty traveling bag.

Still Dimber read on at his seemingly endless novel, and still I lounged about the porch, sometimes smoking, sometimes feigning sleep.

At last came supper time. I hailed it as a pleasant respite, and followed Dimber Joe to the dining room with considerable alacrity.

Dr. Bethel came in soon, looking grave and weary. We saluted each other, but Bethel seemed little inclined to talk, and I was glad not to be engaged in a conversation which might detain me at the table after Joe had left it.

Bethel, I knew, was much at the house of the Barnards. The shock caused by the loss of her husband, together with the fatigue occasioned by his illness, had prostrated Mrs. Barnard, who, it was said, was threatened with a fever, and Bethel was in constant attendance.

As yet there had been no opportunity for the renewal of the conversation, concerning the grave robbery, which had been interrupted more than a week since by Mr. Brookhouse, and afterwards effectually cut off by my flying visit to the city.

When the Dimber left the table I followed him almost immediately, only to again find him poring over that absorbing novel, and seemingly oblivious to all else.

Sundown came, and then twilight. As darkness gathered, Dimber Joe laid down his book with evident reluctance and carefully lighted a cigar.

Would he sit thus all the evening? I was chafing inwardly. Would the man do *nothing* to break this monotony?

Presently a merry whistle broke upon the stillness, and quick steps came down the street.

It was Charlie Harris and, as on a former occasion, he held a telegram in his hand.

"For you," he said, having peered hard at me through the gloom. "It came half an hour ago, but I could not get down until now."

I took the envelope from his hand and slowly arose.

"I don't suppose you will want my help to read it," he said, with an odd laugh, as I turned toward the lighted office to peruse my message.

I gave him a quick glance, and then said:

“Come in, Harris, there may be an answer wanted.”

He followed me to the office desk, and I was conscious that he was watching my face as I perused its contents.

This is what I read by the office lamp.

4— H, c, n, c, e, o, g, k, i, m, b—s, i, a—.

A cipher message. I turned, half smiling, to meet the eye of Harris and kept my own eyes upon his face while I said:

“I’m obliged to you, Harris, your writing is capital, and very easily read. No answer is required.”

The shrewd twinkle of his eye assured me that he comprehended my meaning as well as my words.

I offered him a cigar, and lighted another for myself. Then we went out upon the piazza together.

We had been in the office less than four minutes, but in that time Dimber Joe had disappeared, French novel and all. Much annoyed I peered up and down the street.

To the left was the town proper, the stores, the depot, and other business places. To the right were dwellings and churches; a hill, the summit and sides adorned with the best residences of the village; then a hollow, where nestled Dr. Bethel’s small cottage; and farther on, and back from the highway, Jim Long’s cabin. Beyond these another hill, crowned by the capacious dwelling of the Brookhouse family.

Which way had Dimber gone?

It was early in the evening, too early to set out on an expedition requiring stealth. Then I remembered that Joe had not left the hotel since dinner; probably he had gone to the post office.

Harris was returning in that direction. I ran down the steps and strolled townward in his company.

“It’s deuced hot,” said Harris, with characteristic emphasis, as he lifted his hat to wipe a perspiring brow. “My office is the warmest hole in town after the breeze goes down, and I’ve got to stay there until midnight.”

“Extra business?” I inquired.

“Not exactly; we are going to have a night operator.”

“Ah!” The darkness hid the smile on my face. “That will relieve you a little?”

“Yes, a little; but I’m blessed if I understand it. Business is unusually light just now. I needed an assistant more in the Fall and Winter.”

“Indeed,” I said, aloud. Then to myself, “But Carnes and I did not need one so much.”

Our agency had done some splendid work for the telegraph company whose wires ran through Trafton; and I knew, before requesting a new operator in the town, that they stood ready to oblige my Chief to any extent compatible with their own business. And my Chief had been expeditious indeed.

“Then you look for your night operator by the down express?” I questioned, carelessly.

“Yes; they wired me that he would come to-night. I hope he’ll be an obliging fellow, who won’t mind taking a day turn now and then.”

“I hope so,” I replied, “for your sake, Harris.”

We had reached the post-office, and bidding him good night, I entered.

A few tardy Traftonites were there, asking for and receiving their mail, but Dimber Joe was not among them.

I went slowly back to Porter’s store, glancing in at various windows as I passed, but saw not the missing man.

How had he eluded me? Where should I look for him?

Returning to the hotel, I sat down in the seat lately occupied by the vanished crook, and pondered.

Was Dimber about to strike? Had he strolled out thus early to reconnoiter his territory? If so, he would return anon to equip himself for the work; he could not well carry a burglar’s kit in the light suit he wore.

Suddenly I arose and hurried up the stairs, resolved upon a bold measure.

Hastily unlocking my trunk, I removed a tray, and from a skillfully concealed compartment, took a pair of nippers, some skeleton keys, and a small tin case, shaped like the candle it contained. Next, I removed my hat, coat, and boots; and, in another moment, was standing before the door of the room occupied by Dimber Joe. I knocked lightly and the silence within convinced me that the room was unoccupied.

The Trafton House was not plentifully supplied with bolts, as I knew; and my nippers assured me that there was no key in the lock.

Thus emboldened, I fitted one of the skeleton keys, and was soon within the room, making a hasty survey of Dimber Joe’s effects.

Illustration:

Thus assured, I fitted one of the skeleton keys.

Aided again by my skeleton keys, I hurriedly opened and searched the two valises. They were as honest as they looked.

The first contained a liberal supply of polished linen, a water-proof coat and traveling-cap, together with other articles of clothing, and two or three novels. The second held the clerical black suit worn by Dimber on the evening of his arrival in Trafton; a brace of linen dusters, a few articles of the toilet, and a small six-shooter.

There was nothing else; no concealed jimmy, no “tools” of any description.

It might have been the outfit of a country parson, but for the novels and the revolver. This latter was loaded, and, without any actual motive for so doing, I extracted the cartridges and put them in my pocket.

In another moment I was back in my own room, baffled, disappointed, and puzzled more than before.

Sitting there alone, I drew from my pocket the lately received telegram, and surveyed it once more.

4—. H, c, n, c, e, o, g, k, i, m, b—s, i, a—.

Well might Harris have been puzzled. Arrant nonsense it must have seemed to him, but to me it was simplicity itself. The dispatch was from Carnes, and it said:

“He is coming back.”

Simplicity itself, as the reader will see, by comparing the letters and the words.

“He is coming back.” This being interpreted, meant, “Blake Simpson is now returning to Trafton.”

Was I growing imbecile?

Blake Simpson had departed in the daylight, doubtless taking the “tools of his trade” with him, hence the innocent appearance of his partner’s room, for partners, I felt assured, they were.

He was returning under cover of the darkness; Dimber had gone out to meet him, and before morning, Trafton would be supplied with a fresh sensation.

How was I to act? How discover their point of attack?

It yet lacked more than two hours of midnight. Trafton had not yet gone to sleep.

Blake was coming back, but how?

My telegram came from a village fifteen miles distant. Blake then must have left the train at that point, and Carnes had followed him. He had followed him until assured that he was actually returning to Trafton, and then he had sent the message.

Blake might return in two ways. He might hire a conveyance and drive back to Trafton, or he might walk back as far as the next station, a distance of five miles, and there wait for the night express.

It seemed hardly probable that he would care to court notice by presenting himself at an inn or livery stable. He would be more apt to walk away from the village, assume some light disguise, and return by the train. It would be a child’s trick for him to drop from the moving train as it entered the town, and disappear unnoticed in the darkness.

Carnes might return by that train, also, but we had agreed that, unless he was fully convinced that Blake meant serious mischief, and that I would need his assistance, he was to continue on his journey, as it seemed important that he should be in New Orleans as soon as possible.

After some consideration, I decided that I would attach myself to Dimber, should he return, as it seemed likely that he would, it being so early. And if he failed to appear, I would lie in wait for the night express, and endeavor to spot Blake, should he come that way.

Having thus decided, I resumed my hat, coat and boots, extinguished my light, locked my door and went down-stairs.

The office lamp was burning its brightest, and there underneath it, tilted back in the only arm-chair the room could boast, sat Dimber Joe; his hat hung on a rack beside the door, a fresh cigar was stuck between his lips, and he was reading again that brown-covered French novel!

I began to feel like a man in a nightmare. Could that indolent-looking novel reader be meditating a crime, and only waiting for time to bring the hour?

I went out upon the piazza and fanned myself with my hat. I felt discomposed, and almost nervous. At that moment I wished devoutly that I could see Carnes.

By-and-by my absurd self-distrust passed away, and I began to feel once more equal to the occasion.

Dimber's room was not, like mine, at the end of the building. It was a "front room," and its two windows opened directly over the porch upon which I stood.

I had the side door of the office in full view. He could not leave the house unseen by me.

Mr. Holtz came out to talk with me. I complained of a headache and declared my intention to remain outside until it should have passed away. We conversed for half an hour, and then, as the hands of the office clock pointed to half-past ten he left me to make his nightly round through kitchen, pantries, and dining-room, locking and barring the side door of the office before going. And still Dimber Joe read on, to all appearances oblivious of time and all things else.

A wooden bench, hard and narrow, ran along the wall just under the office window, affording a seat for loungers when the office should be overfull, and the chairs all occupied. Upon this I stretched myself, and feigned sleep, for a time that seemed interminable.

Eleven o'clock; eleven loud metallic strokes from the office time keeper.

Dimber Joe lowered the leg that had been elevated, elevated the leg that had been lowered, turned a page of his novel and read on. The man's coolness was tantalizing. I longed to forget my identity as a detective, and his as a criminal, and to spring through the window, strike the book from his hand, and challenge him to mortal combat, with dirks at close quarters, or pistols at ten paces.

Half-past eleven. Dimber Joe stretched his limbs, closed his book, yawned and arose. Whistling softly, as if not to disturb my repose, he took a small lamp from a shelf behind the office desk, lighted it leisurely and went up-stairs.

As he entered the room above, a ray of light, from his window gleamed out across the road. It rested there for, perhaps, five minutes and then disappeared.

Had Dimber Joe closed his novel to retire like an honest man?

Ten more long minutes of quiet and silence, and then the stillness was broken by a long, shrill shriek, sounding half a mile distant. It was the night express nearing Trafton station.

As this sound died upon the air, another greeted my ears; the sound of swift feet running heedlessly, hurriedly; coming directly toward me from the southward.

As I rose from my lounging place and stepped to the end of the piazza the runner came abreast of me, and the light streaming through the office window revealed to me Jim Long, hatless, coatless, almost breathless.

The lamp light fell upon me also, and even as he ran he recognized me.

Halting suddenly, he turned back with a quick ejaculation, which I did not understand.

"Long, what has happened?"

The answer came between short, sharp breaths.

"Carl Bethel has been shot down at his own door! For God's sake go to him! He is there alone. I must find a doctor."

Illustration:

„Carl Bethel has been shot down at his own door!“

In another instant he was running townward at full speed, and I was flying at an equal pace through the dark and silent street toward Dr. Bethel's cottage.

Chapter XXIV

Jim Long Shows His Hand.

As I ran through the silent, dusky street, keeping to the road in preference to risking myself, at that pace, over some most uncertain "sidewalks," for pavements were unknown in Trafton, my thoughts were keeping pace with my heels.

First they dwelt upon the fact that Jim Long, in making his brief, hasty exhortation to me, had forgotten, or chosen to ignore, his nasal twang and rustic dialect, and that his earnestness and agitation had betrayed a more than ordinary interest in Carl Bethel, and a much more than ordinary dismay at the calamity which had befallen him.

Carl Bethel had been shot down at his own door!

How came it that Jim Long was near the scene and ready for the rescue, at eleven o'clock at night? Who had committed the deed? And why?

Some thoughts come to us like inspirations. Suddenly there flashed upon my mind a possible man and a probable motive.

Blake Simpson was coming back. Contrary to my expectations, he had probably entered Trafton on foot, having made the journey by means of some sort of conveyance which was now, perhaps, carrying him away from the scene of his crime.

This would explain the singular apathy of Dimber Joe. He had walked out earlier in the evening to ascertain that the way was clear and the game within reach, or, in other words, at home and alone. Then perhaps he had made these facts known to his confederate, and after that, his part in the plot being accomplished, he had returned to the hotel, where he had kept himself conspicuously in sight until after the deed was done. Here was a theory for the murder ready to hand, and a motive was not wanting.

Only a week since, some party or parties had committed a shameful outrage, and the attempt had been made to fasten the crime upon Carl Bethel. Fortunately the counter evidence had been sufficient to clear him in the eyes of impartial judges. The doctor's courage and popularity had carried him safely through the danger. His enemies had done him little hurt, and had not succeeded in driving him from Trafton. Obviously he was in somebody's way, and the first attempt having failed, they had made a second and more desperate one.

Here my mental diagnosis of the case came to an end. I had reached the gate of the doctor's cottage.

All was silent as I opened the door and entered the sitting-room. A shaded lamp burned softly on the center-table, and beside it stood the doctor's easy-chair and footrest. An open book lay upon the table, as if lately laid down by the occupant of

the chair, who had put a half-filled pipe between the pages, to mark the place where he had stopped reading when interrupted by—what?

Thus much I observed at a glance, and then turned toward the inner room where, upon the bed, lay Carl Bethel.

Was he living or dead?

Taking the lamp from the table I carried it to the bedside, and bent to look at the still form lying thereon. The loose coat of white linen, and also the vest, had been drawn back from the right shoulder; both were blood-stained, and the entire shirt front was saturated with blood.

I put the lamp upon a stand beside the bed, and examined closer. The hands were not yet cold with the chill of death, the breath came feebly from between the parted lips.

What should I do?

As I glanced about the room while asking myself this helpless question, there came a step upon the gravel outside, quick, light, firm. Then the door opened, and Louise Barnard stood before me.

Shall I ever forget that woful face, white as the face of death, rigid with the calmness of despair? Shall I ever banish from my memory those great dark eyes, too full of anguish for tears? It was another mental picture of Louise Barnard never to be forgotten.

“Carl, Carl!”

She was on her knees at the bedside clasping the limp hand between her own, bowing her white face until it rested upon his.

“Carl, Carl! speak to me!”

Illustration:

„Carl, Carl! speak to me!”

But there was no word of tenderness in answer to her pitiful appeal, no returning pressure from the still hand, and she buried her head in the pillows, uttering a low moan of despair.

In the presence of one weaker than myself, my own helplessness forsook me. I approached the girl who knelt there believing her lover dead, and touched her shoulder lightly.

“Miss Barnard, we have no time now for grief. He is not dead.”

She was on her feet in an instant.

“Not dead! Then he must not die!”

A red flush mounted to her cheek, a new light leaped to her eye. She waited to ask or give no explanation, but turned once more and laid her hand upon the blood-ensanguined garments.

“Ah, we must waste no more time. Can you cut away this clothing?”

I nodded and she sprang from the room. I heard a clicking of steel and the sound of opening drawers, then she was back with a pair of sharp scissors in her hand.

“Use these,” she said, taking command as a matter of course, and flitting out again, leaving me to do my work, and as I worked, I marveled at and admired her wonderful presence of mind—her splendid self-control.

In a moment I knew, by the crack of a parlor match and a responsive flash of steady light, that she had found a lamp and lighted it.

There were the sounds of another search, and then she was back again with restoratives and some pieces of linen.

Glancing down at the bed she uttered a sharp exclamation, and all the blood fled out of her face. I had just laid bare a ghastly wound in the right shoulder, and dangerously near the lung.

It was with a mighty effort that she regained her self-control. Then she put down the things she held, and said, quite gently:

“Please chafe his hands and temples, and afterward try the restoratives. There is a fluid heater out there. I must have warm water before—”

“Long has gone for a doctor,” I interrupted, thinking her possibly ignorant of this fact.

“I know; we must have everything ready for him.”

She went out and I began my work of restoration.

After some time passed in the outer room, she came back to the bedside and assisted me in my task.

After a little, a faint sigh and a feeble fluttering of the eyelids assured us that we were not thus active in vain. The girl caught her breath, and while she renewed her efforts at restoration I saw that she was fast losing her self-control.

And now we heard low voices and hurrying footsteps.

It was the doctor at last.

Excepting Bethel, Dr. Hess was the youngest practitioner in Trafton. He was a bachelor, and slept at his office, a fact which Jim took into account in calling for him, instead of waking up old Dr. Baumbach, who lived at the extreme north of the village.

Dr. Hess looked very grave, and Jim exceedingly anxious, as the two bent together over the patient.

After a brief examination, Dr. Hess said:

“I must get at Bethel’s instruments. I know he keeps them here, so did not stop to fetch mine.”

“They are all ready.”

He turned in surprise. Miss Barnard had drawn back at his entrance, and he was now, for the first time, aware of her presence.

“I knew what was required,” she said, in answer to his look of surprise. “They are ready for you.”

The doctor moved toward the outer room.

“I must have some tepid water,” he said.

“That, too, is ready. I shall assist you, Dr. Hess.”

“You!”

“Yes, I. I know something about the instruments. I have helped my father more than once.”

“But—”

“There need be no objection. I am better qualified than either of these gentlemen.”

He looked at me, still hesitating.

“I think you can trust the lady,” I said; “she has proved her capability.”

"Very well, Miss Barnard," said the doctor, more graciously; "it may try your nerves;" and, taking up some instruments, he turned toward the inner room.

"I shall be equal to it," she replied, as, gathering up some lint, and going across the room for a part of the water, fast heating over the fluid lamp, she followed him.

"Doctor, can't we do something?" asked Jim Long.

"Nothing at present."

How still it was! Jim Long stood near the center of the room, panting heavily, and looking down at a dark stain in the carpet,—a splash of human blood that marked the place where Bethel had fallen under the fire of the assassin. His face was flushed, and its expression fiercely gloomy. His hands were clenched nervously, his eye riveted to that spot upon the carpet, his lips moved from time to time, as if framing anathemas against the would-be destroyer.

After a time, I ventured, in a low tone:

"Long, you are breathing like a spent racer. Sit down. You may need your breath before long."

He turned, silently opened the outer door, making scarcely a sound, and went out into the night.

That was a long half hour which I passed, sitting beside the little table with that splash of blood directly before my eyes, hearing no sound save an occasional rustle from the inner room, and now and then a low word spoken by Dr. Hess.

To think to the purpose seemed impossible, in that stillness where life and death stood face to face. I could only wait; anxiously, impatiently, fearing the worst.

At last it was over; and Jim, who evidently, though out of sight, had not been out of hearing, came in to listen to the verdict of Dr. Hess.

"It was a dangerous wound," he said, "and the patient was in a critical condition. He might recover, with good nursing, but the chances were much against him."

A spasm of pain crossed Louise Barnard's face, and I saw her clench her small hand in a fierce effort to maintain her self-control. Then she said, quite calmly:

"In his present condition, will he not require the constant attention of a surgeon?"

Dr. Hess bowed his head.

"Hemorrhage is likely to occur," he said. "He might need surgical aid at a moment's notice."

"Then, Dr. Hess, would you object to our calling for counsel—for an assistant?"

He elevated his eyebrows, more in surprise at the pronoun, I thought, than at the suggestion, or request.

"I think it might be well to have Dr. Baumbach in to-morrow," he replied.

"I was not thinking of Dr. Baumbach," she said. "I wish to send to New York for a doctor who is a relative of Mr. Bethel's. I know—it is what he would wish."

Dr. Hess glanced from her face to mine and remained silent.

"When my father was sick," she went on, now looking appealingly from the doctor's face to mine, and then over my shoulder at Jim, who had remained near the door, "Dr. Bethel said that if he had any doubts as to his case, he should telegraph at once for Dr. Denham, and he added that he knew of no surgeon more skillful."

Still no answer from Dr. Hess.

Jim Long came forward with a touch of his old impatience and accustomed quaintness in his words and manner.

"I'm in favor of the city doctor," he said, looking, not at Dr. Hess, but straight into my face. "And I'm entitled to a voice in the matter. The patient's mine by right of discovery."

Miss Barnard gave him a quick glance of gratitude, and I rallied from the surprise occasioned by the mention of "our old woman," to say:

"I think you said that this gentleman is a relative of Dr. Bethel's; if so, he should be sent for by all means."

"He is Dr. Bethel's uncle," said Miss Barnard.

"Then," I repeated, with decision, "as a relative he should be sent for at once."

"Most certainly," acquiesced Dr. Hess, who now saw the matter in, to him, a more favorable light. "Send for him; the sooner the better."

"Oh," breathed the anxious girl, "I wish it could be done at once."

"It can," I said, taking my hat from the table as I spoke. "Fortunately there is a new night operator at the station; he came to-night, or was expected. If he is there, we shall save time, if not, we must get Harris up."

"Oh, thank you."

Dr. Hess went to take a look at his patient, and came back, saying:

"I will remain here until morning, I think."

"And I will come back as soon as possible," I responded, turning to go.

Jim Long caught up his hat from the floor, where he had flung it on entering.

"I reckon I had better go along with you," he said, suddenly assuming his habitual drawl; "you may have to rout Harris up, and I know right where to find him."

I was anxious to go, for a reason of my own, and I was not sorry to have Jim's company. "Now, if ever," I thought, "is the time to fathom 'the true inwardness' of this strange man."

We waited for no more words, but set out at once, walking briskly through the night that seemed doubly dark, doubly silent and mysterious, at the witch's hour of one o'clock.

