

Tragedy Trail

by Johnston McCulley, 1883-1958

Published: 1919

*** **

Table of Contents

Chapter 1 ...	A Queer Death.
Chapter 2 ...	The Mystery Deepens.
Chapter 3 ...	Trimble Takes the Trail.
Chapter 4 ...	The Bride-Elect.
Chapter 5 ...	Wanted—A Motive.
Chapter 6 ...	The Truth.

*** **

Chapter 1

A Queer Death.

SWEAT seemed to cover the buildings, the air was stagnant, the gathering darkness had a peculiar quality, somehow suggesting coming tragedy. So thought Mrs. Burke as she opened the front door and stood at the top of the small flight of steps, wiping her hands on her apron, and looking up and down the street, and then at the threatening sky.

The street was not unlike scores of similar side streets in the city. Old houses, that once had been mansions owned by persons of refinement and wealth, now were converted into stores on the ground floor and rooming houses above. Here and there between the stores was a short flight of steps that led to a heavy door with a plate glass upper half. These doors invariably opened into boarding houses.

Mrs. Burke operated one of these houses, and had for some years. She admitted to fifty summers, and was a woman of ample bosom, wide hips, stringy red hair, and kind smile. Mrs. Burke could smile even while ejecting an undesirable boarder.

As she opened the door and stood on the top step this particular evening she sighed—which was unusual—and could not explain why she did so. It had been sultry all day, and now rain threatened. It was an oppressive evening, one to cause uneasiness to human beings, the sort of evening when a man seems to feel a premonition, grows nervous, dislikes to retire and yet does not want to remain up, and, in short, has a feeling that there is "something in the air."

Mrs. Burke catered to young women who were employees in shops and offices. She called them "my girls." Many a young wife, happy in a flat of her own, could look back at her days at Mrs. Burke's place and give thanks that she had met that sort of landlady.

For Mrs. Burke had the happy faculty of reading persons aright. If a girl was deserving but in momentary hard luck, Mrs. Burke knew it and gave what help she could. If a girl spent money unwisely for clothes she did not need, and then attempted to put off paying her board, Mrs. Burke knew exactly what sort of sermon to deliver.

"There'll be a storm," Mrs. Burke said to herself now, as she glanced down the street. It was her habit to do this each evening just before "her girls" came home from their work. It was her little moment. She knew that every boarder would be wondering what would be the foundation of the evening meal. Mrs. Burke never allowed her table to grow monotonous, but she did not go to great expense to give variety. "She can take five cents' worth of meat and an onion and make a dish that

a French chef would strive hopelessly to equal," one of her girls had said not long before.

The landlady's face grew brighter now, for a young woman hurried around the corner and approached the flight of steps, walking briskly and without a hint of fatigue, though she had been standing behind a counter the greater part of the day, battling bargain hunters. Mrs. Burke welcomed her with a smile.

"On time, as usual, dearie," she purred. "Always come straight home, don't you? And how is pretty Miss Alice Patton this evening?"

"Hungry!" Alice Patton replied, laughing and flushing a bit. She knew that she was pretty. Even other women told her that. "Is Mabel home yet?"

"She came home at noon," the landlady answered. "She has one of her sick headaches."

"Oh! I'm sorry!"

"Too much embroidery," declared Mrs. Burke, shaking her head. "It isn't good."

"I know that it's bad for our eyes—and heads," Alice Patton replied. "But this is a special occasion, and we haven't much time. Jessie Simpson used to work with us, you know. The three of us were pals. And when she let us know that she was going to be married, you can bet that we wanted to make her a present."

"Naturally," said Mrs. Burke.

"And we didn't want to buy her something that anybody can buy in any cheap shop. So we decided that we'd make her a centerpiece—and it's going to be a beauty! We have to do most of the work at night, of course."

"You've been working on the thing for more than a month."

"Well, it is almost done. Mabel and I both knew a little about embroidery, and Mrs. Roberts showed us a lot more. You know about Mrs. Gordon Roberts, don't you? She's rich—class!—and president of the working girls' club. She's always at the club at the noon hour, during luncheon. Oh, she's great!"

"I know all about her," said Mrs. Burke. "She's a widow, same as I am, only she's rich, and about twenty-eight, and moves in the highest society. She's the first society woman I ever knew about who went into such a thing sincerely. It isn't just a plaything with her. She has helped the girls a lot."

"I suppose I'd better run in and see how Mabel is before I get ready for dinner," Alice Patton said.

"She's got a headache, that's all," Mrs. Burke persisted. "This is going to be an awful night; I can feel it in my bones. The air is so heavy and depressing."

"That's due to the decaying vegetables in the Italian grocery across the street," Alice Patton responded.

She hurried into the house, ran quickly up the stairs, tossed her hat on the bed in her own little room, and then hurried to the room of her particular chum, Mabel Higgins.

Miss Higgins was stretched across the foot of her bed, with a wet towel wrapped around her head.