We had walked half the distance to the station; in perfect silence, and I was studying the best way to approach Jim and overcome his reticence, when suddenly he opened his lips, to give me a glimpse of his "true inwardness," that nearly took me, figuratively, off my feet.

"Men are only men, after all," he began, sententiously, "and detectives are only common men sharpened up a bit. I wonder, now, how you are going to get the address of this Dr. Denham?"

I started so violently, that he must have perceived it, dark though it was.

What a blunder! I had walked away from the cottage forgetting to ask for Dr. Denham's address.

Uttering an exclamation of impatience, I turned sharply about.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"I'm going back after the address, of course."

"I wouldn't do that; time's precious. Do you go ahead and send the message. I'll run back and ask after the address."

“Long,” I said, sharply, “what do you mean?”

“I mean this,” he replied, his tone changing suddenly. “I mean that it’s time for you and I to understand each other!”

Chapter XXV

In Which I Take Jim on Trust.

“It is time for you and I to understand each other. Don’t stop there looking moon-struck! Go ahead, and don’t waste time. I’ll run back and ask for the address. Miss Barnard, if she scented a secret, might be trusted with it. But, Dr. Hess—his brain has not kept pace with the steps of the universe.”

With these remarkable words, Jim Long lowered his head, compressed his elbows after the fashion of a professional prize-runner, and was off like a flying shadow, while I stood staring after him through the darkness, divided betwixt wonder at his strange words and manner, and disgust at my own stupidity.

What did he mean? Had he actually discovered my identity? And, if so, how?

While waiting for a solution to these riddles, it would be well to profit by Jim’s advice. So I turned my face toward the village, and hurried forward.

As I approached the station, a bright light from the operator’s window assured me that I should not find the office empty, and coming stealthily toward it, I peered in, to see, seated in the most commodious office chair, Gerald Brown, of our agency, the expected “night operator.”

On a lounge opposite the window, lay Charlie Harris asleep.

I tapped softly on the open casement, and keeping myself in the shadow whispered:

“Come outside, Gerry, and don’t wake Harris.”

The night-operator, who knew the nature of the services required of him in Trafton, and who doubtless had been expecting a visit, arose quietly and came out on the platform with the stealthy tread of a bushman.

After a cordial hand-clasp, and a very few words of mutual inquiry, I told Brown what had happened at the doctor’s cottage, and of my suspicions regarding Blake Simpson; and, then, using a leaf from my note-book, and writing by the light from the window, I wrote two messages, to be sent before Harris should awake.

The first was as follows:

Doctor Charles Denham,
No. 300 — street, N. Y.

Carl Bethel is in extreme danger; requires your professional services. Come at once.

Bathurst.

The second was addressed to our office, and was much longer. It ran thus:

Capt. B., A——, N. Y.

Murder was attempted last night; Bethel the victim. See that Denham comes by the first train to attend to him. Give him some hints before starting. Look out for B. S. If he returns to the city in the morning, keep him shadowed. Will write particulars.

Bathurst.

“There,” I said, as I passed them to Brown, “send them as soon as you can, Gerry. The doctor will hardly receive his before morning, but the other will be delivered at once, and then they can hurry up the “old woman.” As for Blake, he will probably take the morning train, if he returns to the city, so they have ample time to prepare for him. Did you see Carnes on the express?”

“Yes; but only had a moment’s speech with him. He told me to tell you that Blake left the train at Ireton, and that he went straight to a sort of feed stable, kept by a man named Briggs—”

“Briggs!” I exclaimed, involuntarily.

“Yes, that was the name. At this stable he was furnished with a good team and light buggy, and he drove straight south.”

“Ah! he did. But my time is not at my disposal just now, Gerry; I have a companion somewhere on the road. I suppose you got the bearings of this Trafton business at the Agency?”

“Yes; I think I am pretty well posted. I have read all your reports.”

“So much the better. Gerry, you had better take up your quarters at the Trafton House. I am stopping there. It will be convenient, for more than one reason.”

Gerry agreed with me in this, and, as at that moment we heard footsteps approaching, which I rightly guessed to be those of Jim Long, we separated at once, and I went forward to meet Jim.

Before, I had deemed it necessary to press the siege, and lead Jim to talk by beginning the attack in a voluble manner. Now, I was equally intent upon holding my own forces in reserve, and letting him open the engagement, which, after a few moments’ silence, he did.

A few rods away from the depot stood a church, with broad, high steps leading up from the street, and a deep, old-fashioned portico.

Here Jim came to an abrupt halt, for we had turned our steps southward, and said, with more of courtesy in his voice than might have been expected, considering his recent abruptness:

“Let us go up there, and sit under the porch. It’s safer than to talk while walking, and I fancy you would like me to explain myself.”

I followed him in silence up the steps, and sat down beside him on the portico.

“I wonder,” began Jim, lowering his voice to insure himself against possible eavesdroppers, “I wonder why you have not asked me, before this time, how it happened that I was the first to discover Bethel’s condition, or, at any rate, the first to give the alarm.”

“There has scarcely been time,” I replied, guardedly. “Besides I, being so nearly a stranger, thought that a question to be more properly asked by Miss Barnard or the doctor.”

"You are modest," said Jim, with a short laugh. "Probably it will not occur to Miss Barnard to ask that question, until her mind is more at ease concerning Bethel's condition. As for Dr. Hess, he had asked it before he took off his nightcap."

"And did you answer it," asked I, maliciously, "in the same good English you are addressing to me?"

"I hope not," he replied, laughing again. "I told him the truth, however, in a very few words, and now I will tell it to you. Last night—I suppose it is morning now by the clock—I spent the evening in the village, principally about the Trafton House. I presume you are wondering how it came that you did not see me there, for I happen to know that you spent the entire evening in the office or on the porch. Well, the fact is, I was there on a little private business, and did not make myself very conspicuous for that reason. It was late when I came home, and, on looking about the cabin, I discovered that my gun was missing. My door, for various reasons, I always leave unlocked *when absent*, so I did not waste any time in wondering how the thief got in. I missed nothing else, and, after a little, I went outside to smoke, and think the matter over. I had not been out many minutes before I heard the report of a gun—*my* gun, I could have sworn. It sounded in the direction of Bethel's cottage, and I was not many minutes in getting there. I found the door open, and Bethel lying across the threshold, wounded, as you have seen. He was almost unconscious then, but as I bent above him he whispered one word, 'Louise.' I could not leave him lying there in the doorway, so I lifted him and carried him to the bed, and then, seeing that it was a shoulder wound, and that he still breathed, I rushed off, stopping to tell Louise Barnard that her lover was wounded and, maybe, dying, and then on again until I saw you, the very man whose help I wanted."

"And why my help rather than that of another?"

"Because, next to that of a physician, the presence of a detective seemed most necessary."

"Long," I said, turning upon him sharply, "this is the second time you have referred to me as 'a detective.' Will you be good enough to explain?"

"I have spoken of you as a detective," he replied, gravely, "because I believe you to be one, and have so believed since the day you came to Trafton. To explain in full would be to occupy more time than you or I can well spare to story telling. I have watched you since you first came to this place, curiously at first, then earnestly, then anxiously. I believe you are here to ferret out the authors of the many robberies that have happened in and about Trafton. If this is so, then there is no one more anxious to help you, or who could have a stronger motive for so doing, than Jim Long."

He paused for a moment, but I remained silent, and he began anew.

"I think you are interested in Bethel and his misfortunes. I think you know him for the victim of those who believe him to be what you really are."

"You think there are those who fear Bethel because they believe him to be a detective? Is that your meaning?"

"That is my meaning."

“Long,” I said, seriously, “you tell me that your gun was stolen last night; that you recognized the sound of the report coming from the direction of Bethel’s house.”

He moved closer to me and laid a hand on my shoulder.

“It was my gun that shot Bethel,” he said, solemnly. “To-morrow that gun will be found and I shall be accused of the crime. If the devils had possessed my knowledge, it would have been you, instead of Carl Bethel, lying somewhere now, dying or dead. I say these things to you to-night because, if my gun is found, as I anticipate, and I am accused of the shooting, I may not be able to serve Carl Bethel, and he is not yet out of danger. If he lives he will still be a target for his enemies.”

He spoke with suppressed emotion, and my own feelings were stirred as I replied:

“Long, you have been a mystery to me from the first, and I do not read your riddle even now, but I believe you are a man to be trusted. Give me your hand, and depend upon it you shall not rest long under a false accusation. Carl Bethel, living, shall not want a friend; Carl Bethel, dead, shall have an avenger. As for you, and myself—”

“We shall understand each other better,” he broke in, “when the time comes for me to tell you my own story in my own way.”

“Then,” I said, “let us go back to Bethel. I want to take a look about the premises by the first streak of daylight.”

“Ah!” ejaculated Jim, “that is what I wanted to hear you say.”

Chapter XXVI

The Trail of the Assassin.

During the night there was little change in Bethel’s condition, and in the gray of dawn Miss Barnard went reluctantly home, having been assured by the doctor that the patient was in no immediate danger, and, by Jim and myself, converted to the belief that he might be safely trusted for a short time to our care.

A little later, with the first clear light of the dawn, I left Jim on guard at the bedside, and went to take a survey of the premises.

I was not long in convincing myself that there was little to be discovered outside, and returning to the house seated myself in Bethel’s easy-chair.

“Long,” I called softly,—somehow since last night I could not bring myself to use the familiar “Jim,” as of old.

He came from the inner room looking a mute inquiry.

“Long, you had ought to know something about your own gun; was that wound of Bethel’s made at long or short range?”

He looked surprised at first, then a gleam of intelligence leaped to his eyes.

“What do you mean by short range?” he asked.

“Suppose Bethel to have stood on the steps outside, was the gun fired from behind that evergreen just beyond, and close to the gravel walk, or from some other point equally distant?”

He opened the door and glanced out at the tree, seeming to measure the distance with his eye.

“It was further away,” he said, after a moment’s reflection. “If the scoundrel had stood as you suggest, the muzzle of the gun would have been almost at Bethel’s breast. The powder would have scorched his clothing and his flesh.”

“Do you think it may have been fired from the gate, or a few feet beyond it?”

“Judging by the appearance of the wound, I should say it must have been from a little beyond the gate.”

“I think so too,” I said. “I think some one drove to the gate last night with a light buggy, and two small horses. He or they drove quite close to the fence and stopped the horses, so that they were hidden from the view of any one who was nearer the house. The buggy was directly before the gate and so close that it could not have been opened, as it swings outward. The horses were not tied, but they were doubtless well trained animals. A man jumped out of the buggy, and, standing beside it, on the side farthest from the gate, of course, leveled your gun across the vehicle and called aloud for the doctor. Bethel was alone, sitting in this chair by this table. His feet were on this footstool,” touching each article as I named it. “He was smoking this pipe, and reading this book. The window was open, and the blinds only half closed. The man, who probably drove close to the fence for that purpose, could see him quite distinctly, and from his attitude and occupation knew him to be alone.

“When Bethel heard the call, he put down the book and pipe with cool deliberation, pushed back the footstool and opened the door, coming from the light to the darkness. At that moment he could see nothing, and leaving the door open he stepped outside, standing clearly outlined in the light from within. *Then* the assassin fired.”

Illustration:

When Bethel heard the call, he put down the book and pipe with cool deliberation, pushed back the footstool and opened the door.

Jim Long came toward me, his eyes earnestly searching my face.

“In Heaven’s name, what foundation have you for such a theory,” he asked, slowly.

“Excellent foundation,” I replied. “Let us demonstrate my theory.”

Long glanced at his charge in the inner room, and then said, “go on.”

“Suppose me to be Bethel,” I said, leaning back in the big chair. “That window is now just as it was last night, I take it?”

“Just the same.”

“Well, if you choose to go outside and walk beside the fence, you will be able to decide whether I could be seen as I have stated.”

He hesitated a moment, and then said:

“Wait; I’ll try it;” and opened the door.

“Long,” I whispered, as he passed out, “keep *this side* of the fence.”

“Yes.”

He was back in a moment.

“I can see you plainly,” he said.

“And, of course, with a light within and darkness outside you could see me still more plainly.”

“I suppose so,” he assented.

“Now for the second test. I hear my name called, I lay aside my book and meerschaum, push back my footrest, and go to the door. I can see nothing as I open it,” I was suiting the action to the word, “so I fling it wide open, and step outside. Now, Long, that spot of blood tells me just about the location of Bethel’s head when you discovered him. Will you point out the spot where his feet rested?”

Long considered a moment and then laid two fingers on the step.

“There, as nearly as I can remember,” he said.

I planted my own feet on the spot indicated by him.

“Now, please go to the gate. Go outside of it. There are some bits of paper scattered about; do not step where you see any of these.”

He obeyed my directions, striding over and around the marked places.

“Now,” I called, retaining my position on the door-step, “step about four feet from the gate, and from that distance how must you stand to take aim at me, on this spot?”

He shifted his position a trifle, went through the motion of taking aim, looking down at his feet, then dropped his arms, and said:

“I can’t do it; to aim at you there, I would have to stand just where you have left some bits of paper. In any other position the bushes obstruct the sight.”

I came down to the gate and swung it open.

“Just what I wanted to establish. Now for the next test,” I said. “Mark me, Long; do you see those bits of paper along the fence? Go and look at the ground, where they lie, and you will see the faint impression of a wheel. Just before the gate where the vehicle stood for a moment, the print is deeper, and more easily noticed. I said that the gun was fired across the buggy; you have convinced yourself that aim could be taken from only one position, at this distance. The man must stand where those bits of paper are scattered. Now, look;” I bent down and gathered up the fragments of paper; “look close. Here is a fine, free imprint from the heel of a heavy boot. As there is but one, and that so marked, it is reasonable to suppose that the assassin rested one foot upon the buggy wheel, thus throwing his weight upon this heel.”

Long bent to examine the print and then lifted his head to ejaculate:

“It is wonderful!”

“It is simplicity itself,” I replied; “the a, b, c of the detective’s alphabet. I said there were two horses; look, here is where one of them scraped the fence with his teeth, and here the other has snatched a mouthful of leaves from the doctor’s young shade tree. Here, too, are some faint, imperfect hoof-prints, but they are enough to tell us, from their position, that there were two horses, and from their size, that the animals were pretty small.”

Long examined the different marks with eager attention, and then stood gazing fixedly at me, while I gathered up my bits of paper.

"I shall not try to preserve these as evidence in the case," I said. "I think we shall do very well without them. They were marked for your benefit, solely. Are you convinced?"

"Convinced! Yes, convinced and satisfied that you are the man for this business."

We returned to the house, each intent on his own thoughts.

The sun was rising in a cloudless sky. It would not be long before curious visitors would be thronging the cottage. After a time I went to the door of the room where Jim had resumed his watch.

"Long," I asked, in a low tone, "do you know any person in Ireton?"

He shook his head.

"Do you know whether this fellow Tom Briggs has any relatives about Trafton?"

He pondered a moment.

"Yes," he said, finally. "He has a brother somewhere in the neighborhood. I don't know just where. He comes to Trafton occasionally."

"What is he like?"

"He is not unlike Tom, but goes rather better dressed."

"Do you know his occupation?"

"A sort of horse-trading character, I think."

I considered for a time, and then resumed my catechism.

"Among the farmers whose horses have been stolen, do you know one who is thoroughly shrewd, cautious and reliable?"

"I think so," after a moment's reflection. "I think Mr. Warren is such a man."

"Where can he be found?"

"He lives five miles northwest of Trafton."

"If you wished to organize a small band of regulators, say six or eight, where could you find the right men, and how soon?"

"I should look for them among the farmers. I think they could be organized, *for the right purpose*, in half a day's ride about the country."

As my lips parted to launch another question, the outer door opened slowly and almost noiselessly, and Louise Barnard brushed past me and hurried to the bedside.

"Miss Barnard—"

"Don't lecture me, please," she said, hurriedly. "Mamma is better and could spare me, and I *could* not sleep. I have taken a cordial, and some food. You must let me stay on guard until Dr. Denham arrives. I will resign my post to him."

"Which means that you will not trust to us. You are a 'willful woman,' Miss Barnard, and your word is our law, of course. There is actually nothing to do here just now but to sit at the bedside and watch our patient. And so, if you *will* occupy that post, Long and myself will take a look at things out of doors."

She took her seat by the bedside, and, beckoning Jim to follow me, I went out, and, turning to see that he was close behind me, walked to the rear of the house.

Here we seated ourselves upon the well platform, where Jim had once before stationed himself to watch the proceedings of the raiding party, and for a full half-hour remained in earnest consultation.

At the end of that time, Jim Long saddled and bridled the doctor's horse, led him softly from the yard, mounted, and rode swiftly away to the northwest.

Chapter XXVII

An Angry Heiress.

Very soon after Jim's departure, the first visitors arrived at the cottage, and most welcome ones they were.

Miss Barnard, who seemed capable of wise thought in the midst of her grief and anxiety, had dispatched her own servant with a message to Mr. Harris, and, early as was the hour, that good man had hastened to the cottage, with his wife at his side. Their presence was comforting to Miss Barnard and myself. Mr. Harris was the right man to assume responsibilities, which I, for various reasons, had no desire to take upon myself, and Mrs. Harris was the very companion and assistant needed by the anxious girl. They were soon in possession of all the facts, as we knew them, concerning the previous night, and its calamity.

I say, as we knew them; Miss Barnard had heard nothing concerning the part Jim's gun was believed to have played in the sad affair, and I did not think it necessary to enlighten either her or Mr. Harris on that subject, at that time.

Leaving Bethel in such good hands, I went back to the hotel. But before I could breakfast or rest, I was called upon to repeat again and again all that I could or would tell concerning this new calamity that had befallen Dr. Bethel, for the news of the night was there before me.

As I re-entered the office, after quitting the breakfast table, I found a considerable crowd assembled, and was again called upon to rehearse my story.

"It looks sorter queerish to me," commented a hook-nosed old Traftonite, who had listened very intently to my words. "It's sorter queerish! Why warn't folks told of this sooner? Why warn't the alarm given, so'at citizens could agone and seen for theirselves how things was?"

I recognized the speaker as one who had been boisterously and vindictively active on the day of the raid upon Bethel's cottage, and I fixed my eye upon his face with a look which he seemed to comprehend, as I retorted:

"Dr. Bethel has received one visit from a delegation of 'citizens who were desirous to see for theirselves how things was,' and if he suffered no harm from it, it was not owing to the tender mercies of the 'citizens' aforesaid. The attendance of a mob last night would not have benefited Bethel. What he needed was a doctor and good nursing. These he had and will have," and I turned upon my heel to leave the room.

"I should say," spoke up another voice, "that there was a detective needed around there, too."

"Nothing shall be lacking that is needed," I retorted, over my shoulder, and then ascended the stairs, wishing heartily, as I entered my room, that Trafton and a large majority of its inhabitants were safely buried under an Alpine avalanche.

Two hours later I awoke, and being in a more amiable mood, felt less inclined to consign all Trafton to annihilation.

Going below I found the office comparatively quiet, and Dimber Joe and the new operator socially conversing on the porch.

Gerald's presence was a relief to me. I felt sure that he would keep a sharp eye upon the movements of Dimber, and, being anxious about the situation of Bethel I returned to the cottage.

Dr. Hess stood in the doorway, in conversation with Mr. Harris.

"How is the patient?" asked I, approaching them.

"Much the same," replied the doctor. "But there will be a change soon."

"Has he spoken?"

"No; he will hardly do that yet, and should not be allowed to talk even if he could. When the change comes there will be fever, and perhaps delirium."

I passed them and entered the sick-room.

Mrs. Harris sat by the bed. Louise Barnard was not there.

"We have sent Louise home," Mrs. Harris whispered, seeing me glance about inquiringly. "The doctor told her that if she insisted upon remaining she would soon be sick herself, and unable to help us at all. That frightened her a little. The poor child is really worn out, with her father's sickness and death, her mother's poor health, and now this," nodding toward the bed.

"Have you had any visitors?"

"Oh, yes. But we knew that the house must be kept quiet, and Mr. Harris has received the most of them out in the yard. Dr. Hess says it will be best to admit none but personal friends."

"Dr. Hess is very sensible."

Going back to join the two gentlemen, I saw that Dr. Hess was hastening toward the gate with considerable alacrity, and that a pony phaeton had just halted there.

Swinging the gate wide open, the doctor assisted the occupant to alight.

It was Miss Manvers.

There was an anxious look upon her face, and in her eyes a shadow of what I had once discovered there, when, myself unseen, I had witnessed her interview with Arch Brookhouse on the day of the garden party. She was pale, and exceedingly nervous.

She said very little. Indeed her strongest effort to preserve her self-control seemed almost a failure, and was very evident to each of us. She listened with set lips to the doctor's description and opinion of the case, and then entered the inner room, and stood looking down at the figure lying there, so stalwart, yet so helpless. For a moment her features were convulsed, and her hands clenched each other fiercely. Her form was shaken with emotion so strong as to almost overmaster her. It was a splendid picture of fierce passion held in check by an iron will.

She came out presently, and approached me.

"You were one of the first to know this, I am told," she said, in a low, constrained tone. "Please tell me about it."

I told her how I was called to the rescue by Jim, and gave a brief outline of after events.

"And has all been done that can be?" she asked, after a moment of silence.

"Not quite all, Miss Manvers. We have yet to find this would-be murderer and bring him to justice." I spoke with my eyes fixed on her face.

She started, flushed, and a new excited eagerness leaped to her eyes.

“Will you do that? *Can you?*”

“It shall be done,” I replied, still watching her face.

She gave a little fluttering sigh, drew her veil across her arm, and turned to go.

“If I can be of service, in any way,” she began, hesitatingly.

“We shall not hesitate to ask for your services,” I interrupted, walking beside her to the door, and from thence to the gate, a little to the annoyance of Dr. Hess, I fancied.

As I assisted her to her seat in the phæton, and put the reins in her hands, I saw Arch Brookhouse galloping rapidly from the direction of town. And, just as she had turned her ponies homeward, and I paused at the gate to nod a final good-bye, he reined his horse up sharply beside her vehicle.

“How is the doctor, Adele?” he asked, in a tone evidently meant for my ears.

“Don’t speak to me,” she replied, vehemently, and utterly regardless of my proximity. “Don’t speak to me. I wish it were you in his place.”

She snatched up her whip, as though her first instinct was to draw the lash across his face, but she struck the ponies instead, and they flew up the hill at a reckless gait.

As Brookhouse turned in the saddle to look after the flying phæton, I saw a dark frown cross his face.

But the next instant his brow cleared, and he turned again to bestow on me a look of sharp scrutiny.

Springing from his horse, and throwing the bridle across his arm, he approached the gate.

“Did you hear her?” he exclaimed. “That is what I get for being an amiable fellow. My friend is not amiable to-day.”

“Evidently not,” I responded, carelessly. “Lovers’ quarrels are fierce affairs, but very fleeting.”

He smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

“I have been so unfortunate as to offend her,” he said. “By to-morrow she will have forgotten the circumstances.”

“Will she, indeed?” thought I. “We shall see, my friend.”

But I made no audible comment, and he dismissed the subject to ask the stereotyped questions, “How was Dr. Bethel? Could he be of any service? How did it happen?”

While I was answering these questions with the best grace I could muster, there came the patter of horse’s hoofs, and Jim Long rode up to the side gate, dismounted with a careless swing, nodded to me, and, opening the gate, led the doctor’s horse stableward.

The look of surprise on my companion’s face was instantly followed by a malicious smile, which, in its turn, was banished to give place to a more proper expression.

“Long has been giving the doctor’s horse some exercise,” he said, half inquiringly.

“I believe he has been executing some commission for Miss Barnard,” I fabricated, unblushingly. “Long has been very useful here.”

“Indeed,” carelessly; then glancing at his watch, “nearly noon, I see.”

He turned, vaulted into his saddle, and touched his hat. "Good-morning. In case of necessity, command me;" and with a second application of his finger-tip to the brim of his hat, he shook the reins and cantered away.

As soon as he was out of sight I went straight to the stable where Jim was bountifully feeding the tired horse.

"Well, Long?"

"It's all right, captain. I've had a hard ride, but it's done."

"And the men?"

"Will be at the cabin to-night."

Chapter XXVIII

Jim Gives Bail.

Upon Jim's reappearance in the cottage, Mrs. Harris installed him as nurse, and, herself, set about improvising a kitchen in the rear room.

Mr. Harris had been despatched to town for sundry articles, and, at noon, we were served with a plentiful lunch, of which we partook in rather primitive fashion.

Not long after, while Jim and I were conversing out under the trees, and Mr. Harris was discoursing to two Trafton ladies who had called to proffer service and sympathy, I saw Gerald Brown coming toward the cottage, and guessing that his real business was with me, whatever pretext he might present, I advanced to the gate and met him there.

He carried in his hand a telegraph envelope, which he proffered me ostentatiously over the gate.

I opened it and read:

N. Y., etc., etc.

Will come to-night.

Denham.

Underneath this was written:

They are wild in town; are about to arrest Jim Long for the shooting of Bethel.

Two pair of eyes, at least, were looking out from the cottage door and window.

I turned the message over, and resting it upon the gate post, wrote the following:

Don't lose sight of Dimber; telegraph to the Agency to ask if Blake has arrived. Tell them not to let him get out of reach. We may want him at any moment.

While I was writing this Gerry shifted his position, so that his face could not be seen by the observers in the house, and said:

“Dimber is in it. He claims to have seen Long with his gun near Bethel’s house last night. The gun has been found.”

“Of course,” I returned. “We will put a muzzle on friend Dimber very shortly.”

I refolded the message and returned it to Gerry, who touched his hat and turned back toward the village.

Going to the door of the cottage, I informed Mr. Harris and the ladies that the new operator had just brought the news we so much wished for, viz.: the coming of Bethel’s uncle from New York by that night’s express. Then, sauntering back to my old place under the trees, I communicated to Jim the purport of the postscript written by Gerry.

He listened attentively, but with no sign of discomposure visible upon his countenance.

“I’ve had time to think the matter over,” he said, after a moment’s silence, “and I think I shall pull through, but,” with a waggish twinkle in his eye, “I am puzzled to know why that young man going up the hill should take so much interest in me, or was it Harris?”

“It was not Harris,” returning his look with interest. “That young man going up the hill is Gerald Brown, of New York. He’s the new night operator, and he will not fail to do his duty, in the office and out of it.”

“Ah!” ejaculated Jim, turning his eyes once more toward the receding form of Gerry.

I let my own gaze follow his and there, just coming into sight on the brow of the hill, was a party of men.

It consisted of the constable, supported by several able-bodied citizens, and followed, of course, by a promiscuous rabble.

Jim gave vent to a low chuckle.

“See the idiots,” he said, “coming like mountain bandits. No doubt they look for fierce resistance. Don’t let them think you are too much interested in the case.”

“I won’t,” I said, briefly, for the men were hurrying down the hill. “It would not be politic, but I’ll have you out of their clutches, Long, without a scratch, sure and soon.”

I turned toward the house as I finished the sentence, and Jim arose and went toward the gate; not the man of easy movements and courteous speech who had been my companion for the past twenty-four hours, not Long, the gentleman, but “Long Jim,” the loafer, awkward, slouching, uncouth of manner and speech.

As the crowd made a somewhat noisy approach, Jim leaned over the gate and motioned them to silence.

“Gentlemen,” he said, seriously, “ye can’t be any too still about this place, an’ ye’d a’ showed better gumption if ye hadn’t paid yer respects in a squad, as if ye was comin’ to a hangin’. Somehow ye seem mighty fond o’ waitin’ on Dr. Bethel in a gang.”

Acting upon a hint from me, Mr. Harris now went out, and in milder words, but with much the same meaning, exhorted the visitors to quiet.

And then, casting a quick glance behind him, and a somewhat apprehensive one toward Jim, the constable read his warrant. The two men inside the gate

listened with astonished faces. Indeed, Jim's assumption of amazement, viewed in the light of my knowledge concerning its genuineness, was ludicrous beyond description.

Mr. Harris began an earnest expostulation, and turned to beckon me to his assistance, but Jim checked him by a gesture.

"We can't have any disputing here," he said, sharply. "Don't argy, parson; tain't wuth while."

Then he opened the gate and stepped suddenly out among them.

"I'll go with ye," he said, "for the sake of peace. But," glaring about him fiercely, "if it wan't fer makin' a disturbance, again the doctor's orders, I'd take ye one at a time and thrash a little sense into ye. Come along, Mr. Constable; I'm goin' to 'pear' afore Jestice Summers, an' I'm goin' to walk right to the head o' this mob o' your'n, an' don't ye try to come none o' yer jailer dodges over me. Ye kin all walk behind, an' welcome, but the first man as undertakes to lay a finger on me, or step along-side—somethin'll happen to him."

And Jim thrust his hands deep down in his pockets, walked coolly through the group, which divided to let him pass, and strode off up the hill.

"Goodness!" ejaculated the valorous officer of the law, "is—is there a man here that's got a pistol?"

Illustration:

„Goodness!” ejaculated the valorous officer of the law.

No reply from his supporters.

I put my hand behind me and produced a small revolver.

"Take this," I said, proffering the weapon over the gate. "You had better humor his whim, but if he attempts to escape, you know how to stop him."

He seized the protecting weapon, nodded his thanks, and hastened after his prisoner, followed by the entire body guard.

"My dear sir," said Mr. Harris, gravely, "I was sorry to see you do that. You surely don't think Long guilty?"

I turned toward him, no longer trying to conceal my amusement.

"He is as innocent as you or I," I replied, "and the pistol is not loaded. One may as well retain the good will of the magnates of the law, Mr. Harris."

He smiled in his turn, and, wishing to avoid a discussion, in which I must of necessity play a very hypocritical part, I turned back and entered the cottage to explain the situation to the ladies.

During that long, still afternoon, visitors came and went. Louise Barnard, a little refreshed and very anxious returned and resumed her post at the bedside. She was shocked and indignant at the news of Jim Long's arrest; and she breathed a sigh of relief and gratification upon being told of the expected coming Dr. Denham. Late in the afternoon, Dr. Hess made a second visit, and when he returned to town Mr. Harris accompanied him, the two driving back in the doctor's gig.

It was very quiet. Mrs. Harris dozed in the easy-chair; Louise sat mute and statue-like by the bedside of her lover, and I, oppressed by the stillness, was leaning over the open window sill, wondering how it was faring with Jim Long,

when the gate gave the faintest creak, and I lifted my eyes to see the object of my mental inquiry coming toward me.

Uttering an exclamation which roused good Mrs. Harris and caused the watcher in the inner room to turn her head, I hastened to meet him.

“Long,” I exclaimed, “what lucky fate has brought you back?”

He glanced from me to the doorway, where Mrs. Harris was now standing, with an expectant look on her benevolent countenance, and replied, laconically:

“Bail.”

“Good! I was thinking of that.”

“Jim,” broke in Mrs. Harris, eagerly, “who did it? We’ll all bless his kindness.”

He advanced to the door, planted his right foot upon the lower step, rested his elbow on his knee, pushed his hat off his forehead, and grinned benignly on us both.

“Then I’m the feller that’ll walk off with the blessin’,” he said, with a chuckle. “I went my own bail to the tune of five thousand dollars!”

Mrs. Harris gave a gasp of surprise. I seated myself on the corner of the step farthest from Jim, and, seeing that he was about to volunteer a further explanation, remained silent.

At the same moment I observed what was unnoticed by the other two; Miss Barnard had left her post and was standing behind Mrs. Harris.

“Ye see,” continued Jim, giving me a sidelong glance, and then fixing his eyes upon the hem of Mrs. Harris’s apron, “Ye see, I had ter appear afore Jestice Summers. Now, the Jestice,” with another sidelong glance, and an almost imperceptible gesture, “is a man an’ a brother. I ain’t agoin’ ter say anythin’ agin’ him. I s’pose he had to do his duty. There was some in that office that wanted ter see me put where I couldn’t be so sassy, but I didn’t mind them. The minit I got in my oar, I jest talked right straight at the Jestice, an’ I told him in short order that ef I was sure of bein’ treated on the square, I’d jest waive an examination. An’ then I kind o’ sighed, an’ appealed to their feelin’s, tellin’ them that I hadn’t no friends nor relations, but that may be, ef they gave me half a show, an’ didn’t set my bail too high, may be some one would go my security, an’ give me a chance ter try ter clear myself. Wal! ef you could a looked around that office, ye’d a thought my chance o’ gittin security was slim. The Jestice called the time on me, an’ allowed ‘twould be fair ter give me bail. An’ then ‘Squire Brookhouse, an’ one or two more, piped in with objections, until the Jestice put the bail up ter five thousand. Of course that wilted me right down. Everybody grinned or giggled, an’ nobody didn’t offer any more objections, an’ the bizness was finished up. Then, when they had got ter a place where there was no backin’ out, I jest unbuttoned my coat an’ vest, whipped off a belt I’d got fixed handy for the ‘casion, an’ counted five thousand dollars right down under their noses!”

Here he paused to lift his eyes to the face of Mrs. Harris, and to see, for the first time, his third auditor, who now came forward to grasp his hand, and utter rejoicings at his present liberty, and indignant disapproval of the parties who had brought against him a charge which she unhesitatingly pronounced absurd and without reasonable foundation.

Next Jim’s hand came into the cordial grasp of good Mrs. Harris, who was more voluble than Louise Barnard, and none the less sincere.

When, after a time, Jim and I found ourselves tête-à-tête for a moment, I said: “Long, I look on it as a fortunate thing that you were taken before Justice Summers.”

“Well,” said Jim, dryly, “all things considered, so do I.”

Chapter XXIX

Vigilants.

The long day is ended at last; the sun has set in a bank of dim clouds. There is no moon as yet, and that orb, which is due above the horizon in exactly eight minutes, by an authentic almanac, will scarcely appear at her best to-night, for the leaden clouds that swallowed up the sun have spread themselves across all the sky, leaving scarce a rent through which the moon may peep at the world.

The darkness is sufficient to cover my journey, and the hour is yet early—too early for birds of the night to begin to prowl, one might think; yet, as I approach Jim Long’s cabin, I encounter a sentinel, dimly outlined but upright before me, barring the way.

“Hold on, my—”

“Jim.”

“Oh! it’s you, Cap’n; all right. Come along; we’re waitin’.”

I follow him into his own cabin, and stand beside the door, which some one has closed as we enter, while Jim strikes a light. Then I see that the cabin is occupied by half a dozen men.

Illustration:

I follow him into his own cabin, and stand beside the door,
which some one has closed as we enter, while Jim strikes a light.

“Pardner,” says Jim, setting down the candle, and indicating the various individuals, by a gesture, as he names them, “this ‘er’s Mr. Warren, the captain o’ the Trafton vigilants.”

I turn upon Jim a look of surprise, but he goes placidly on.

“This is young Mr. Warren.”

I return the nod of a bright-looking young farmer.

“This is Mr. Booth, Mr. Benner, and Mr. Jaeger.”

The three men who stand together near the window bow gravely.

“And this,” finishes Jim, “is Mr. Harding.”

As Mr. Harding moves forward out of the shadow, I recognize him. It is the man whose recital of the misfortunes of Trafton, overheard by me on the day of my departure from Groveland, had induced me to come to the thief-ridden village.

“I have met Mr. Harding before,” I say, as I proffer my hand to him.

“I don’t remember,” with a look of abashed surprise.

“Perhaps not, Mr. Harding; nevertheless, if it had not been for you I should, probably, never have visited Trafton.”

The look of surprise broadens into amazement. But it is not the time for explanations. I turn back to Mr. Warren.

“Am I to understand that you have a vigilance committee already organized here?”

“We have an organized party, sir.” Here Jim interposes.

“Ye see, I happen ter belong ter the vigilants. An’ when ye asked me ter name a reliable man, why, I jest thought I’d bring you an’ Mr. Warren together an’ ‘twould simplify matters. ‘Twant my business to explain jest then.”

“Charlie,” says Mr. Warren, addressing the young man near the door, “go outside and see that no one comes within seeing or hearing distance. We want Long here.”

The young vigilant mounts guard and I turn again to Mr. Warren.

“Mr. Long has explained the nature of my business?”

“Yes, you may be sure it was a surprise to me.”

“How many men have you?”

“Fifteen in all.”

“And you have all failed to find a clue to the identity of the horse-thieves?”

“Yes, sir, we have failed. We have organized in secret and worked in secret. We hoped and expected to sift this matter to the bottom, and we have failed utterly. But Jim tells me that you have succeeded where we have failed.”

“Not quite that. Listen, gentlemen. I know where to put my hands, now, to-night, upon the six horses that were stolen one week ago. If it were merely a question of the recovery of these, I should not need your aid. It might be worth something to me if I recovered the horses, but it will be worth much more to us, and to all Trafton, if we capture the thieves, and they cannot be taken to-night, perhaps not for many nights. We are surrounded with spies; the man we might least suspect, may be the very one to betray us. Our only safe course is to work in harmony, and, for the present, at least, trust none outside of this room. I have trusted this organization to Jim Long, believing in his discretion. He assures me that I can rely upon every man of you.”

Mr. Warren bares his head, and comes forward.

“We have all been losers at the hands of these rascally thieves,” he says, earnestly. “And we all want to see the town free from them. We are not poor men; the vigilants are all farmers who have something at stake. Show us how to clean out these horse-thieves, and if you want reliable men, they will be on hand. If you want money, that can be had in plenty.”

“All we want, is here; half a dozen men with ordinary courage and shrewdness, and a little patience. The moon is now at its full; before a new moon rises, we will have broken up the gang of Trafton outlaws!”

“And why,” asks Mr. Warren, eagerly, “must our time be regulated by the moon?”

“Because,” I say, significantly, “horse-thieves are seldom abroad on moonlight nights.”

An hour passes; an hour during which Mr. Warren, Mr. Harding, and myself, talk much, and the others listen attentively, making, now and then, a brief

comment, or uttering an approving ejaculation. All except Jim. He has forced young Warren to join the conference within, and has stood on picket-duty outside, to all appearances, the least interested of any gathered there for counsel.

It is ten o'clock when we separate; the vigilants going their way silently, and one at a time, and Jim and myself returning to the cottage together.

"Ye couldn't have found six better men," says Jim, who has chosen to sustain his *rôle* of illiterate rustic throughout the evening. "Ye can trust 'em."

"I have given them no unnecessary information, Long. Not half so much as you have scented out for yourself. They know enough to enable them to do what will be required of them and nothing more."

"Then," with a dry laugh, "they know more than I do."

"If they know that you are actually capable of drawing the reins over the 'nine parts of speech,'" I retort, "they did not learn it from me."

"Then," with another chuckling laugh, "I fancy they don't know it."

* * * * *

Dr. Denham came at midnight, and Miss Barnard greeted him with a smile that ended in a sob.

Evidently "our old woman" had been enlightened concerning her, for he took her in his arms and kissed her with grave tenderness, before going to the bedside of his patient.

He took absolute command of the cottage, and no one, not even Louise, ventured to oppose him or raise the voice of argument. He took all responsibility out of my hands, and dismissed me with his usual formula.

"Go about your business, you young rascal. I might have known you'd be at some new deviltry shortly. Go about your business, and by the time I get Bethel on his feet, you'll have me another patient, I'll be bound."

But Jim found favor in the eyes of "our old woman," who straightway elected him general assistant, and he soon discovered that to be assistant to Dr. Denham was no sinecure. Indeed, a more abject bond slave than Jim, during that first week of Bethel's illness, could not well be imagined.

"Our old woman's" scepter extended, too, over poor Louise. He was as tender as possible, allowing her to assist him when she could, and permitting her to watch by the bedside four or five hours each day. But beyond that she could not trespass. There must be no exhausting effort, no more night vigils.

Louise rebelled at first; tried coaxing, then pouting, then submitted to the power that would wield the scepter.

The good doctor brought from the city a package sent me by my Chief, which he put into my hands at the first opportunity.

It contained papers, old and yellow; some copied memoranda, and two photographs. When I had examined all these, I breathed a sigh of relieved surprise.

Another link was added to my chain of evidence, another thread to the web I was weaving.

Without that packet I had cherished a suspicion. With it, I grasped a certainty.

Chapter XXX

A Chapter of Telegrams.

The following week was to me one of busy idleness. Now at the cottage, where Bethel, pain-racked and delirious, buffeted between life and death. Now closeted for a half-hour with the new night operator. Keeping an eye upon Dimber Joe, who continued his lounging and novel reading, and who was, to all appearances, the idlest and most care-free man in Trafton.

I saw less of Jim Long than pleased me, for, when he was not bound to the chariot wheel of "our old woman," he contrived somehow to elude me, or to avoid all *tête-à-têtes*. I scarcely saw him except in the presence of a third party.

Mr. Warren, or one or two other members of the party who had met me at Jim Long's cabin, were constantly to be seen about Trafton. During the day they were carelessly conspicuous; during the night their carelessness gave place to caution; but they were none the less present, as would have been proven by an emergency.

The new telegraph operator was a host in himself. He was social, talkative, and something of a loungeur. He found it easy to touch the pulse of Trafton gossip, and knew what they thought at Porter's concerning Bethel's calamity, Long's arrest and subsequent release under bail, etc., without seeming to have made an effort in search of information.

The two questions now agitating the minds of the Trafton gossips were: "Who shot Dr. Bethel, if Jim Long did not?" and "Where did Jim Long, who had always been considered but one remove from a pauper, get the money to pay so heavy a bail?"

The theories in regard to these two questions were as various as the persons who advocated them, and were as astounding and absurd as the most diligent sensation-hunter could have desired.

Jim's gun had been found in a field less than half a mile from Bethel's cottage, by some workmen who had been sent by 'Squire Brookhouse to repair one of his farm fences, and I learned, with peculiar interest, that Tom Briggs was one of these workmen.

Upon hearing that the gun had been found, Dimber Joe had made his statement. He had seen Jim Long, between the hours of nine and ten. m., going in the direction of the cottage, with a gun upon his shoulder.

Of course, when making this assertion, he had no idea of the use to which it would be put; and equally, of course, he much regretted that he had mentioned the fact when he found himself likely to be used as a witness against Long, whom he declared to be an inoffensive fellow, so far as he had known him, and toward whom he could have no ill-will.

In due time, sooner, in fact, than I had dared hope, there came a message from Carnes.

It came through the hands of young Harris. Carnes, having sent it early in the day, and knowing into whose hands it would probably fall, had used our cipher alphabet:

4. F d, t, t, o w n—u h e—n a x—, —, —. C—.

This is the cipher which, using the figure at the head as the key, will easily be interpreted:

Found. What next?

Carnes.

Found! That meant much. It meant that the end of the Groveland mystery was near at hand!

But there was much to learn before we could decide and reply to the query, "What next?"