"It's the same old thing, Alice," she complained. "I endured it all morning, and went to the girls' club for lunch, and then decided that I'd come home. Mrs. Roberts was there, and she said it would be foolish for me to go back to work."

"You've been using your eyes too much."

"We've got to get that centerpiece done, Alice. We haven't much more time."

"Don't you worry about that," Alice Patton told her. "I'll come in here after dinner and work on it as late as I can; or I'll take it to my own room, if you want to keep the lights out here."

"Please come in," Mabel decided. "I'll be all right if I just stay still for a time."

"Want some dinner?"

"No. I told Mrs. Burke that she might bring me some tea and toast; that's all I can eat. I'll be all right in an hour or so if I keep quiet. I feel so—so creepy!"

"It's the weather, Mabel. It makes me feel shivery, too. I think there is going to be a storm."

Alice Patton went to her own room again, and ten minutes later was in the big dining room eating with the others. The meal at an end, she hurried back to her chum's room. Mabel Higgins had consumed her tea and toast.

"Where's that centerpiece?" Alice demanded.

"In the top drawer of the bureau."

"Sure you don't want me to go to my own room to work?"

"No, dear. I'm much better now. And we can talk if you work at it in here. My head doesn't ache so bad if I keep my eyes closed and don't move around."

Alice Patton took the big centerpiece from the drawer, sat down beside the table, adjusted the light, and began the work.

"To think that Jessie Simpson will be a bride before the end of another week!" she said.

"She's getting a good man, too," Mabel added. "He's steady and straight."

"A plumber!"

"They make tremendous wages, dear. Jessie is a lucky girl. She'll have a dandy flat."

"And she'll have some centerpiece to put on her table!" Alice Patton said.

"I showed it to Mrs. Roberts at noon, and she said that we had done fine. She told me about a new stitch, too."

"This needle is about as dull as it could be."

"You'll find a couple of new ones in that little envelope on the dresser. Mrs. Roberts gave them to me. They are a better kind for this sort of work, she said. She had a package of them—just got them at the dealer's."

"She's a funny rich woman," Alice Patton commented; "always wanting to be at work."

"She was working on a scarf to-day—and it was some scarf!" Mabel Higgins said. "She just loves to do fancy work, even if she is rich. I'll bet she almost pays the rent of that little shop where she buys her stuff. I went there with her once. A queer little fellow runs it. He's some sort of foreigner. Mrs. Roberts told me that he knows more about embroidery and silks and needles and patterns than any woman on earth. He's really an expert."

"Deliver me from being an expert on embroidery!" Alice Patton exclaimed. "When we get this centerpiece finished I am done with embroidery for life! If you ever decide to get married, Mabel, I'll buy you a cut-glass pickle dish."

She got the package of needles, selected one and threaded it, and sat down to resume her work. There was silence for a time. And then Mabel Higgins started to get up from the bed.

"Better lie still," Alice advised.

"I just want a drink of water."

"Stay on the bed, and I'll get it for you. I want one myself. Oh, confound it!"

"What's the trouble?"

"I stuck my finger with the needle, if you want to know. That is the 'steenth time this week. I'm not very handy with the thing, it seems to me. Jessie Simpson never will know what I've suffered to help make her a wedding present."

She put the centerpiece upon the table and went into the bathroom adjoining. Mabel Higgins heard her start the water, fill a glass, and guessed that she was drinking.

"This water seems to taste queer tonight!" she said.

Mabel Higgins heard the water running again, and knew that the glass was being filled once more. Then the water was shut off, and Alice Patton came back into the room, carrying the glass.

"At the store to-day——" she began.

She seemed to choke on the sentence. Mabel Higgins turned slowly on the bed to regard her.

"What—what is it, Alice?" she gasped.

For her friend's face had turned white and her eyes had closed. She dropped the glass of water to the floor and clutched at her breast with both hands, gasping, seeming to struggle to speak. Then she tottered and fell with a crash.

Mabel Higgins' cry rang through the house. Other girls heard it and ran into the hallways from their rooms, and Mrs. Burke hurried up the narrow stairs as rapidly as her bulk would permit, to ascertain the cause of the trouble.

"Alice! Alice!" Mabel Higgins was crying.

Mrs. Burke burst into the room with half a dozen girls at her heels. They saw Alice Patton stretched upon the floor, one arm bent beneath her body. Her face was ashen, and her eyes were open and fixed.

Mrs. Burke was a woman of broad experience; she needed but the one glance.

"Dead!" she said. "Telephone for a doctor, one of you girls—but she's dead!"

Chapter 2

The Mystery Deepens.

BEFORE the physician arrived Mrs. Burke drove the panic-stricken girls to the lower floor, led the frantic Mabel Higgins to another room, and tried her best to restore silence and order.