While Harris was absent for a few moments, during the afternoon, the night operator sent the following to Carnes:

Where found? In what condition? What do you advise?

Before midnight, this answer came:

In a fourth-rate theater. One well, the other sick. Their friends had better come for them at once. Can you get your hands on Johnny La Porte?

To this I promptly replied:

Telegraph particulars to the Agency. We can get La Porte, but must not alarm the others too soon. State what you want with him. Wyman will come to you, if needed.

This message dispatched, I dictated another to my Chief.

Let Wyman act with Carnes. Can not quit this case at present. Carnes will wire you particulars.

This being sent, I went back to my hotel and waited.

The next day the night operator offered to relieve Harris, an offer which was gladly accepted.

A little before noon the following message came:

Instructions received. Wyman, Ewing, Rutger, and La Porte start for New Orleans to-morrow. Do you need any help?

I heaved a sigh of relief and gratification, and sped back the answer, "No."

Chapter XXXI

Carnes Tells His Story.

The time came when Carnes told me the story of his New Orleans search. As he related it to me then, let him relate it now:

Arrived in New Orleans without trouble or delay, at three o'clock in the afternoon. Registered at the "Hotel Honore," a small house near the levees; giving my name as George Adams, sugar dealer, from St. Louis.

Then began a hunt among the theaters, and, before seven o'clock I had found the place I wanted,—"The Little Adelphi," owned and managed by "Storms & Brookhouse." It is a small theater, but new and neatly fitted up, has a bar

attached, and beer tables on the floor of the auditorium. I made no effort to see Brookhouse, but went back to the "Honore," after learning that money would open the door of the green room to any patron of the theater.

After supper I refreshed my memory by a look at the pictures of the missing young ladies, including that of Miss Amy Holmes, and then I set out for the little Adelphi.

There was never an easier bit of work than this New Orleans business. The curtain went up on a "Minstrel first part," and there, sitting next to one of the "end men," was Mamie Rutger!

Her curly hair was stuck full of roses. She wore a very short pink satin dress, and her little feet were conspicuous in white kid slippers. If Miss Mamie was forcibly abducted, she has wasted no time in grieving over it. If she has been in any manner deceived or deluded, she bears it wonderfully well. She sang her ballad with evident enjoyment, and her voice rang out in the choruses, clear and sweet. Her lips were wreathed in smiles, her cheeks glowed, and her eyes sparkled. Occasionally she turned her head to whisper to the blacked-up scamp who sat at her right hand. Altogether she deported herself with the confidence of an oldhabitué of the stage. Evidently she had made herself popular with the Little Adelphi audiences, and certainly she enjoyed her popularity.

After the first part, I watched the stage impatiently, it being too early to venture into the green-room.

Mamie Rutger did not re-appear, but, after an hour, occupied principally by "burnt cork artists," Miss Lotta Le Clair, "the song and dance Queen," came tripping from the wings; and Miss Lotta Le Clair, in a blue velvet coat and yellow satin nether garments, was none other than Amy Holmes! She danced very well, and sang very ill; and I fancied that she had tasted too often of the cheap wine dealt out behind the bar. Very soon after her exit I made my way to the green-room, piloted by the head waiter. I had, of course, gotten myself up for the occasion, and I looked like a cross between a last year's fashionplate and a Bowery blackleg.

It is always easy to make a variety actress talk, and those at the Little Adelphi proved no exception. Two or three bottles of wine opened the way to some knowledge.

By chatting promiscuously with several of the Adelphi belles, I learned that Amy Holmes and Mamie Rutger, who, by the way, was "Rose Deschappelles" on the bills, lived together. That Amy, who was not known at the theater by that name, was "a hard one," and "old in the business;" while "Rose" was a soft little prig who "wore her lover's picture in a locket," and was "as true to him as steel." The girls all united in voting Amy disagreeable, in spite of her superior wisdom; and Mamie, "a real nice, jolly little thing," spite of her verdancy.

The fair Amy was then approached, and my real work began. I ordered, in her honor, an extra brand of wine. I flattered her, I talked freely of my wealth, and displayed my money recklessly. I became half intoxicated in her society, and, through it all, bemoaned the fact that I could not offer, for her quaffing, the sparkling champagne that was the only fitting drink for such a goddess.

The Adelphi champagne was detestable stuff, and Miss Amy was connoisseur enough to know it. She frankly confessed her fondness for good champagne, and could tell me just where it was to be found.

The rest came as a matter of course. I proposed to give her a champagne banquet; she accepted, and the programme was speedily arranged.

At eleven o'clock the next day, she would meet me at a convenient little restaurant near the theater. I must come with a carriage. We would have a drive, and, just outside the city, would come upon Louis Meniu's Summer café. There we would find fine luscious fruits, rare wines, everything choice and dainty.

Miss Amy, who seemed to possess all the luxurious tastes of a native creole, arranged the programme, and we parted at the green-room door, mutually satisfied, she anticipating a gala day, and I seeing before me the disagreeable necessity of spoiling her frolic and depriving the Little Adelphi, for a time at least, of one of its fairest attractions.

The course which I had resolved to pursue was not the one most to my taste; but it was the simplest, shortest, and would accord best with the instructions given me, viz., that no arrests must be made, nor anything done to arouse the suspicions of Fred Brookhouse, and cause him to give the alarm to his confederates in the North.

I had purposely held aloof from Mamie Rutger, feeling convinced that it were best not to approach her until a definite course of action had been decided upon. Nor was I entirely certain that my scheme would succeed. If Amy Holmes should prove a shade wiser, shrewder, and more courageous, and a trifle less selfish and avaricious than I had judged her to be, my plans might fail and, in that case, the girl might work me much mischief.

I weighed the possibilities thoughtfully, and resolved to risk the chances.

Accordingly, on the morning after my visit to the Little Adelphi, I sent my first telegram, and made arrangements for putting my scheme into execution.

The beginning of the programme was carried out, as planned by the young lady.

We drove to the café, kept by Louis Meniu, and tested his champagne, after which I began to execute my plans.

"Louis Meniu might be all very well," I said, "but there was no man in New Orleans, so I had often been told by Northern travelers, who could serve such a dinner as did the chef at the P—— Hotel. Should we drive to this house and there eat the best dinner to be served in the city?"

The prospect of dining at a swell hotel pleased the young lady. She gave instant consent to the plan, and we turned back to the city and the P—— Hotel.

Here we were soon installed in a handsome private parlor, and, after I had paused a few moments in the office, to register, "Geo. Adams and sister, St. Louis, Mo.," I closed the door upon servants and intruders, and the engagement commenced.

Having first locked the door and put the key in my pocket, I approached Miss Amy, who stood before a mirror, carelessly arranging a yellow rose in her black frisettes. Dropping my swaggering, half-maudlin, wholly-admiring tone and manner, I said, quietly:

"Now, Miss Amy Holmes, if you will sit down opposite me, we will talk things over."

She started violently, and turned toward me with a stare of surprise, in which, however, I could observe no fear. The name had caused her astonishment. I had been careful to address her by her stage name, or rather the one she chose to use at the theater. I hardly suppose her real name to be Holmes,—probably it is Smith or Jones instead.

She let the hand holding the rose drop at her side, but did not loosen her grasp of the flower.

“Look here,” she exclaimed, sharply. “Where did you pick up that name? and what kind of a game are you giving me, anyhow?”

After the surprise occasioned by the utterance of her discarded name, my altered tone and manner had next impressed her.

“I got that name where I got several others, Miss Amy, and the game I am playing is one that is bound to win.”

She sat down upon the nearest chair, and stared mutely.

“How would you like to go back to Amora, Miss Holmes? Or to Groveland and the widow Ballou’s?”

She sprang up with her eyes flashing, and made a sudden dash for the door. Of course it resisted her effort to open it.

“Open that door,” she said, turning upon me a look of angry defiance. “You are either a fool or a meddler. Open the door!”

Illustration:

„Open that door,” she said, turning upon me a look of angry defiance.

I laid one hand somewhat heavily upon her shoulder, and led her back to the seat she had just vacated.

“Possibly I may be both fool and meddler,” I replied, in a tone so stern that it seemed to arrest her attention, and impress her with the fact that I was neither trifling nor to be trifled with. “But I am something else, and I know more of you, my young lady, and of your past career, than you would care to have me know. Perhaps you may never have heard of Michael Carnes, the detective, but there are others who have made his acquaintance.”

Now, all this was random firing, but I acted on the knowledge that nine-tenths of the women who are professional adventuresses have, in their past, something either criminal or disgraceful to conceal, and on the possibility that Miss Amy Holmes might not belong to the exceptional few.

The shot told. I saw it in the sudden blanching of her cheek, in the startled look that met mine for just an instant. If there were nothing else to conceal, I think she would have defied me and flouted at my efforts to extract information on the subject of the Groveland mystery.

But I had touched at a more vulnerable point. If I could now convince her that I knew her past career, the rest would be easy.

It was a delicate undertaking. I might say too much, or too little, but I must press the advantage I had gained. Her attention was secured. Her curiosity was aroused. There was a shade of anxiety on her face.

Drawing a chair opposite her, and seating myself therein, I fixed my eyes upon her face, and addressed her in a tone half stern, half confidential:

"You are a plucky girl," I began, "and I admire you for that; and when I tell you that I have followed you, or tracked you, from the North, through Amora, through Groveland, down to the Little Adelphi, you will perhaps conjecture that I do not intend to be balked or evaded, even by so smart a little lady as you have proved yourself. I bear you no personal ill-will, and I much dislike to persecute a woman even when she has been guilty of"—

I paused; she made a restless movement, and a look of pain flitted across her face.

"Perhaps we may be able to avoid details," I said, slowly. "I will let you decide that."

"How?" with a gasp of relief or surprise, I could hardly guess which.

"Listen. Some time ago two girls disappeared from a little northern community, and I was one of the detectives employed to find them. I need not go into details, since you know so much about the case. In the course of the investigation, we inquired pretty closely into the character of the company kept by those two young ladies, and learned that a Miss Amy Holmes had been a schoolmate of the missing girls. Afterward, this same Amy Holmes and a Miss Grace Ballou made an attempt to escape from the Ballou farm house. The scheme was in part frustrated, but Amy Holmes escaped. Mrs. Ballou furnished us with a photo of Miss Amy Holmes, and when I saw it I *knew* it!"

"Ah!"

This time it was an interjection of unmistakable terror. It gave me my cue.

"I knew it for the picture of a young woman who had—committed—a crime; a young woman who would be well received at police headquarters, and I said to myself I will now find this young person who calls herself Amy Holmes."

A look of sullen resolution was settling upon her face. She sat before me with her eyes fixed upon the carpet and her lips tightly closed.

"I have found her," I continued, mercilessly. "And now—shall I take you back with me, a prisoner, and hand you over to the officers of the law, or will you answer truthfully such questions as I shall put to you, and go away from this house a free woman?"

She was so absorbed by her own terror, or so overshadowed by some ghost of the past, that she seemed to take no note of my interest in the Groveland business, except as it had been an incidental aid in hunting her down.

"Do you think I would trust you?" she said, with a last effort at defiance. "You want to make me testify against myself."

"You mistake, or you do not understand. I am at present working in the interest of the Groveland case. My discovery of you was an accident, and my knowledge concerning you I am using as a means toward the elucidation of the mystery surrounding the movements of Mamie Rutger and Nellie Ewing. Mamie Rutger I saw last night at the Little Adelphi. Nellie Ewing is no doubt within reach. I might find them both without your assistance. It would only require a little more time and a little more trouble; but time just now is precious. I have other business which demands my attention at the North. Therefore, I say, tell me all that you know concerning these two girls—all, mind. If you omit one necessary detail, if you fabricate in one particular, I shall know it. Answer all my questions truthfully. I shall only ask such as concern your knowledge or connection with this Groveland

affair. If you do this, you have nothing to fear from me. If you refuse—you are my *prisoner*. You comprehend me?”

She eyed me skeptically.

“How do I know that you will let me go, after all?” she said.

“You have my promise, and I am a man of my word. You are a woman, and I don’t want to arrest you. If you were a man, I should not offer you a chance for escape. Do as I wish and you are free, and if you need assistance you shall have it. You must choose at once; time presses.”

She hesitated a moment, and then said:

“I may as well tell you about the girls, as you seem to know so much, and—I can’t be arrested for that.”

“Very well! Tell your story, then, truly and without omissions.”

Chapter XXXII

Amy Holmes Confesses.

“You say that you have seen Mamie Rutger at the theater,” began the unwilling narrator, rather ungraciously, “and so I should think you wouldn’t need to be told why she ran away from home. She wanted to go on the stage, and so did Nellie Ewing. Every country girl in christendom wants to be an actress, and if she has a pretty face and a decent voice she feels sure that she can succeed. The girls had both been told that they were pretty, and they could both sing, so they ran away to come out at the Little Adelphi.

“Mamie took to the business like a duck to water. Nellie got sick and blue and whimsical, and has not appeared at the theater for several weeks. They live at 349 B—— place.”

I made a careful note of the address, and then said:

“Well, proceed.”

“Proceed! what more do you want to know? I have told you why they ran away and where to find them.”

This was too much. My wrath must have manifested itself in face and voice, for she winced under my gaze and made no further attempt to baffle or evade me.

“I want to know who devised the villainous plot to allure two innocent country girls away from home and friends! Who set you on as decoy and temptress, and what reward did you receive? There are men or scoundrels connected with this affair; who are they; and what means have they used to bring about such a misfortune to the girls and their friends? Tell the whole truth, and remember what I have said. If you evade, omit, equivocate, *I shall know it!*”

“Will you give me time?” she faltered.

“Not ten minutes. Do you want time to telegraph to Arch Brookhouse? It will be useless; he is in the hands of the detectives, and no message can reach him.”

“What has Arch done?” she cried, excitedly. “He is not the one to be blamed.”

“He has done enough to put him out of the way of mischief. You have seen the last of Arch Brookhouse.”

“But Fred is the man who set this thing going!”

“Very likely. And Arch and Louis Brookhouse were the brothers to help him. What about Johnny La Porte and Ed. Dwight? You see I know too much. There are two officers down-stairs. If you have not finished your story, and told it to my satisfaction, before half-past four, I will call them up and hand you over to them. It is *now* ten minutes to four.”

She favored me with a glance full of impotent hatred, sat quite silent for a long moment, during which I sat before her with a careless glance fixed on my watch.

Then she began:

“I worked at the Little Adelphi over a year ago. There was a hot rivalry between us, the Gayety, and the ‘Frolique.’ Fred Brookhouse was managing alone then; *Storms*—only came into partnership in the Spring.

“During the winter the Gayety brought out some new attractions,—I mean new to the profession; no old names that had been billed and billed, but young girls with fresh faces and pretty voices. They were new in the business, and the ‘old stagers,’ especially the faded and cracked-voiced ones, said that they would fail, they would hurt the business. But the managers knew better. They knew that pretty, youthful faces were the things most thought of in the varieties. And the ‘freshness’ of the new performers was only another attraction to green-room visitors. Nobody knew where these new girls came from, and nobody could find out; but they drew, and the Little Adelphi lost customers, who went over to the ‘Gayety.’

“Fred Brookhouse was angry, and he began to study how he should outdo the ‘Gayety,’ and ‘put out’ the new attractions.

“At the carnival season, Arch and Louis Brookhouse came down; and we got to be very good friends. Do you mean to use anything that I say to make me trouble?” she broke off, abruptly.

“Not if you tell the entire truth and spare nobody.”

“Then I will tell it just as it happened. Arch and Fred and I were together one day after rehearsal. I was a favorite at the theater, and Fred consulted me sometimes. Fred wanted some fresh attractions, and wondered how they got the new girls at the ‘Gayety.’ And I told him that I thought they might have been ‘recruited.’ He did not seem to understand, and I explained that there were managers who paid a commission to persons who would get them young, pretty, bright girls, who could sing a little, for the first part, and for green-room talent.

“I told him that I knew of an old variety actress who went into the country for a few weeks in the Summer, and picked up girls for the variety business. They were sometimes poor girls who ‘worked out,’ and were glad of a chance to earn an easier living, and sometimes daughters of well-to-do people; girls who were romantic or ambitious, stage-struck, and easily flattered.

“Fred asked me how I knew all this, and I told him that I was roped into the business in just that way.”

“Was that true?”

“Yes; it was true,” a dark shade crossing her face. “But never mind me. Fred asked me if I knew where to go to find three or four pretty girls. He said he did not

want '*biddies*;' they must be young and pretty; must be fair singers, and have nice manners. He could get gawks in plenty. He wanted lively young girls who would be interesting and attractive. Some new idea seemed to strike Arch Brookhouse. He took Fred aside, and by-and-by they called Louis, and the three talked a long time.

"The next day, Arch and Louis came to me. They knew where to find just the girls that would suit Fred, but it would be some trouble to get them. Then they told me all about the Groveland girls; Nellie and her sister, Mamie, Grace Ballou and one or two others. Arch knew Nellie and Grace. Louis seemed particularly interested in Mamie.

"Fred is a reckless fellow, and he would spend any amount to outdo the 'Gayety,' and he seemed infatuated with the new scheme for getting talent. Besides, he knew that he could pay them what he liked; they would not be clamoring for high salaries. He agreed to pay my expenses North if I would get the girls for him.

"Arch and Louis went home, and we corresponded about the business. Finally, Arch wrote that three of the girls would attend school at Amora, the Spring term, and it was settled that I should attend also.

"I rather liked the prospect. Fred fitted me out in good style, and I went.

"Of course I soon found how to manage the girls. Mamie Rutger was ripe for anything new, and she did not like her step-mother. She was easy to handle.

"Grace was vain and easily influenced. She thought she could run away and create a sensation at home, and come back after a while to astonish the natives with her success as an actress.

"Nellie Ewing was more difficult to manage, but I found out that she was desperately in love with Johnny La Porte. Johnny had begun by being in love with Nellie, but her silly devotion had tired him, and besides, he is fickle by nature.

"I told Arch that if we got Nellie, it would have to be through La Porte. Arch knew how to manage La Porte, who was vain, and prided himself upon being a 'masher.' He thought to be mixed up in a sensational love affair, would add to his fame as a dangerous fellow. He sang a good tenor, and often sang duets with Nellie.

"Louis Brookhouse had a chum named Ed. Dwight; Ed. had been, or claimed to have been, a song and dance man. I don't think he was ever anything more than an amateur, but he was perpetually dancing jigs, and singing comic songs, and went crazy over a minstrel show.

"Louis used to take Grace out for an occasional drive, and one day he introduced Ed. to Mamie.

"After a time, Arch and Louis thought they could better their original plan. Arch is a shrewd fellow, with a strong will, and he could just wind Johnny La Porte around his finger. Johnny took him for a model, for Arch was a stylish fellow, who knew all the ropes, and had seen a deal of the world; and Johnny, while he had been a sort of prince among the Grovelanders, had never had a taste of town life.

"Arch managed Johnny, and he managed Nellie Ewing."

She paused, and something in her face made me say, sternly:

"How did Johnny La Porte manage Nellie Ewing?" and then I glanced ominously at my watch, which I still held in my hand.

She moved uneasily, and averted her eyes.

“Nellie was conscientious,” she resumed, reluctantly. “She had all sorts of scruples. But Johnny told her that he was to go South and study law with his mother’s cousin, who lived in New Orleans. He said that he dared not marry until he had finished his studies, but if she would marry him privately, and keep the marriage a secret, she could go South and they would not be separated.

“She agreed to this, and the ceremony was performed. After it was over, he told her that he had just discovered that he would be subject to arrest under some new marriage law, and that they would be separated if it became known.

“And then he persuaded her to come here before him and work at the Little Adelphi; telling her that if her father found her there they would not suspect him, and as soon as his studies were over he would claim her openly.”

Again she hesitated.

“And was this precious programme carried out?” I demanded.

“Yes. It was a long time before Nellie consented, but a little cool treatment from Johnny brought her to terms. She got away very nicely. I presume you know something about that.”

“Never mind what I know. How did she get rid of her horse after leaving Mrs. Ballou’s house?”

“Not far from Mrs. Ballou’s there is a small piece of timber. Johnny was there with his team and he had a fellow with him who took charge of the pony. Johnny drove Nellie ten miles towards Amora, driving at full speed. There Ed. Dwight, with his machine wagon, waited, and Nellie was taken by Ed. into Amora. On the way she put on some black clothes and a big black veil. At Amora, Louis Brookhouse was waiting. They got there just in time to catch the midnight express, and were almost at their journey’s end before Nellie was missed.”

“Stop. You have said that Nellie Ewing has not been at the theater of late; has been blue, and ill. What has caused all this?”

She colored hotly, and a frightened look crept into her eyes.

“You are not to hold me to blame?”

“Not if you answer me truly.”

“One night I had come home from the theater with Nellie, and she began crying because Johnny did not come as he had promised, and did not write often enough. I was tired and cross, and I suppose I had taken too much wine. I forgot myself, and told her that Johnny had hired a man to personate a parson, and that she was not married at all. She broke down entirely after that.”

I sprang to my feet, for the moment forgetting that the creature before me was a woman. I wanted to take her by the throat and fling her from the window.

“Go on!” I almost shouted. “Go on; my patience is nearly exhausted. Is Nellie Ewing seriously ill?”

“She is fretting and pining; she thinks she is dying, and she loves Johnny La Porte as much as ever.”

“And Mamie Rutger?”

“She was glad to run away. One evening when every body about the farm was busy, she waited at the front gate for Ed. Dwight. People were used to the sight of his covered wagon, and it was the last thing to suspect. But Mamie Rutger went from her father’s gate in that wagon, and she and Dwight drove boldly to Sharon, and both took the midnight train as the others did at Amora.

“Ed. only went a short distance with Mamie; he came back the next morning. Mamie was plucky enough to come on alone.”

“And then you and Grace Ballou tried to elope?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I won’t trouble you to tell you that story. I know all about it. Now, listen to me. I have registered you here as my sister, and you are going to stay here for one week a prisoner. You are to speak to no one, write to no one. You will be constantly watched, and if you attempt to disobey me you know the consequences. As soon as Mr. Rutger and ‘Squire Ewing arrive I will set you at liberty, and no one shall harm you; but until then you must remain in your own room, and see no one except in my presence.”

“But you promised—”

“I shall keep my promise, but choose my own time.”

“But the theater—”

“You can write them a note stating that you are going to leave the city for a little recreation. You may send a similar note to Mamie and Nellie.”

“You are not treating me fairly.”

“I am treating you better than you deserve. Did you deal fairly at Amora and Groveland? If I were not morally sure that such crimes as yours must be punished sooner or later, I should not dare set you free.”

Chapter XXXIII

Johnny la Porte is Brought to Book.

That is how Miss Amy Holmes was brought to judgment. I had managed her by stratagem, and extracted the truth from her under false pretenses. The weapon that I brandished above her head was a reed of straws, but it sufficed. My pretended knowledge of her past history had served my purpose.

What her secret really was, and is, I neither know nor care. She is a woman, and when a woman has stepped down from her pedestal the world is all against her. The law may safely trust such sinners and their punishment to Dame Nature, who never errs, and never forgives, and to Time, who is the sternest of all avengers.

After hearing her story, I sent my second telegram to you, and then my third; and after assuring myself that the girl had told the truth concerning Nellie Ewing, I telegraphed to the office, giving the hints which Wyman acted on.

I should not have liked Wyman’s task of going to those two honest farmers and telling them the truth concerning their daughters; but I should not have been averse to the other work.

I can imagine Johnny La Porte, under the impression that he was preparing for a day’s lark, oiling his curly locks, scenting his pocket handkerchief, and driving Wyman, in whom he thought he had found a boon companion, to Sharon, actually flying into the arms of the avengers, at the heels of his own roadsters. I should

have driven over that ten miles of country road, had I been in Wyman's place, bursting with glee, growing fat on the stupidity of the sleek idiot at my side.

But Wyman is a modest fellow, and given to seeing only the severe side of things, and he says there is no glory in trapping a fool. Possibly he is right.

I should like to have seen Johnny La Porte when he was brought, unexpectedly, before 'Squire Ewing and Farmer Rutger, to be charged with his villainy, and offered one chance for his life. He had heard the Grovelanders talk, and he knew that the despoilers of those two Groveland homes had been dedicated to Judge Lynch.

Small wonder that he was terror-stricken before these two fathers, and that under the lash of Wyman's eloquence he already felt the cord tightening about his throat.

I don't wonder that he whined and grovelled and submitted, abjectly, to their demands. But I do wonder that those two fathers could let him out of their hands alive; and I experienced a thrill of ecstasy when I learned that Wyman kicked him three times, with stout boots!

That must have been an unpleasant journey to New Orleans. The two farmers, stern, silent, heavy of heart, and filled with anxiety. La Porte, who was taken in hand by Wyman, writhing under the torments of his own conscience and his own terror, and compelled to submit to his guardian's frequent tirades of scorn and contempt, treated, for the first time in his life, like the poltroon he was.

I found the two girls at the address given by Amy Holmes; and, more to spare the two farmers the sight of her, than for her sake, I did not compel her to repeat her story in their presence, but related it myself instead.

It's not worth while to attempt a description of the meeting between the two girls and their parents. Mamie was, at first, inclined to rebel; but Nellie Ewing broke down completely, and begged to be taken home. She was pale and emaciated, a sad and pitiful creature. Her father was overcome with grief at sight of the change in her. He could not trust himself to speak to her of Johnny La Porte; and so—what a Jack of all trades a detective is—he called me from the room and delegated to me the unpleasant task.

I did it as well as I could. I told her as gently as possible that Johnny La Porte was in New Orleans, and asked if she wanted to see him. She cried for joy, poor child, and begged me to send for him at once. And then I told her why we had brought him; he was prepared to make what reparation he could. Did she wish him to make her his wife? She interrupted me with a joyful cry.

"Would he do that? Oh, then she could go home and die happy."

In that moment I made a mental vow that this dying girl, if she could be made any happier by it, should have not only the name of the young scoundrel she so foolishly loved, but his care and companionship as well.

I assured her that he was ready to make her his lawful wife, but could not tell her that he did it under compulsion.

After a long talk with 'Squire Ewing, during which I persuaded him to think first of his daughter's needs, and to make such use of Johnny La Porte as would best serve her, I went back to the hotel, where we had left the young scamp in charge of Wyman, and a little later in the day the ceremony was performed which made Johnny La Porte the husband of the girl he had sought to ruin.

Not long after this I invited the young man to a *tête-à-tête*, and he followed me somewhat ungraciously into a room adjoining that in which his new wife lay.

“Sit down,” I said, curtly, motioning him to a chair opposite the one in which I seated myself. “Sit down. I want to give you a little advice concerning your future conduct.”

He threw back his head defiantly; evidently he believed that he was now secure from further annoyance, and no longer within reach of law and justice.

“I don’t need your advice,” he said, pettishly. “I have done all that you, or any one else, can require of me.”

“Mistaken youth, your conformity with my wishes is but now begun.”

“You can’t bully me, now,” he retorted. “I have married the girl, and that’s enough.”

“It is *not* enough! it is not all that you will do.”

“You are a liar.”

I took him by the shoulders, and lifting him fairly off his feet shook him as a terrier shakes a rat. Then I popped him down upon the chair he had refused to occupy, and said:

“There, you impudent little dunce, if you want to call me any more names, don’t hesitate. Now, hear me; you will do precisely what I bid you, now, and hereafter, or you will exchange that smart plaid suit for one adorned with horizontal stripes, and I’ll have that curly pate of yours as bare as a cocoanut.”

Illustration:

„I took him by the shoulders, and lifting him fairly off his feet shook him as a terrier shakes a rat.“

“The law,”—he began.

“The *law* may permit you to break the marriage vow you have just taken, but I will not.”

“You?” incredulously.

“Yes, *I*,” I retorted, firmly. “The law of this mighty country, made by very wise men, and enacted by very great fools, is a wondrous vixen. You have stolen ‘Squire Ewing’s daughter, and for that the law permits you to go unhung. You have stolen ‘Squire Ewing’s horse, and for that, the law will put you in the State’s prison.”

“His horse—I!”—the poor wretch gasped, helplessly.

“Exactly. The horse! and you! You see, the daughter has been found, but the horse has *not*.”

“But—I can prove—”

“You can prove nothing. I know all about the affair. You carried Nellie Ewing away in your own carriage. You handed her pony over to an accomplice. I have, at my finger’s ends, testimony enough to condemn you before any jury, and the only thing that can save you from the fate of a common horse-thief, is—your own good behavior.”

“What do you want?” he said, abjectly.

“I *want* to see you hung as high as Haman. But that poor girl in the next room wants something different, and I yield my wishes to hers. She is so foolish as to value your miserable existence, and so I give you this one chance. Go home with

your wife, not to your home, but hers, and remain there so long as she needs or wants you. Treat her with tenderness, serve her like a slave, and try thus to atone for some of your past villainy. Quit your old associates, be as decent and dutiful as the evil within will let you. So long as I hear no complaint, so long as your wife is made happy, you are safe. Commit one act of cruelty, unkindness, or neglect, and your fate is sealed. And, remember this, if you attempt to run away, I will bring you back, if I have to bring you dead.”

He whined, he blustered, he writhed like a cur under the lash. But he was conquered. ‘Squire Ewing behaved most judiciously. Poor Nellie was foolishly happy. Mamie Rutger, too, became our ally, and, after a time, La Porte, who loved his ease above all things, seemed resigned, or resolved to make the best of the situation. I think, too, that he was, in his way, fond of his poor little wife. Perhaps his conscience troubled him, for when a physician was called in by the anxious father, her case was pronounced serious, and the chances for her recovery less than three in ten. The physician advised them to take her North at once, and they hastened to obey his instructions.

Our next care was to quiet Fred Brookhouse, for the present, and punish him, as much as might be, for the future.

Accordingly, Brookhouse was arrested, on a trumped-up charge, and locked up in the city jail, and then Wyman and myself gave to the Chief of police and the Mayor of the city, a detailed account of his scheme to provide attractions for his theater, and took other measures to insure for the Little Adelphi a closer surveillance than would be at all comfortable or welcome to the enterprising manager.

Brookhouse was held in jail until we were out of the city, and far on our way Northward, thus insuring us against the possibility of his telegraphing the alarm to any one who might communicate it to Arch, or Ed. Dwight, and then, there being no one to appear against him, at the proper time, he was released.

Amy Holmes remained a prisoner at the hotel, conducting herself quite properly during the time of her compulsory sojourn there; and on the day of our departure I paid her a sum equivalent to the week’s salary she had lost, and bade her go her way, having first obtained her promise that she would not communicate with any of her accomplices; a promise which I took good care to convince her it would be safest to keep.

She was not permitted to see either Mamie or Nellie, and she had no desire to see the other members of the homeward-bound party. And thus ended our case in New Orleans.

Chapter XXXIV

How Bethel was Warned.

While Carnes was solving the Groveland problem, in that far-away Southern city, we, who were in Trafton, were living through a long, dull week of waiting.

There were two dreary days of suspense, during which Carl Bethel and Dr. Denham wrestled with the deadly fever fiend, the one unconsciously, the other despairingly. But when the combat was over, the doctor stood at his post triumphant, and "Death, the Terrible," went away from the cottage without a victim.

Then I began to importune the good doctor.

"When would Bethel be able to talk? at least to answer questions? For it was important that I should ask, and that he should answer one at least."

I received the reward I might have expected had I been wise. "Our old woman" turned upon me with a tirade of whimsical wrath, that was a mixture of sham and real, and literally turned me out of doors, banished me three whole days from the sick room; and so great was his ascendancy over Jim Long, that even he refused to listen to my plea for admittance, and kept me at a distance, with grim good nature.

At last, however, the day came when "our old woman" signified his willingness to allow me an interview, stipulating, however, that it must be very brief and in his presence.

"Bethel is better," he said, eyeing me severely, "but he can't bear excitement. If you think you *must* interview him, I suppose you must, but mind, I think it's all bosh. Detectives are a miserable tribe through and through. Is not that so, Long?"

And Jim, who was present on this occasion, solemnly agreed with him.

And so the day came when I sat by Bethel's bedside and held his weak, nerveless hand in my own, while I looked regretfully at the pallid face, and into the eyes darkened and made hollow by pain.

Illustration:

And so the day came when I sat by Bethel's bedside
and held his weak, nerveless hand in my own.

The weak hand gave mine a friendly but feeble pressure. The pale lips smiled with their old cordial friendliness, the eyes brightened, as he said:

"Louise has told me how good you have been, you and Long."

"Stuff," interrupted Dr. Denham. "He good, indeed; stuff! stuff! Now, look here, young man, you can talk with my patient just five minutes, then—out you go."

"Very well," I retorted, "then see that you don't monopolize four minutes out of the five. Bethel, you may not be aware of it, but, that cross old gentleman and myself are old acquaintances, and, I'll tell you a secret, we, that is myself and some friends,—"

"A rascally lot," broke in the old doctor, "*a rascally lot!*"

"We call him," I persisted, "our old woman!"

"Humph!" sniffed the old gentleman, "upstarts! 'old woman,' indeed!"

But it was evident that he was not displeased with his nickname in the possessive case.

We had judged it best to withhold the facts concerning our recent discoveries, especially those relating to his would-be assassin, from Bethel, until he should be better able to bear excitement. And so, after I had finished my tilt with the old

doctor, and expressed my regret for Bethel's calamity, and my joy at his prospective recovery, I said:

"I have been forbidden the house, Bethel, by your two dragons here, and now, I am only permitted a few moments' talk with you. So I shall be obliged to skip the details; you shall have them all soon, however. But I will tell you something. We are having things investigated here, and, for the benefit of a certain detective, I want you to answer me a question. You possess some professional knowledge which may help to solve a riddle."

"What is your question?" he whispers, with a touch of his natural decisiveness.

"One night, nearly two weeks ago," I began, "you and I were about to renew an interview, which had been interrupted, when the second interruption came in the shape of a call, from 'Squire Brookhouse, who asked you to accompany him home, and attend to his son, who, so he said, had received some sort of injury."

"I remember."

"Was your patient Louis Brookhouse?"

"Yes."

"Did you dress a wound for him?"

He looked at me wonderingly and was silent.

"Bethel, I am tracing a crime; if your professional scruples will not permit you to answer me, I must find out by other means what you can easily tell me. But to resort to other measures will consume time that is most valuable, and might arouse the suspicions of guilty parties. You can tell me all that I wish to learn by answering my question with a simple 'Yes,' or 'No.'"

While Bethel continued to gaze wonderingly, my recent antagonist came to my assistance.

"You may as well answer him, boy," "our old woman" said. "If you don't, some day he'll be accusing you of ingratitude. And then this is one of the very *rare* instances when the scamp may put his knowledge to good use."

Bethel looked from the doctor's face to mine, and smiled faintly.

"I am overpowered by numbers," he said; "put your questions, then."

"Did you dress a wound for Louis Brookhouse?"

"Yes."

"A wound in the leg?"

"Yes, the right leg."

"Was it a bullet wound?"

"Yes."

"Did you extract the ball?"

"I did."

"Who has it?"

"I. Nobody seemed to notice it. I put it in my pocket."

"Brookhouse said that his wound was caused by an accident, I suppose?"

"Yes, an accidental discharge of his own pistol."

"Some one had tried to dress the wound, had they not?"

"Yes, it had been sponged and—"

"And bound with a fine cambric handkerchief," I interrupted.

"Yes," with a stare of surprise, "so it was."

"How old was the wound, when you saw it?"

"Twenty-four hours, at least."

"Was it serious?"

"No; only a flesh wound, but a deep one. He had ought to be out by this time."

"Can you show me the bullet, sometime, if I wish to see it?"

"Yes."

My five minutes had already passed, but "our old woman" sat with a look of puzzled interest on his face, and as Bethel was quite calm, though none the less mystified, I took advantage of the situation, and hurried on.

"Bethel, I want to ask you something concerning your own hurt, now. Will it disturb or excite you to answer?"

"No; it might relieve me."

"This time I *will* save you words. On the night when you received your wound, you were sitting by your table, reading by the light of the student's lamp, and smoking luxuriously; the door was shut, but the front window was open."

"True!" with a look of deepening amazement.

"You heard the sound of wheels on the gravel outside, and then some one called your name."

"Oh!" a new look creeping into his eyes.

"When you opened the door and looked out, could you catch a glimpse of the man who shot at you?"

"No," slowly, as if thinking.

"Have you any reason for suspecting any one? Can you guess at a motive?"

"Wait," he turned his head restlessly, seemingly in the effort to remember something, and then looked toward Dr. Denham.

"In my desk," he said, slowly, "among some loose letters, is a yellow envelope, bearing the Trafton post-mark. Will you find it?"

Dr. Denham went to the desk, and I sat silently waiting. Bethel was evidently thinking.

"I received it," he said, after a moment of silence, disturbed only by the rustling of papers, as the old doctor searched the desk, "I received it two days after the search for little Effie Beale. I made up my mind then that I would have a detective, whom I could rely upon, here in Trafton. And then Dr. Barnard was taken ill. After that I waited—have you found it?"

Dr. Denham stood beside me with a letter in his hand, which Bethel, by a sign, bade him give to me.

"Do you wish me to read it?" I asked.

"Yes."

I glanced at the envelope and almost bounded from my seat. Then, withdrawing the letter with nervous haste, I opened it.

Dr. Bethel. If that is your name, you are not welcome in Trafton. If you stay here three days longer, it will be at your own risk.

No resurrectionists.

I flushed with excitement; I almost laughed with delight. I got up, turned around, and sat down again. I wanted to dance, to shout, to embrace the dear old doctor.

I held in my hand a *printed warning*, every letter the counterpart of those used in the anonymous letter sent to "Chris Oleson" at Mrs. Ballou's! It was a similar warning, written by the same hand. Was the man who had given me that pistol wound really in Trafton? or—

I looked up; the patient on the bed, and the old doctor beside me, were both gazing at my tell-tale countenance, and looking expectant and eager.

"Doctor," I said, turning to "our old woman," "you remember the day I came to you with my wounded arm?"

"Umph! Of course."

"Well, shortly before getting that wound I received just such a thing as this," striking the letter with my forefinger, "a warning from the same hand. And now I am going to find the man who shot me, who shot Bethel, and who robbed the grave of little Effie Beale, here, in Trafton, and very soon."

"What is it? I don't understand," began Bethel.

But the doctor interposed.

"This must be stopped. Bethel, you shan't hear explanations now, and you *shall* go to sleep. Bathurst, how dare you excite my patient! Get out."

"I will," I said, rising. "I must keep this letter, Bethel, and I will tell you all about it soon; have patience."

Bethel turned his eyes toward the doctor, and said, eagerly:

"Why did you call him *Bathurst*?"

"Did I?" said the old man, testily. "It was a slip of the tongue."

The patient turned his head and looked from one to the other, eagerly. Then he addressed me:

"If you will answer me one question, I promise not to ask another until you are prepared to explain."

"Ask it," I replied.

"Are *you* a detective?"

"Yes."

"Thank you," closing his eyes, as if weary. "I am quite content to wait. Thank you."

Chapter XXXV

We Prepare fo a „Party“.

My first movement, after having made the discovery chronicled in the last chapter, was to go to the telegraph office and send the following despatch:

Arrest Blake Simpson instantly, on charge of attempted assassination. Don't allow him to communicate with any one.

This message was sent to the Agency, and then I turned my attention to other matters, satisfied that Blake, at least, would be properly attended to.

Early the following morning Gerry Brown presented himself at the door of my room, to communicate to me something that instantly roused me to action.

At midnight, or a little later, Mr. Arch Brookhouse had dropped in at the telegraph office; he was in evening dress, and he managed to convey to Gerry in a careless fashion the information that he, Arch, had been enjoying himself at a small social gathering, and on starting for home had bethought himself of a message to be sent to a friend. Then he had dashed off the following:

Ed. Dwight, Amora, etc.

Be ready for the party at The Corners to-morrow eve. Notify Lark. B. ___ will join you at Amora.

A. B.

"There," he had said, as he pushed the message toward the seemingly sleepy operator, "I hope he will get that in time, as I send it in behalf of a lady. Dwight's always in demand for parties."

Then, with a condescending smile as he drew on his right glove, "Know anybody at Amora?"

"No," responded Gerry, with a yawn, "nor anywhere else on this blasted line; wish they had sent me East."

"You must get acquainted," said the gracious young nabob. "I'll try and get you an invitation to the next social party; should be happy to introduce you."

And then, as Gerry was too sleepy to properly appreciate his condescension, he had taken himself away.

"Gerry," I said, after pondering for some moments over the message he had copied for my benefit, "I'm inclined to think that this means business. You had better sleep short and sound this morning, and be on hand at the office as early as twelve o'clock. I think you will be relieved from this sort of duty soon, and as for Mr. Brookhouse, perhaps you may be able to attend this 'party' in question, even without his valuable patronage."

After this I went in search of Jim Long. I found him at Bethel's cottage, and in open defiance of "our old woman," led him away where we could converse without audience or interruption. Then I put the telegram in his hand, telling him how it had been sent, much as Gerry had told the same to me.

"What do you make of it?" asked Jim, as he slowly folded the slip of paper and put it in my hand.

"Well, I may be amiss in my interpretation, but it seems to me that we had better be awake to-night. The moon has waned; it will be very dark at ten o'clock. I fancy that *we* may be wise if we prepare for this party. I don't know who B— may stand for, but there is, at Clyde, a man, who is a friend of Dwight's, and whose name is *Larkins*."

"Larkins! To be sure; the man is often in Trafton."

"Exactly. He appears like a good-natured rustic, but he is a good judge of a horse. Do you know of a place in this vicinity called The Corners?"

"No."

"Well, you are probably aware that the south road forks, just two miles north of Clyde, and that the road running east goes to the river, and the coal beds. It would not be a long drive from Amora to these corners, and Larkins is only two miles off from them. Both Dwight and Larkins own good teams."

“Ah!” ejaculated Jim, in a tone which conveyed a world of meaning. “Ah, yes!” Then after a moment’s silence, and looking me squarely in the face, “what do you want me to do?”

“Our movements must be regulated by theirs. We must see Warren and all the others.”

“All?”

“Yes, all. It will not be child’s play. I think Mr. Warren is the man to lead one party, for there must be two. I, myself, will manage the other. As for you and Gerry—”

“Gerry?” inquiringly.

“Gerald Brown, our night operator. You will find him equal to most emergencies, I think.”

“And what are we to do?”

“Some special business which will depend on circumstances. We must capture the gang outside of the town, if possible, and the farther away the better.”

“But—”

“Wait. There are others who must not take the alarm too soon.”

“They will ride fleet horses; remember that.”

“Long,” I said, earnestly, “we won’t let them escape us. If they ride, we will pounce upon them at the very outset. But if my theory, which has thus far proven itself correct, holds good to the end *they will not ride.*”

Chapter XXXVI

Something the Moon Failed to See.

It has come at last; that night, almost the last in August, which I and others, with varying motives and interests, have so anxiously looked forward to.

It has come, and the moon, so lately banished from the heavens, had she been in a position to overlook the earth, would have witnessed some sights unusual to Trafton at the hour of eleven P. M.

A little more than a mile from Trafton, at a point where the first mile section crosses the south road, not far from the Brookhouse dwelling, there is a little gathering of mounted men. They are seven in number; all silent, all cautious, all stern of feature. They have drawn their horses far into the gloom of the hedge that grows tall on either side, all save one man, and he stands in the very center of the road, looking intently north and skyward.

Farther away, midway between Trafton and Clyde, six other horsemen are riding southward at an easy pace.

These, too, are very quiet, and a little light would reveal the earnest faces of Messrs. Warren, Harding, Benner, Booth, Jaeger and Meacham; the last mentioned being the owner of the recently stolen matched sorrels, and the others being the most prominent and reliable of the Trafton vigilants.

A close inspection would develop the fact that this moving band of men, as well as the party whose present mission seems "only to stand and wait," is well armed and strongly mounted.

The Hill, Miss Manvers' luxurious residence, stands, as its name indicates, on an elevation of ground, at the extreme northern boundary of Trafton.

It stands quite alone, this abode of the treasure-ship heiress, having no neighbors on either hand for a distance of more than a quarter of a mile.

The road leading up the hill from the heart of Trafton, is bordered on either side by a row of shade trees, large and leafy. All about the house the shrubbery is dense, and the avenue, leading up from the road, and past the dwelling, to the barns and outhouses, is transformed, by two thickly-set rows of poplars into a vault of inky blackness.

To-night, if the moon were abroad, she might note that the fine roadster driven by Arch Brookhouse had stood all the evening at the roadside gate at the foot of the dark avenue of poplars, and, by peeping through the open windows, she would see that Arch Brookhouse himself sits in the handsome parlor with the heiress, who is looking pale and dissatisfied, and who speaks short and seldom, opposite him.

The lady moon might also note that the new telegraph operator is not at his post, in the little office, at eleven o'clock P. M. But then, were the fair orb of night actually out, and taking observations, these singular phenomena might not occur.

At half-past ten, on "this night of nights," three shadows steal through the darkness, moving northward toward the Hill.

At a point midway between the town proper and the mansion beyond, is a junction of the roads; and here, at the four corners, the three shadows pause and separate.

Two continue their silent march northward, and the third vanishes among the sheltering, low-bending branches of a gnarled old tree that overhangs the road, and marks the northwestern corner.

At twenty minutes to eleven Arch Brookhouse takes leave of the treasure-ship heiress, and comes out into the darkness striding down the avenue like a man accustomed to the road. He unties the waiting horse which paws the ground impatiently, yet stands, obedient to his low command, turns the head of the beast southward, seats himself in the light buggy, lights a cigar, and then sits silently smoking, and waiting,—for what?

The dull red spark at the end of his cigar shines through the dark; the horse turns his head and chafes to be away, but the smoker sits there, moveless and silent.

Presently there comes a sound, slight but distinct; the crackling of a twig beneath a man's boot, and almost at the same instant the last light disappears from the windows of the "Hill House."

One, two, three. Three dark forms approach, one after the other, each pauses for an instant beside the light buggy, and seems to look up to the dull red spark, which is all of Arch Brookhouse that is clearly visible through the dark. Then they enter the gate and are swallowed up in the blackness of the avenue.

And now, a fourth form moves stealthily down the avenue after the others. It does not come from without the grounds, it starts out from the shrubbery within, and it is unseen by Arch Brookhouse.

How still the night is! The man who follows after the three first comers can almost hear his pulses throb, or so he fancies.

Presently the three men pause before the door of the barn, and one of them takes from his pocket a key, with which he unlocks the door, and they enter.

As soon as they are inside, a lantern is lighted, and the three men move together toward the rear of the barn, the part against which is piled a monstrous stack of hay.

Meanwhile the watcher outside glides close to the wall of the building, listening here and there, as he, too, approaches the huge hay pile.

And now he does a queer thing. He begins to pull away handfuls of hay from the bottom of the stack, where it is piled against the barn. He works noiselessly, and very soon has made an opening, into which he crawls. Evidently this mine has been worked before, for there is a long tunnel through the hay, penetrating to the middle of the stack. Here the watcher peeps through two small holes, newly drilled in the thick boards of the barn. And then a smile of triumph rests upon his face.

Illustration:

He works noiselessly, and very soon has made an opening,
into which he crawls.

He sees a compartment that, owing to the arrangement of the hay against the rear wall, is in the very heart of the barn, shut from the gaze of curious eyes. On either side is a division, which our spy knows to contain a store of grain piled high, and acting as a complete non-conductor of sound. In front is a small room hung about with harness, and opening into a carriage room. The place is completely hidden from the ordinary gaze, and only a very inquiring mind would have fathomed its secret.

The spy, who is peering in from his vantage ground among the hay, *has* fathomed the secret. And he now sees within six horses—two bay Morgans, two roans, and two sorrels.

The three men are there, too, busily harnessing the six horses. They are working rapidly and silently.

The watcher lingers just long enough to see that the harness looks new and that it is of the sort generally used for draft horses, and then he executes a retreat, more difficult than his entrance, inasmuch as he can not turn in his hay tunnel, but must withdraw by a series of retrograde movements more laborious than graceful.

A moment more, and from among the poplars and evergreens a light goes shooting up, high and bright against the sky; a long, red ribbon of fire, that says to those who can read the sign,

“The Trafton horse-thieves are about to move with their long-concealed prey. Meacham’s matched sorrels, Hopper’s two-forty’s, and the bay Morgans stolen from ‘Squire Brookhouse.’”

It was seen, this fiery rocket, by the little band waiting by the roadside more than a mile away.

“There it is!” exclaims young Warren, who is the leader of this party—“It is the red rocket. They *are* going with the wagons; it’s all right, boys, we can’t ride too fast now.”

The seven men file silently out from the roadside and gallop away southward.

At the four corners, not far from the house on the hill, where, a short time before, a single individual had stationed himself, as a sentinel in the darkness, this signal rocket was also seen, and the watcher uttered an exclamation under his breath, and started out from underneath the tree that had sheltered him.

He could never remember how it happened, but his next sensation was that of being borne to the ground, clutched with a tiger-like grip, crushed by a heavy weight.

And then a voice, a voice that he had not heard for years, hissed above him,

“Lie still, Joe Blaikie! I’ve waited for this opportunity for eight long years, and it won’t be worth your while to trifle with Harvey James *now*.”

Illustration:

„Lie still, Joe Blaikie! I’ve waited for this opportunity
for eight long years.“

And something cold and hard is pressed against the temple of the fallen sentinel, who does not need the evidence of the accompanying ominous click to convince him that it is a revolver in the hand of his deadliest foe.

“You did not use to be a horse-thief, Joe,” continues the voice, and the speaker’s words are emphasized by the pressure of a knee upon his chest, and the weapon at his forehead. “They could not trust you to do the fine business, it seems, and so you are picketed here to give the alarm if anything stirs up or down the road. If it’s all right, you are to remain silent. If anything occurs to alarm you, you are to give the signal. Now, listen; you are to get up and stand from under this tree. I shall stand directly behind you with my revolver at your head, and I shall not loosen my grip upon your collar. When your friends pass this way, *you had better remain silent*, Joe Blaikie.”

Arch Brookhouse, waiting at the avenue gate, has not seen the red rocket. The tall poplars that overshadow him have shut the shooting fiery ribbon from his vision; besides, he has been looking down the hill. Neither has he seen the form that is creeping stealthily toward him from behind the tree that guards the gate.

Those within the barn have not seen the rocket, of course; and presently they come forth and harness the six horses to two huge wagons that stand in readiness. Four horses to one wagon, two to the other. The wheels are well oiled, and the wagons make no unnecessary rumbling as they go down the dark poplar avenue.

At the gate the foremost wagon halts, just long enough to enable the driver to catch the low-spoken word that tells him it is safe to proceed.

“All right,” Arch Brookhouse says, softly, and the two wagons pass out and down the hill, straight through the village of Trafton.

At the foot of the hill, where the four roads cross, the drivers peer through the darkness. Yes, their sentinel is there. The white handkerchief which he holds in his hand, as a sign that all is safe, gleams through the dark, and they drive on merrily, and if the sound of their wheels wakens any sleeper in Trafton, what then? It is not unusual to hear coal wagons passing on their way to the mines.

Should they meet a belated traveler, no matter. He may hear the rumble of the wheels, and welcome, so long as the darkness prevents him from seeing the horses that draw those innocent vehicles of traffic.

Meanwhile, his duty being done, Arch Brookhouse heaves a sigh of relief, gathers up his reins, and chirrups to his horse.

But the animal does not obey him. Arch leans forward; is there something standing by the horse's head? He gives an impatient word of command, and then,—yes, there is some one there.

Arch utters a sharp exclamation, and his hand goes behind him, only to be grasped by an enemy in the rear, who follows up his advantage by seizing the other elbow and saying:

“Stop a moment, Mr. Brookhouse; you are my prisoner, sir. Gerry, the handcuffs.”

The man at the horse's head comes swiftly to my assistance, Arch Brookhouse is drawn from his buggy, and his hands secured behind him by fetters of steel. Not a captive to be proud of; his teeth chatter, he shivers as with an ague.

“Wh—who are you?” he gasps. “Wh—what do you want?”

“I'm a city sprig,” I answer, maliciously, “and I'm an easy fish to catch. But not so easy as *you*, my gay Lothario. By-and-by you may decide, if you will, whether I possess most money or brains; now I have more important business on hand.”

Just then comes a long, low whistle.

“Gerry,” I say, “that is Long. Go down to him and see if he needs help.”

Gerry is off in an instant, and then my prisoner rallies his cowardly faculties, and begins to bluster.

“What does this assault mean? I demand an explanation, sir!”

“But I am not in the mood to give it,” I retort. “You are my prisoner, and likely to remain so, unless you are stolen from me by Judge Lynch, which is not improbable.”

“Then, y—you are an impostor!”

“You mistake; I am a detective. You shot at the wrong man when you winged Bethel. You did better when you crippled widow Ballou's hired man.”

“What, are you?”—he starts violently, then checks his speech.

“I'm the man you shot, behind the hedge, Mr. Brookhouse, and I'll trouble you to explain your conduct to-morrow.”

My prisoner moves restlessly under my restraining hand, but I cock my pistol, and he comprehending the unspoken warning, stands silent beside his buggy.

Presently I hear footsteps, and then Gerry comes towards me, lighting the way with a pocket lantern, which reveals to my gaze Dimber Joe, handcuffed and crest-fallen, marching sedately over the ground at the muzzle of a pistol held in the firm clutch of Jim Long, upon whose countenance sits a look of grim, triumphant humor.

“Here,” says Gerry, with aggravating ceremony, “is Mr. Long, with sentinel number two, namely: Mr. Dimber Joe Blaikie, late of Sing Sing.”

“And very soon to return there,” adds Jim Long, emphatically. “What shall we do with these fellows?”

“We must keep everything quiet to-night,” I say, quickly. “If you and Gerry think you won’t go to sleep over the precious scamps you might take them to the barn and let them pass the night where they have hidden so many horses. We will take them there now, and bind them more securely. Then one of you can look after them easily, while the other stands guard outside. All must be done quietly, so that they may not take the alarm in the house. If your prisoners attempt to make a noise, gag them without scruple.”

“But,” gasps Brookhouse, “you can not; you have no power.”

“No power,” mocks Jim Long. “We’ll see about that! It may be unparliamentary, gentlemen, but you should not object to that. If you give us any trouble, we will convince you that we have inherited a little brief authority.”

Ten minutes later we have carried out our programme. The two prisoners are safely housed in the hidden asylum for stolen horses, with Jim Long as guard within, and Gerry as sentinel without, and I, seated in the light buggy from which I have unceremoniously dragged Arch Brookhouse, am driving his impatient roadster southward, in the wake of the honest coal wagons.

Chapter XXXVII

Caught in the Act.

It is long past midnight. A preternatural stillness broods over the four corners where the north and south road, two miles north from Clyde, intersects the road running east and west, that bears westward toward the coal beds and the river.

There are no houses within sight of these corners, and very few trees; but the northeastern corner is bounded by what the farmers call a “brush fence,” an unsightly barricade of rails, interwoven with tall, ragged, and brambly brush, the cuttings, probably, from some rank-growing hedge.

The section to the southwest is bordered by a prim hedge, thrifty and green, evenly trimmed, and so low that a man could leap across it with ease.

And now the silence is broken by the sound of wheels coming from the direction of Clyde; swift running wheels that soon bring their burden to the four corners, and then come to a sudden halt.

It is a light buggy, none other than that owned by Mr. Larkins, of Clyde, drawn by his roans that “go in no time,” and it contains three men.

“There!” says the driver, who is Larkins himself, springing to the ground, and thrusting his arm through the reins, “here we are, with nothing to do but wait. We always do wait, you know.”

“Yes, I know,” assents a second individual, descending to the ground in his turn. “We’re always on time. Now, if a man only could smoke—but he can’t.”

And Ed. Dwight shrugs his shoulders and burrows in his pockets, and shuffles his feet, as only Ed. Dwight can.

“Might’s well get out, Briggs,” says Larkins, to the man who still sits in the buggy.

“Might’s well stay here, too,” retorts that individual, gruffly. “I’m comfortable.”

Larkins sniffs, and pats the haunch of the off roan.

Dwight snaps a leaf from the hedge and chews it nervously.

The man in the buggy sits as still as a mummy.

Presently there comes again the sound of wheels. Not noisy wheels, that would break in upon midnight slumbers, nor ghostly wheels, whose honesty might be called in question, but well oiled, smooth running wheels, that break but do not disturb the stillness.

These also approach the cross roads, and then stop.

The first are those of a coal wagon, drawn by four handsome horses; the second, those of a vehicle of the same description, drawn by two fine steeds.

Two men occupy the first wagon; one the next.

As the foremost wagon pauses, Larkins tosses his reins to the silent man in the buggy, and advances, followed by Dwight.

“Anything wrong?” queries Larkins.

“Not if *you* are all right,” replies a harsh voice, a voice that has a natural snarl in it.

“All right, Cap’n; give us your orders.”

The two men in the wagon spring to the ground, and begin to unharness the foremost horses. The other wagon comes closer.

“You and Briggs are to take in these two teams. Tom is to go on with the Morgans. Dwight is to take us back to Trafton,” says the rasping voice.

Dwight comes closer, and then exclaims:

“By George, Captain, it’s *you* in person.”

“Yes, it’s me,” shortly. “Simpson failed to come, and I wanted to have a few words with you and Larkins. Hark! *What’s that?*”

Wheels again; swift rushing, rattling wheels. Six heads are turned toward the north, whence they approach.

Suddenly there is a whistle, short and shrill.

Men are bounding over the low hedge to the left! Men are rising up from the long grass by the roadside!

Illustration:

Men are bounding over the low hedge to the left!

Oaths, ejaculations, cracking of pistols, plunging of horses—

“The first man who attempts to run will be shot down!”

I hear these words, as I drive the Brookhouse roadster, foaming and panting, into the midst of the melee.

In spite of the warning one man has made a dart for liberty, has turned and rushed directly upon my horse.

In spite of the darkness his sharp eyes recognize the animal. What could his son’s horse bring save a warning or a rescue?

He regains his balance, which, owing to his sudden contact with the horse, he had nearly lost, and springs toward me as my feet touch the earth.

“Arch!”

Before he can realize the truth my hands are upon him. Before he can recover from his momentary consternation other hands seize him from behind.

The captain of the horse-thieves, the head and front and brains of the band, is bound and helpless!

It is soon over; the horse-thieves fight well; strive hard to evade capture; but the attack is so sudden, so unexpected, and they are unprepared, although each man, as a matter of course, is heavily armed.

The vigilants have all the advantage, both of numbers and organization. While certain ones give all their attention to the horses, the larger number look to the prisoners.

Briggs, the silent man in the buggy, is captured before he knows what has happened.

Tom Briggs, his cowardly brother, is speedily reduced to a whimpering poltroon.

Ed. Dwight takes to his heels in spite of the warning of Captain Warren, and is speedily winged with a charge of fine shot. It is not a severe wound, but it has routed his courage, and he is brought back, meek and pitiful enough, all the jauntiness crushed out of him.

Larkins, my jehu on a former occasion, makes a fierce fight; and Louis Brookhouse, who still moves with a limp, resists doggedly.

Our vigilants have received a few bruises and scratches, but no wounds.

The struggle has been short, and the captives, once subdued, are silent and sullen.

We bind them securely, and put them in the coal wagons which now, for the first time, perhaps, are put to a legitimate use.

We do not care to burden ourselves with Larkins' roars, so they are released from the buggy and sent galloping homeward.

The bay Morgans, which have been “stolen” for the sake of effect, are again harnessed, as leaders of the four-in-hand. The vigilants bring out their horses from behind the brush fence, and the procession starts toward Trafton.

No one attempts to converse with the captives. No one deigns to answer a question, except by a monosyllable.

‘Squire Brookhouse is wise enough to see that he can gain nothing by an attempt at bluster or bribery. He maintains a dogged silence, and the others, with the exception of Dwight, who can not be still under any circumstances, and Tom Briggs, who makes an occasional whimpering attempt at self-justification, which is heeded by no one, all maintain a dogged silence. And we move on at a leisurely pace, out of consideration for the tired horses.

As we approach Trafton, the Summer sun is sending up his first streak of red, to warn our side of the world of his nearness; and young Warren reins his horse out from the orderly file of vigilants, who ride on either side of the wagons.

He gallops forward, turns in his saddle to look back at us, waves his hat above his head, and then speeds away toward the village.

I am surprised at this, but, as I look from one face to another, I see that the vigilants, some of them, at least, understand the movement, and so I ask no questions.

I am not left long in suspense as to the meaning of young Warren's sudden leave-taking, for, as we approach to within a mile of Trafton, our ears are greeted by the clang of bells, all the bells of Trafton, ringing out a fiercely jubilant peal.

I turn to look at 'Squire Brookhouse. He has grown old in an instant; his face looks ashen under the rosy daylight. The caverns of his eyes are larger and deeper, and the orbs themselves gleam with a desperate fire. His lifeless black locks flutter in the morning breeze. He looks forlorn and desperate. Those clanging bells are telling him his doom.

Warren has done his work well. When we come over the hill into Trafton, we know that the news is there before us, for a throng has gathered in the street, although the hour is so early.

The bells have aroused the people. The news that the Trafton horse-thieves are captured at last, in the very act of escaping with their booty, has set the town wild.

Not long since these same horse-thieves have led Trafton on to assault, to accuse, and to vilify an innocent man. Now, those who were foremost at the raiding of Bethel's cottage, are loudest in denouncing those who were then their leaders; and the cry goes up,

"Hand over the horse-thieves! Hand them out! Lynch law's good enough for them!"

But we are fourteen in number. We have captured the prisoners, and we mean to keep them.

Once more my pistols, this time fully loaded, are raised against a Trafton mob, and the vigilants follow my example.

We guard our prisoners to the door of the jail, and then the vigilants post themselves as a wall of defence about the building, while Captain Warren sets about the easy task of raising a trusty relief guard to take the places of his weary men.

Illustration:

Then the vigilants post themselves as a wall of defence
about the building.

It is broad day now. The sun glows round and bright above the Eastern horizon. I am very weary, but there is work yet to be done.

I leave Captain Warren at the door of the jail, and hasten toward the Hill.

Chapter XXXVIII

„The Counterfeiter's Daughter.“

I am somewhat anxious about this coming bit of work, and a little reluctant as well, but it must be done, and that promptly.

Just outside of the avenue gate I encounter a servant from the Hill House, and accost him.

“Is Miss Manvers at home, and awake?”

“Yes, she is at home; she has been disturbed by the bells,” and has sent him to inquire into the cause of the commotion.

She does not know, then! I heave a sigh of relief and hurry on.

I cross the avenue, and follow the winding foot-path leading up to the front entrance. I make no effort to see Jim or Gerry, at the barn; I feel sure that they are equal to any emergency that may arise.

Miss Manvers is standing at an open drawing-room window; she sees my approach and comes herself to admit me.

Then we look at each other.

She, I note, seems anxious and somewhat uneasy, and she sees at a glance that I am not the jaunty, faultlessly-dressed young idler of past days, but a dusty, dishevelled, travel-stained individual, wearing, instead of the usual society smile, a serious and preoccupied look upon my face.

“Miss Manvers,” I say, at once, “you will pardon my abruptness, I trust; I must talk with you alone for a few moments.”

She favors me with a glance of keen inquiry, and a look of apprehension crosses her face.

Then she turns with a gesture of careless indifference, and leads the way to the drawing-room, where she again turns her face toward me.

“I have before me an unpleasant duty,” I begin again; “I have to inform you that Arch Brookhouse has been arrested.”

A fierce light leaps to her eyes.

“Is that all?” she questions.

“The charge against him is a grave one,” I say, letting her question pass unanswered. “He is accused of attempted abduction.”

“Abduction!” she exclaims.

“And attempted assassination.”

“Assassination! ah, *who?*”

“Attempt first, upon myself, in June last. Second attempt, upon Dr. Carl Bethel.”

A wrathful look crosses her face.

“I wish they could hang him for it!” she says, vindictively. Then she looks me straight in the eyes. “Did you come to tell me this because you fancy that I care for Arch Brookhouse?” she questions.

“No.”

“Why, then?”

“Because I am a detective, and it was my duty to come. There is more to tell you. ‘Squire Brookhouse and his gang were arrested last night in the act of removing stolen horses from your barn.’”

Her face pales and she draws a long sighing breath, but she does not falter nor evince any other sign of fear.

"So it has come," she says. "And now you are here to arrest me. I don't think I shall mind it much."

"I have come to make terms with you, Miss Lowenstein, and it will be your fault if they are hard terms. I know your past history, or, at least—"

"At least, that I am a counterfeiter's daughter, and that I have served a term as a convict," she finishes, sarcastically.

"I know that you are the daughter of Jake Lowenstein, forger and counterfeiter. I know that you were arrested with him, as an accomplice; that immunity was offered you if you would testify against your father, the lawyers being sure that your evidence alone would easily convict him. I know that you refused to turn State's evidence; that you scoffed at the lawyers, and rather than raise your voice against your father, let them send you to prison for two years."

"You know all this?" wonderingly. "How did you find me out here?"

"Before you were taken to prison, they took your picture for—"

I hesitate, but she does not.

"For the rogue's gallery," she says, impatiently. "Well! go on."

"You were fiercely angry, and the scorn on your face was transferred to the picture."

"Quite likely."

"I had heard of your case, and your father's, of course. But I was not personally concerned in it, and I never saw him. I had never seen you, until I came to Trafton."

"I have changed since then," she breaks in, quickly.

"True; you were a slender, pretty young girl then. You are a handsome woman, now. Your features, however, are not much changed; yet probably, if I had never seen you save when your face wore its usual serene smile, I should never have found you out. But my comrade, who came to Trafton with me—"

"As your servant," she interposes.

"As my servant; yes. He had your picture in his collection. On the day of your lawn party, I chanced to see you behind a certain rose thicket, in conversation with Arch Brookhouse. He was insolent; you, angry and defiant. I caught the look on your face, and knew that I had seen it before, somewhere. I went home puzzled, to find Carnes, better known to you as Cooley, looking at a picture in his rogue's gallery. I took the book and began turning its leaves, and there under my eye was your picture. Then I knew that Miss Manvers, the heiress, was really Miss Adele Lowenstein."

"You say that it will be my fault if you make hard terms with me. My father is dead. I suppose you understand that?"

"Yes; I know that he is dead, but I do not know why you are here, giving shelter to stolen property and abetting horse-thieves. Frankly, Miss Lowenstein, so far as your past is concerned, I consider you sinned against as much as sinning. Your sacrifice in behalf of your father was, in my eyes, a brave act, rather than a criminal one. I am disposed to be ever your friend rather than your enemy. Will you tell me how you became connected with this gang, and all the truth concerning your relations with them, and trust me to aid you to the limit of my power?"

"You do not promise me my freedom if I give you this information," she says, more in surprise than in anxiety.

"It is not in my power to do that and still do my duty as an officer; but I promise you, upon my honor, that you shall have your freedom if it can be brought about."

"I like the sound of that," says this odd, self-reliant young woman, turning composedly, and seating herself near the open window. "If you had vowed to give me my liberty at any cost I should not have believed you. Sit down; I shall tell you a longer story than you will care to listen to standing."

I seat myself in obedience to her word and gesture, and she begins straightway:

"I was seventeen years old when my father was arrested for counterfeiting, and I looked even younger.

"He had a number of confederates, but the assistant he most valued was the man whom people call 'Squire Brookhouse. He was called simply Brooks eight years ago.

"When my father was arrested, 'Squire Brookhouse, who was equally guilty, contrived to escape. He was a prudent sharper, and both he and father had accumulated considerable money.

"If you know that my father and myself were sentenced to prison, he for twenty years, and I for two, you know, I suppose, how he escaped."

"I know that he did escape; just how we need not discuss at present."

"Yes; he escaped. Brookhouse used his money to bribe bolder men to do the necessary dangerous work, for he, Brookhouse, needed my father's assistance, and he escaped. I had yet six months to serve.

"Well, Brookhouse had recently been down into this country on a plundering expedition. He was an avaricious man, always devising some new scheme. He knew that without my father's assistance, he could hardly run a long career at counterfeiting, and he knew that counterfeiting would be dangerous business for my father to follow, in or near the city, after his escape.

"They talked and schemed and prospected; and the result was that they both came to Trafton, and invested a portion of their gains, the largest portion of course, in two pieces of real estate; this and the Brookhouse place.

"Before we had been here a year, my father grew venturesome. He went to the city, and was recognized by an old policeman, who had known him too well. They attempted to arrest him, but only captured his dead body. The papers chronicled the fact that Jake Lowenstein, the counterfeiter, was dead. And we, at Trafton, announced to the world that Captain Manvers, late of the navy, had been drowned while making his farewell voyage.

"After that, I became Miss Manvers, the heiress, and the good Traftonites were regaled with marvelous stories concerning a treasure-ship dug out from the deep by my father, 'the sea captain.'

"Their main object in settling in Trafton, was to provide for themselves homes that might afford them a haven should stormy times come. And, also, to furnish them with a place where their coining and engraving could be safely carried on.

"Then the 'Squire grew more enterprising. He wanted more schemes to manage. And so he began to lay his plans for systematic horse-stealing.

"Little by little he matured his scheme, and one by one he introduced into Trafton such men as would serve his purpose, for, if you inquire into the matter,

you will find that every one of his confederates has come to this place since the first advent of 'Squire Brookhouse.

"The hidden place in our barn was prepared before my father was killed, and after that—well, 'Squire Brookhouse knew that I could be a great help to him, socially.

"I did not know what to do. This home was mine, I felt safe here; I had grown up among counterfeiters and law-breakers, and I did not see how I was to shake myself free from them—besides—"

Here a look of scornful self-contempt crosses her face.

"Besides, I was young, and up to that time had seen nothing of society of my own age. Arch Brookhouse had lately come home from the South, and I had fallen in love with his handsome face."

She lifts her eyes to mine, as if expecting to see her own self-scorn reflected back in my face, but I continue to look gravely attentive, and she goes on:

"So I stayed on, and let them use my property as a hiding-place for their stolen horses. I kept servants of their selection, and never knew aught of their plans. When I heard that a horse had been stolen, I felt very certain that it was concealed on my premises, but I never investigated.

"After a time I became as weary of Arch Brookhouse as he, probably, was of me. Finally indifference became detestation. He only came to my house on matters of business, and to keep up the appearance of friendliness between the two families. Mrs. Brookhouse is a long-suffering, broken-down woman, who never sees society.

"I do not intend to plead for mercy, and I do not want pity. I dare say that nine-tenths of the other women in the world would have done as I did, under the same circumstances. I have served two years in the penitentiary; my face adorns the rogues' gallery. I might go out into the world and try a new way of living, but I must always be an impostor. Why not be an impostor in Trafton, as well as anywhere else? I have always believed that, some day, I should be found out."

Chapter XXXIX

„Louise Barnard's Friendship.“

When she has finished her story there is a long silence, then she says, with a suddenness that would have been surprising in any other woman than the one before me:

"You say you have arrested Arch Brookhouse for the shooting of Dr. Bethel. Tell me, is it true that Dr. Bethel is out of danger?"

"He is still in a condition to need close attention and careful medical aid; with these, we think, he will recover."

"I am very glad to know that," she says, earnestly.

"Miss Lowenstein, I have some reason for thinking that you know who is implicated in that grave-robbing business."

"I do know," she answers, frankly, "but not from them. The Brookhouses, father and sons, believed Dr. Bethel to be a detective, and to be candid, so did I. You know 'the wicked flee when no man pursueth.' They construed his reticence into mystery. They fancied that his clear, searching eye was looking into all their secrets. I knew they were plotting against him, but I had told Arch Brookhouse that they should not harm him. When I went down to the cottage with Louise Barnard, I felt sure that it was their work, the grave-robbing.

"Tom Briggs was there, the fiercest of the rioters. Tom had worked about my stable for a year or more, and I thought that I knew how to manage him. I contrived to get a word with him. Did you observe it?"

"Yes, I observed it."

"I told him to come to The Hill that evening, and he came. Then I made him tell me the whole story.

"Arch Brookhouse had planned the thing, and given it to Briggs to execute. There were none of the regular members of the gang here to help him at that work, so he went, under instructions, of course, to Simmons and Saunders, two dissolute, worthless fellows, and told them that Dr. Bethel had offered him thirty dollars to get the little girl's body, and offered to share with them.

"Those three did the work. Briggs buried the clothing and hid the tools. Then, when the raid began, Briggs told his two assistants that, in order to avoid suspicion, they must join the hue and cry against Dr. Bethel, and so, as you are aware, they did."

This information is valuable to me. I am anxious to be away, to meet Simmons and Saunders. I open my lips to make a request, when she again asks a sudden question.

"Will you tell me where and how you arrested the Brookhouse gang? I am anxious to know."

"I will tell you, but first will you please answer one more question?"

She nods and I proceed.

"I have told you that Arch Brookhouse is charged with attempted abduction; I might say Louis Brookhouse stands under the same charge. Do you know anything about the matter?"

"I? No."

"Did you ever know Miss Amy Holmes?"

"Never," she replies, emphatically. "Whom did they attempt to abduct?"

"Three young girls; three innocent country girls."

"Good heavens!" she exclaims, her eyes flashing fiercely, "that is a deed, compared with which horse-thieving is honorable!"

I give her a brief outline of the Groveland affair, or series of affairs, so far as I am able, before having heard Carnes' story. And then I tell her how the horse-thieves were hunted down.

"So," she says, wearily, "by this time I am known all over Trafton as the accomplice of horse-thieves."

"Not so, Miss Lowenstein. The entire truth is known to Carnes and Brown, the two detectives I have mentioned, to Jim Long, and to Mr. Warren. The vigilants knew that the horses had been concealed near Trafton, but, owing to the manner

in which the arrests were made, they do not know where. I suppose you are aware what it now becomes my duty to do?"

"Assuredly," with constrained voice and manner. "You came here to arrest me. I submit."

"Wait. From first to last it has been my desire to deal with you as gently as possible. Now that I have heard your story, I am still more inclined to stand your friend. The three men in Trafton who know your complicity in this business, are acting under my advice. For the present, you may remain here, if you will give me your promise not to attempt an escape."

"I shall not try to escape; I would be foolish to do so, after learning how skillfully you can hunt down criminals."

"Thanks for the compliment, and the promise implied. If you will give your testimony against the gang, telling in court the story you have told me, you shall not stand before these people without a champion."

"I don't like to do it. It seems cowardly."

"Why? Do you think they would spare you were the positions reversed?"

"No, certainly not; but—" turning her eyes toward the foliage without, and speaking wistfully, "I wish I knew how another woman would view my position. I never had the friendship of a woman who knew me as I am. I wish I knew how such a woman as Louise Barnard would advise me."

Illustration:

"I wish I knew how such a woman as Louise Barnard would advise me."

Scarcely knowing how to reply to this speech, I pass it by and hasten to finish my own.

Will she remain in her own house until I see her again, which may not be until to-morrow? And will she permit me to leave Gerry Brown here, for form's sake?

Jim Long would hardly question my movements and motives, but Mr. Warren, who is the fourth party in our confidence, might. So, for his gratification, I will leave Gerry Brown at the Hill.

She consents readily enough, and I go out to fetch Gerry.

"Miss Lowenstein, this is my friend, Gerry Brown, who has passed the night in your barn and in very bad company. Will you take pity on him and give him some breakfast?" I say, as we appear before her.

She examines Gerry's handsome face attentively, and then says:

"If your late companions were bad, Mr. Brown, you will not find your present company much better. You do look tired. I will give you some breakfast, and then you can lock me up."

"I'll eat the breakfast with relish," replies Gerry, gallantly; "but as for locking you up, excuse me. I've been told that you would feed me and let me lie down somewhere to sleep; and I've been ordered to stay here until to-morrow. It looks to me as if I were your prisoner, and such I prefer to consider myself."

I leave them to settle the question of keeper and prisoner as best they can, and go out to Jim.

He is smoking placidly, with Arch Brookhouse, in a fit of the sulks, sitting on an overturned peck measure near by, and Dimber Joe asleep on a bundle of hay in a corner.

We arouse Dimber and casting off the fetters from their feet, set them marching toward the town jail, where their brethren in iniquity are already housed.

Trafton is in a state of feverish excitement. As we approach the jail with our prisoners the air is rent with jeers and hisses for them, and "three cheers for the detective," presumably for me.

I might feel flattered and gratified at their friendly enthusiasm, but, unfortunately for my pride, I have had an opportunity to learn how easily Trafton is excited to admiration and to anger, so I bear my honors meekly, and hide my blushing face, for a time, behind the walls of the jail.

All the vigilants are heroes this morning, and proud and happy is the citizen who can adorn his breakfast table with one of the band. The hungry fellows, nothing loath, are borne away one by one in triumph, and Jim and I, who cling together tenaciously, are wrangled over by Justice Summers and Mr. Harris, and, finally, led off by the latter.

We are not bored with questions at the parsonage, but good, motherly Mrs. Harris piles up our plates, and looks on, beaming with delight to see her good things disappearing down our hungry throats.

We have scarcely finished our meal, when a quick, light step crosses the hall, and Louise Barnard enters. She has heard the clanging bells and witnessed the excitement, but, as yet, scarcely comprehends the cause.

"Mamma is so anxious," she says, deprecatingly, to Mr. Harris, "that I ran in to ask you about it, before going down to see Carl—Dr. Bethel."

While she is speaking, a new thought enters my head, and I say to myself instantly, "here is a new test for Christianity," thinking the while of that friendless girl at this moment a paroled prisoner.

"Miss Barnard," I say, hastily, "it will give me pleasure to tell you all about this excitement, or the cause of it."

"If I understand aright, you are the cause, sir," she replies, smilingly. "How horribly you have deceived us all!"

"But," interposes Mr. Harris, "this is asking too much, sir. You have been vigorously at work all night, and now—"

"Never mind that," I interrupt. "Men in my profession are bred to these things. I am in just the mood for story telling."

They seat themselves near me. Jim, a little less interested than the rest, occupying a place in the background. Charlie Harris is away at his office. I have just the audience I desire.

I begin by describing very briefly my hunt for the Trafton outlaws. I relate, as rapidly as possible, the manner in which they were captured, skipping details as much as I can, until I arrive at the point where I turn from the Trafton jail to go to The Hill.

Then I describe my interview with the counterfeiter's daughter minutely, word for word as nearly as I can. I dwell on her look, her tone, her manner, I repeat her words: "I wish I knew how another woman would view my position. I wish I knew

how such a woman as Louise Barnard would advise me." I omit nothing; I am trying to win a friend for Adele Lowenstein, and I tell her story as well as I can.

When I have finished, there is profound silence for a full moment, and then Jim Long says:

"I know something concerning this matter. And I am satisfied that the girl has told no more and no less than the truth."

I take out a pocket-book containing papers, and select one from among them.

"This," I say, as I open it, "is a letter from the Chief of our force. He is a stern old criminal-hunter. I will read you what he says in regard to the girl we have known as Adele Manvers, the heiress. Here it is."

And I read:

In regard to Adele Lowenstein, I send you the papers and copied reports, as you request; but let me say to you, deal with her as mercifully as possible. There should be much good in a girl who would go to prison for two long years, rather than utter one word disloyal to her counterfeiter father. Those who knew her best, prior to that affair, consider her a victim rather than a sinner. Time may have hardened her nature, but, if there are any extenuating circumstances, consider how she became what she is, and temper justice with mercy.

"There," I say, as I fold away the letter, "that's a whole sermon, coming from our usually unsympathetic Chief. Mr. Harris, I wish you would preach another of the same sort to the Traftonites."

Still the silence continues. Mr. Harris looks serious and somewhat uneasy. Mrs. Harris furtively wipes away a tear with the corner of her apron. Louise Barnard sits moveless for a time, then rises, and draws her light Summer scarf about her shoulders with a resolute gesture.

"I am going to see Adele," she says, turning toward the door.

Mr. Harris rises hastily. He is a model of theological conservatism.

"But, Louise,—ah, don't be hasty, I beg. Really, it is not wise."

"Yes, it is," she retorts. "It is wise, and it is right. I have eaten her bread; I have called myself her friend; I shall not abandon her now."

"Neither shall I!" cries Mrs. Harris, bounding up with sudden energy. "I'll go with you, Louise."

"But, my dear," expostulates Mr. Harris, "if you really insist, I will go first; then, perhaps—"

"No, you won't go first," retorts his better half. "You don't know what that poor girl needs. You'd begin at once to administer death-bed consolation. That will do for 'Squire Brookhouse, but not for a friendless, unhappy girl. Take your foot off my dress, Mr. Harris; I'm going for my bonnet!"

She conquers, of course, gets her bonnet, and ties it on energetically.

During the process, I turn to Jim.

"Long," I say, "we have yet one task to perform. Dr. Denham is on duty at the cottage, and fretting and fuming, no doubt, to know the meaning of all this storm in Trafton. Bethel, too, may be anxious—"

"Now, hear him!" interrupts our hostess, indignantly. "Just hear that man! As if you were not both tired to death already. You two are to stay right here; one in the parlor bed, and one in Charlie's room; and you're to sleep until dinner, which I'll

be sure to have late. Mr. Harris can run down to the cottage and tell all the news. It will keep him from going where he is not wanted.”

Mr. Harris warmly seconds this plan. Jim and I are indeed weary, and Mrs. Harris is an absolute monarch. So we submit, and I lay my tired head on her fat pillows, feeling that everything is as it should be.

Chapter XL

The Story of Harvey James.

It is late in the afternoon when I awake, for Mrs. Harris has been better than her word.

Jim is already up, and conversing with Mr. Harris on the all-absorbing topic, of course.

After a bountiful and well-cooked dinner has received our attention, Jim and I go together to the cottage.

Here we are put upon the witness stand by “our old woman,” who takes ample vengeance for having been kept so long in the dark concerning my business in Trafton.

After he has berated us to his entire satisfaction, and after Bethel, who, having heard a little, insists upon hearing more, has been gratified by an account of the capture, given for the most part by Jim Long, we go southward again and come to a halt in Jim’s cottage. Here we seat ourselves, and, at last, I hear the story of Jim Long, or the man who has, for years, borne that name.

* * * * *

“My name is Harvey James,” he begins, slowly. “My father was a farmer, and I was born upon a farm, and lived there until I became of age.

“Except two years passed at a college not far from my home, I had never been a week away from my father’s farm. But after my twenty-first birthday, I paid a visit to the city.

“It was short and uneventful, but it unsettled me. I was never content upon the home farm again.

“After my father died and the property came into my possession, I resolved to be a farmer no longer, but to go and increase my fortune in the city.

“My farm was large and valuable, and there was considerable money in the bank. My mother clung to the farm; so, as the house was a large one, I reserved for her use, and mine when I should choose to come home, a few of the pleasantest rooms, and put a tenant into the remainder of the house.

“I was engaged to be married to a dear girl, the daughter of our nearest neighbor. She was pretty and ambitious. She heartily approved of my new departure, but when I urged our immediate marriage, she put the matter off, saying that she preferred to wait a year, as by that time I should be a city gentleman; and until I should have become established in business, I would have

no time to devote to a rustic wife. If she had married me then, my fate might have been different, God knows! But I went to the city alone, and before the year had elapsed I was in a prison cell!

"I took with me a considerable sum of money, and I commenced to enjoy city life. I began with the theaters and billiards, and went on down the grade. Before I had been in town a month I became acquainted with Brooks, the name then used by 'Squire Brookhouse. He professed to be a lawyer, and this profession, together with his superior age, won my confidence, as, perhaps, a younger man could not have done. After a time he made me acquainted with Joe Blaikie and Jake Lowenstein, both brokers, so he said.

"I was an easy victim; I soon began to consult the 'brokers' as to the best investment for a small capital.

"Of course they were ready to help me. I think I need not enter into details; you know how such scoundrels work. We soon became almost inseparable, and I thought myself in excellent company, and wrote glowing letters to my mother and sweetheart, telling them of my fine new friends and the promising prospect for a splendid investment, which was to double my money speedily, and laying great stress upon the fact that my prospective good fortune would be mainly brought about by my 'friends,' the lawyer and the brokers, who 'knew the ropes.'

"At last the day came when I drew a considerable sum of money from my home bankers, to invest in city stock. The 'brokers' strongly advised me to put in all I could command, even to the extent of mortgaging my farm, but this I would not do. I adhered to my stern old father's principle, 'never borrow money to plant,' and I would not encumber my land; but I drew every dollar of my ready capital for the venture.

"I had established myself in comfortable rooms at a hotel, which, by-the-by, was recommended me by Brooks, as a place much frequented by 'solid men.' And soon the three blacklegs began dropping in upon me evenings, sometimes together, sometimes separately. We would then amuse ourselves with 'harmless' games of cards. After a little we began to bet chips and coppers, to make the game more interesting.

"They worked me with great delicacy. No doubt they could have snared me just as easily with half the trouble they took. I was fond of cards, and it was not difficult to draw me into gambling. I had learned to drink wine, too, and more than once they had left me half intoxicated after one of our 'pleasant social games,' and had laughingly assured me, when, after sobering up, I ventured a clumsy apology, that 'it was not worth mentioning; such things would sometimes happen to gentlemen.'

"On the night of my downfall I had all my money about my person, intending to make use of it early on the following morning. I expected the three to make an evening in my room, but at about eight o'clock Lowenstein came in alone and looking anxious.

"He said that he had just received a telegram from a client who had entrusted him with the sale of a large block of buildings, and he must go to see him that evening. It was a long distance, and he would be out late. He had about him a quantity of gold, paid in to him after banking hours, and he did not like to take it with him. He wanted to leave it in my keeping, as he knew that I intended passing

the evening in my rooms, and as he was not afraid to trust me with so large a sum.

“I took the bait, and the money, three rouleaux of gold; and then, after I had listened to his regrets at his inability to make one at our social game that evening, I bowed him out and locked the door.

“As I opened my trunk and secreted the money in the very bottom, underneath a pile of clothing and books, I was swelling with gratified vanity, blind fool that I was, at the thought of the trust imparted to me. Did it not signify the high value placed upon my shrewdness and integrity by this discriminating man of business?

“Presently Brooks and Blaikie came, and we sat down to cards and wine. Blaikie had brought with him some bottles of a choice brand, and it had an unusual effect upon me.

“My recollections of that evening are very indistinct. I won some gold pieces from Brooks, and jingled them triumphantly in my pockets, while Blaikie refilled my glass. After that my remembrance is blurred and then blank.

“I do not think that I drank as much wine as usual, for when I awoke it was not from the sleep of intoxication. I was languid, and my head ached, but my brain was not clouded. My memory served me well. I remembered, first of all, my new business enterprise, and then recalled the events of the previous evening, up to the time of my drinking a second glass of wine.

“I was lying upon my bed, dressed, as I had been when I sat down to play cards with Brooks and Blaikie. I strove to remember how I came there on the bed, but could not; then I got up and looked about the room.

“Our card table stood there with the cards scattered over it. On the floor was an empty wine-bottle—where was the other, for Blaikie had brought two? On a side table sat *two* wine-glasses, each containing a few drops of wine, and a third which was *clean*, as if it had been unused.

“Two chairs stood near the table, as if lately occupied by players.

“What did it mean?

“I stepped to the door and found that it had not been locked. Then I thought of my money. It was gone, of course. But I still had in my pockets the loose gold won at our first game, and the three rouleaux left by Lowenstein were still in my trunk. I had also won from Brooks two or three bank notes, and these also I had.

“You can easily guess the rest. The three sharpers had planned to secure my money, and had succeeded; and to protect themselves, and get me comfortably out of the way, they had laid the trap into which I fell.

“Blaikie appeared at the police station, and entered his complaint. He had been invited to join in a social game of cards at my rooms. When he arrived there, Brooks was there, seemingly on business, but he had remained but a short time. Then we had played cards, and Blaikie had lost some bank-notes. Next he won, and I had paid him in gold pieces. He had then staked his diamond studs, as he had very little money about him. These I had won, and next had permitted him to win a few more gold pieces. Blaikie did not accuse me of cheating, oh, no; but he had just found that I had won his diamonds and his honest money, and had paid him in counterfeit coin.

“At that time, Blaikie had not become so prominent a rogue as he now is. His story was credited, and, while I was yet frantically searching for my lost money,

the police swooped down upon me, and I was arrested for having circulated counterfeit money. The scattered cards, the two wine-glasses, the two chairs, all substantiated Blaikie's story.

"A search through my room brought to light Blaikie's diamonds, and some plates for engraving counterfeit ten dollar bills, hidden in the same receptacle. In my trunk were the three rouleaux of freshly-coined counterfeit gold pieces, and in my pockets were some more loose counterfeit coin, together with the bank-notes which Blaikie had described to the Captain of police.

"It was a cunning plot, and it succeeded. I fought for my liberty as only a desperate man will. I told my story. I accused Blaikie and his associates of having robbed me. I proved, by my bankers, that a large sum of money had actually come into my possession only the day before my arrest. But the web held me. Brooks corroborated Blaikie's statements; Lowenstein could not be found.

"I was tried, found guilty, and condemned for four years to State's prison. A light sentence, the judge pronounced it, but those four years put streaks of gray in my hair and changed me wonderfully, physically and mentally.

"I had gone in a tall, straight young fellow, with beardless face and fresh color; I came out a grave man, with stooping shoulders, sallow skin, and hair streaked with gray.

"My mother had died during my imprisonment; my promised wife had married another man. I sold my farm and went again to the city; this time with a fixed purpose in my heart. I would find my enemies and revenge myself.

"I let my beard grow, I dropped all habits of correct speaking, I became a slouching, shabbily-dressed loafer. I had no reason to fear recognition,—the change in me was complete."

He paused, and seemed lost in gloomy meditations, then resumed:

"It was more than three months before I struck the trail of the gang, and then one day I saw Brooks on the street, followed him, and tracked him to Trafton. He had just purchased the 'Brookhouse farm' and I learned for the first time that he had a wife and family. I found that Lowenstein, too, had settled in Trafton, having been arrested, and escaped during my long imprisonment; and I decided to remain also. I had learned, during my farm life, something about farriery, and introduced myself as a traveling horse doctor, with a fancy for 'settling' in a good location. And so I became the Jim Long you have known.

"I knew that the presence of 'Squire Brookhouse' and 'Captain Manvers, late of the navy,' boded no good to Trafton; I knew, too, that Lowenstein was an escaped convict, and I might have given him up at once; but that would have betrayed my identity, and Brooks might then escape me. So I waited, but not long.

"One day 'Captain Manvers,' in his seaman's make-up, actually ventured to visit the city. He had so changed his appearance that, but for my interference, he might have been safe enough. But my time had come. I sent a telegram to the chief of police, telling him that Jake Lowenstein was coming to the city, describing his make-up, and giving the time and train. I walked to the next station to send the message, waited to have it verified, and walked back content.

"When Jake Lowenstein arrived in the city, he was followed, and in attempting to resist the officers, he was killed.

“Since that time, I have tried, and tried vainly, to unravel the mystery surrounding these robberies. Of course, I knew Brooks and his gang to be the guilty parties, but I was only one man. I could not be everywhere at once, and I could never gather sufficient evidence to insure their conviction, because, like all the rest of Trafton, I never thought of finding the stolen horses in the very midst of the town. I assisted in organizing the vigilants, but we all watched the roads leading out from the town, and were astounded at our constant failures.

“And now you know why I hailed your advent in Trafton. For four years I have hoped for the coming of a detective. I would have employed one on my own account, but I shrank from betraying my identity, as I must do in order to secure confidence. In every stranger who came to Trafton I have hoped to find a detective. At first I thought Bethel to be one, and I was not slow in making his acquaintance. I watched him, I weighed his words, and, finally, gave him up.

“When you came I made your acquaintance, as I did that of every stranger who tarried long in Trafton. You were discreetness itself, and the man you called Barney was a capital actor, and a rare good fellow too. But I studied you as no other man did. When I answered your careless questions I calculated your possible meaning. Do you remember a conversation of ours when I gave my opinion of Dr. Bethel, and the ‘average Traftonite?’”

“Yes; and also told us about Miss Manvers and the treasure-ship. Those bits of gossip gave us some pointers.”

“I meant that they should. And now you know why I preferred to hang on the heels of Joe Blaikie rather than go with the vigilants.”

“I understand. Has Blaikie been a member of the gang from the first?”

“I think not. Of course when I heard that Brooks intended to employ a detective, I was on the alert. And when Joe Blaikie and that other fellow, who was a stranger to me, came and established themselves at the Trafton House, I understood the game. They were to personate detectives. Brooks was too cunning to make their pretended occupations too conspicuous; but he confided the secret to a few good citizens who might have grown uneasy, and asked troublesome questions, if they had not been thus confided in. I think that Blaikie and Brooks went their separate ways, when the latter became a country gentleman. Blaikie is too cowardly a cur ever to succeed as a horse-thief, and Brooks was the man to recognize that fact. I think Blaikie was simply a tool for this emergency.”

“Very probable. When you told my landlord that Blaikie was a detective, did you expect the news to reach me through him?”

“I did,” with a quizzical glance at me; “and it reached you, I take it.”

“Yes; it reached me. And now, Long—it seems most natural to call you so—I will make no comments upon your story now. I think you are assured of my friendship and sympathy. I can act better than I can talk. But be sure of one thing, from henceforth you stand clear of all charges against you. The man who shot Dr. Bethel is now in limbo, and he will confess the whole plot on the witness stand; and, as for the old trouble, Joe Blaikie shall tell the truth concerning that.”

He lifts his head and looks at me steadfastly for a moment.

“When that is accomplished,” he says, earnestly, “I shall feel myself once more a man among men.”

Chapter XLI

A Gathering of the Fragments.

There was a meeting of the vigilants that night and Gerry Brown, Mr. Harris, Justice Summers and myself, were present with them.

I gave them the details of my investigation, and related the cause of Doctor Bethel's troubles. When they understood that the outlaws had looked upon Bethel as a detective, and their natural enemy, the vigilants were ready to anticipate the rest of my story.

When everything concerning the male members of the clique had been discussed, I entered a plea for Adele Lowenstein, and my audience was not slow to respond.

Mr. Harris arose in his place, and gave a concise account of the visit paid by his wife and Miss Barnard to the dethroned heiress, as he had heard it described by Mrs. Harris.

Adele Lowenstein had been sincerely grateful for their kindness, and had consented to act precisely as they should advise, let the result be what it would. She would give her testimony against the horse-thieves, and trust to the mercy of the Traftonites. Her story may as well be completed here, for there is little more to tell.

She was not made a prisoner. Mrs. Harris and Louise Barnard were not the women to do things by halves. They used all their influence in her favor, and they had the vigilants and many of the best citizens to aid them. They disarmed public opinion. They appealed to men high in power and won their championship. They conducted their campaign wisely and they carried the day.

There were found for Adele Lowenstein, the counterfeiter's daughter, "extenuating circumstances:" what the jury could not do the governor did, and she went out from the place, where justice had been tempered with mercy, a free woman.

The Hill was sold, and Miss Lowenstein, who had avowed her intention of retaking her father's name, sullied as it was, prepared to find a new home in some far away city.

One day while the trial was pending, Gerry Brown came to me with fidgety manner and serious countenance.

"Old man," he said, anxiously, "I've been thinking about Miss Lowenstein."

"Stop it, Gerry. It's a dangerous occupation for a fellow of your age."

"My, age indeed! Two years, four months and seventeen days younger than your ancient highness, I believe."

"A man may learn much in two years, four months, and seventeen days—,Gerry. What about Miss Lowenstein?"

"I'm sorry for the girl."

"So am I."

"Don't be a bore, old man."

“Then come to the point, youngster.”

“Youngster!” indignantly, “well, I’ll put that to our private account. About Miss Lowenstein, then: She is without friends, and is just the sort of woman who needs occupation to keep her out of mischief and contented. She’s ladylike and clever, and she knows the world; don’t you think she would be a good hand on the force.”

I paused to consider. I knew the kind of woman that we sometimes needed, and it seemed to me that Adele Lowenstein would “be a good hand.” I knew, too, that our Chief was not entirely satisfied with one or two women in his employ. So I stopped chaffing Gerry and said soberly:

“Gerry, it’s a good idea. We’ll consult the lady and if she would like the occupation, I will write to our Chief.”

Adele Lowenstein was eager to enter upon a career so much to her taste, and our Chief was consulted. He manifested a desire to see the lady, and she went to the city.

The interview was satisfactory to both. Adele Lowenstein became one of our force, and a very valuable and efficient addition she proved.

I had assured Jim Long,—even yet I find it difficult to call him Harvey James,—that his name should be freed from blot or suspicion. And it was not so hard a task as he evidently thought it.

Blake Simpson, like most scamps of his class, was only too glad to do anything that would lighten his own sentence, and when he found that the Brookhouse faction had come to grief, and that his own part in their plot had been traced home to him by “the detectives,” he weakened at once, and lost no time in turning State’s evidence. He confessed that he had come to Trafton, in company with Dimber Joe, to “play detective,” at the instigation, and under the pay of Brookhouse senior, who had visited the city to procure their services. And that Arch Brookhouse had afterward bribed him to make the assault upon Bethel, and planned the mode of attack; sending him, Simpson, to Ireton, and giving him a note to the elder Briggs, who furnished him with the little team and light buggy, which took him back to Trafton, where the shooting was done precisely as I had supposed after my investigation.

Dimber Joe made a somewhat stouter resistance, and I offered him two alternatives.

He might confess the truth concerning the accusations under which Harvey James had been tried and wrongfully imprisoned; in which case I would not testify against him except so far as he had been connected with the horse-thieves in the capacity of sham detective and spy. Or, he might refuse to do Harvey James justice, in which case I would put Brooks on the witness stand to exonerate James, and I myself would lessen his chances for obtaining a light sentence, by showing him up to the court as the villain he was; garroter, panel-worker, counterfeiter, burglar, and general utility rascal.

Brooks or Brookhouse was certain of a long sentence, I assured Blaikie, and he would benefit rather than injure his cause by exposing the plot to ruin and fleece James. Would Mr. Blaikie choose, and choose quickly?

And Mr. Blaikie, after a brief consideration, chose to tell the truth, and forever remove from Harvey James the brand of counterfeiter.

The testimony against the entire gang was clear and conclusive. The elder Brookhouse, knowing this, made very little effort to defend himself and his band, and so "The 'Squire" and Arch Brookhouse were sentenced for long terms. Louis Brookhouse, the two Briggs, Ed. Dwight, the festive, Larkins and the two city scamps, were sentenced for lesser periods, but none escaped lightly.

Only one question, and that one of minor importance, yet lacked an answer, and one day, before his trial, I visited Arch Brookhouse in his cell, my chief purpose being to ask this question.

"There is one thing," I said, after a few words had passed between us, "there is one thing that I should like you to tell me, merely as a matter of self-gratification, as it is now of no special importance; and that is, how did you discover my identity, when I went to Mrs. Ballou's disguised as a Swede?"

He laughed harshly.

"You detectives do not always cover up your tracks," he said, with a sneer. "I don't object to telling you what you seem so curious about. 'Squire Ewing and Mr. Rutger went to the city to employ you, and no doubt you charged them to be secret as the grave concerning your plans. Nevertheless, Mr. Rutger, who is a simple-minded confiding soul, told the secret in great confidence to Farmer La Porte; and he repeated it, again in great confidence in the bosom of his family."

"And in the presence of his son, Johnnie?"

"Just so. When we learned that a disguised detective was coming into the community, and that he would appear within a certain time, we began to look for him, and *you* were the only stranger we discovered."

"And you wrote me that letter of warning?"

"Precisely."

"And undoubtedly *you* are the fellow who shot at me?"

"I am happy to say that I am."

"And I am happy to know that I have deprived you of the pleasure of handling firearms again for some time to come. Good morning, Mr. Brookhouse."

That was my final interview with Arch Brookhouse, but I saw him once more, for the last time, when I gave my testimony against him at the famous trial of the Trafton horse-thieves.

When the whole truth concerning the *modus operandi* of the horse-thieves was made public at the trial, when the Traftonites learned that for five years they had harbored stolen horses under the very steeples of the town, and that those horses, when the heat of the chase was over, were boldly driven away across the country and toward the river before a lumbering coal cart, they were astounded at the boldness of the scheme, and the hardihood of the men who had planned it.

But they no longer marveled at their own inability to fathom so cunning a plot.

Chapter XLII

In Conclusion.

When Winter closed in, and the first snow mantled the farms of Groveland, the poor girl whom Johnny La Porte had reluctantly made his wife, closed her eyes upon this earthly panorama.

She never rallied after her return from the South. They said that she died of consumption, but her friends knew, whatever medical name might be applied to her disease at the end, that it began with a broken heart.

When it was over, and Nellie Ewing had no further need of his presence, Johnny La Porte,—who, held to his duty by the stern and oftentimes menacing eye of ‘Squire Ewing, as well as by the fear which Carnes had implanted in his heart, had been as faithful and as gentle to his poor wife as it was in his worthless nature to be,—now found himself shunned in the community where he had once been petted and flattered.

There was no forgiveness in the heart of ‘Squire Ewing, and his door was closed against his daughter’s destroyer; for such the Grovelanders, in spite of his tardy reparation, considered Johnny La Porte.

He attempted to resume his old life in Groveland; but ‘Squire Ewing was beloved in the community, and when he turned his back upon Johnny La Porte his neighbors followed his example.

Nowhere among those cordial Grovelanders was there a place or a welcome for the man who had blighted the life of Nellie Ewing, and so he drifted away from Groveland, to sink lower and lower in the scale of manhood—dissolute, brainless, a cumberer of the ground.

Nellie Ewing’s sad death had its effect upon thoughtless little Mamie Rutger. She was shocked into sobriety, and her grief at the loss of her friend brought with it shame for her own folly, and then repentance and a sincere effort to be a more dutiful daughter and a better woman.

Mrs. Ballou put her threat into execution after mature deliberation. She put her daughter Grace into a convent school, and then, to make assurance doubly sure, she rented her fine farm, and took up her abode near that of the good sisters who had charge of her daughter’s mental and spiritual welfare.

As for the Little Adelphi and Fred Brookhouse, they both lost prestige after coming under the severe scrutiny of the police. One iniquitous discovery concerning the theatre and its manager led to more; and before another Spring visited the Sunny South, the Little Adelphi and Fred Brookhouse had vanished together, the one transformed into an excellent green grocers’ establishment, and the other into a strolling disciple of chance.

Amy Holmes clung to the Little Adelphi to the last; and, after its final fall, she, too, wandered away from New Orleans, carrying with her, her secret which had been so serviceable a weapon in the hands of Carnes, but which he never knew.

* * * * *

It is written in the book of Fate that I shall pay one more visit to Trafton.

This time there is no gloom, no plotting; there are no wrongs to right. The time is the fairest of the year, May time, and the occasion is a joyous one.

Doctor Denham, funny, talkative, and lovable as ever; Carnes, bubbling over with whimsical Hibernianisms; Gerry Brown, handsome and in high spirits; and myself, quite as happy as are the rest; all step down upon the platform at the

Trafton depot, and one after another grasp the outstretched hands of Harvey James, whom we all will call Jim Long in spite of ourselves, and then receive the hearty welcome of the Harris's, senior and junior, and many other Traftonites.

We have come to witness the end of our Trafton drama, viz., the marriage of Louise Barnard and Carl Bethel.

Bethel is as happy as mortals are ever permitted to be and as handsome as a demigod. There are left no traces of his former suffering; the wound inflicted by a hired assassin has healed, leaving him as strong as of old, and only the scar upon his breast remains to tell the story of the long days when his life hung by a thread.

Of the blow that was aimed at his honor, there remains not even a scar. The plot of the grave robbers has recoiled upon their own heads. Dr. Carl Bethel is today the leading physician, and the most popular man in Trafton.

"I have waited for this event," says Harvey James, as we sit chatting together an hour before the marriage. "I have waited to see them married, and after this is over, I am going West."

"Not out of our reach, I hope!"

"No; I have still the surplus of the price of my farm; enough to buy me a ranche and stock it finely. I mean to build a roomy cabin and fit it up so as to accomodate guests. Then by-and-by, when you want another Summer's vacation, you and Carnes shall come to my ranche. I have talked over my plans with Bethel and his bride, and they have already accepted my hospitality for next year's vacation. I anticipate some years of genuine comfort yet, for I have long wanted to explore the West, and try life as a ranchman, but I would not leave Trafton while Brooks continued to flourish in it. Do you mean to accept my invitation, sir?"

"I do, indeed; and as for Carnes, you'll get him to come easier than you can persuade him to leave."

"Nothing could suit me better."

Louise Barnard made a lovely bride, and there never was a merrier or more harmonious wedding party.

During the evening, however, the fair bride approached Jim—or Harvey James—and myself, as we stood a little aloof from the others. There was the least bit of a frown upon her face, too, as she said:

"I can't help feeling cross with you, sir detective. Somebody must bear the blame of not bringing Adele Lowenstein to my wedding. I wrote her that I should take her presence as a sign that she fully believed in the sincerity of my friendship, and that Trafton would thus be assured of my entire faith in her, and yet, she declined."

I do not know what to say in reply. So I drop my eyes and mentally anathematize my own stupidity.

"Do you know why she refused to come?" she persists.

While I still hesitate, Jim—I must say Jim—touches my arm.

"Your delicacy is commendable," he says in my ear. "But would it not be better to tell Mrs. Bethel the truth, than to allow her to think the woman she has befriended, ungrateful?"

I feel that he is wise and I am foolish; so I lift my eyes to her face and say:

"Mrs. Bethel, Adele Lowenstein had one secret that you never guessed. If you had seen her, as I saw her, at the bedside of your husband, on the day after the

attempt upon his life, *you*, of all women in the world, would understand best why she is not at your wedding to-day.”

She utters a startled exclamation, and her eyes turn involuntarily to where Carl Bethel stands, tall and splendid, among his guests; then a look of pitying tenderness comes into her face.

“Poor Adele!” she says softly, and turns slowly away.

“Adele Lowenstein is not the woman to forget easily,” I say to my companion. “But there,” and I nod toward Gerry Brown, “is the man who would willingly teach her the lesson.”

“Then,” says Jim, contentedly, “it is only a question of time. Gerry Brown is bound to win.”

(14-1) Handsome.