Mrs. Burke was used to emergencies, and she found herself confronted by one now. She did not pretend to know what had caused this sudden death of a girl in excellent health and spirits, apparently; that was for the doctor to determine. Her present duty was to quiet the other boarders and preserve the reputation of her boarding house. She did not want a tragedy to drive away her only means of livelihood.

The physician arrived, and Mrs. Burke conducted him to the room where the dead girl was stretched on the floor. At the first glance the doctor pronounced life extinct and then he began his careful examination. Mrs. Burke stood near one of the windows and said nothing. It would be time for her to talk when there were questions asked.

After an interval the physician got to his feet and stepped across to the landlady, whom he had known for years.

"Mrs. Burke," he asked, "what have you to tell me?"

"Very little, doctor. Alice Patton has boarded with me for more than a year, and so has Mabel Higgins, her particular chum, who has this room. Alice came from work as usual this evening and seemed to be in good spirits. Mabel was home with a headache, and after dinner Alice came up here to work on some embroidery and talk to Mabel. A little later we heard Mabel scream. I hurried upstairs and found Alice on the floor, as you see her now."

"Um!" the doctor grunted. "What sort of girl was she? Rather nice sort?"

"One of the very best!" Mrs. Burke replied, without a trace of hesitation. "And I'm not saying that just because she is dead now, either; I mean it. I'd have been proud of a daughter like Alice Patton. She was a kind, lovable girl, and everybody liked her."

"She hasn't been having the blues lately, has she, or anything like that?"

"She always seemed to be in good spirits. Just what are you driving at doctor?"

"You don't think she'd commit suicide?"

"Good heavens, no!"

"Mrs. Burke," the doctor said, "I regret it very much, because it happened in your house, but I shall have to notify the coroner, of course—and the police."

"The police?"

"Miss Patton died as the result of poison."

"Doctor!"

"And from an unusual poison, which is very difficult to obtain. It may have been an accident—or suicide—or foul play."

"Why, Alice Patton didn't have an enemy in the world!" Mrs. Burke declared.

"We never know, Mrs. Burke," the physician said, out of the wisdom acquired through years of practice among all sorts of persons. "I'll remain here until the officers come, of course, and do what I can to save you annoyance. Please leave everything in the room exactly as it is. Get the other young ladies into your back parlor and keep all of them there for the present. Perhaps I can let the police in and get them upstairs without the other boarders knowing."

"Thank you, doctor," Mrs. Burke said.

She went down the stairs to collect the other frightened boarders, and the doctor closed the door of the room and followed her. He telephoned the coroner, and to police headquarters, and then waited outside on the steps to the house.

The police detective who answered the call was a man of wide metropolitan experience. His name was Darter. He was acquainted with the doctor, who told him all that he knew in a few words.

"Sorry if it bothers Mrs. Burke, but we've got to get to the bottom of this," the detective said.

The coroner's assistant arrived and made his superficial examination, and the body was removed. Then the detective and the doctor went to the back parlor, where Mrs. Burke was speaking in low tones to her boarders, girls with horror written in their faces. They could not believe that Alice Patton, the favorite of the house, who had been eating dinner with them so short a time before, was dead.

The detective whispered to the landlady, and she, in turn, took Mabel Higgins into another room, the detective and the doctor going along.

"Miss Higgins," the detective said, "I want you to tell me, please, just what happened. Try to be as calm as possible, and tell me everything. Do not omit a thing, no matter how insignificant it may seem to you."

Mabel Higgins strove to be calm, but her recital was interrupted by frequent fits of sobbing. Alice had come into her room to work on the piece of embroidery, she said. The girl had appeared as cheerful as usual. She insisted on getting the water, when Mabel wanted a drink, saying that she wanted one herself.

"Did she take it?" the detective asked.

"I think she did," Mabel replied. "It sounded like it. I couldn't see her, of course. And then she drew a glass of water for me and came back into the room. She began to say something, and then seemed to choke. I turned over to look at her. She dropped the glass and clutched at her breast—and dropped on the floor."

Mabel Higgins began sobbing again, and the detective waited until Mrs. Burke comforted her and she was calm once more.

"Please come up to the room with us, Miss Higgins," he said then.

The girl went, with Mrs. Burke's arm around her waist. She stood near the door, white, shaking, looking at the place on the floor where her dead chum's body had been.

"Is this the water glass?" the detective asked, picking it up from the floor.

"Yes, sir."

He went into the bathroom with the doctor, and they looked at the toilet preparations and investigated the tiny medicine chest. There was no poison of any description, no empty vial.

"How would that stuff have to be carried?" the detective asked the physician.

"It could be carried in almost any way. It might be in liquid form, or merely a bit of paste, or a powder."

"And how soon does it cause death?"

"That depends upon conditions, of course. The poison is virulent. I should say that, taken into the stomach, or introduced directly into the blood, it would cause death in from two to ten minutes, depending upon the constitution and general condition of the victim."

"Then the girl could have swallowed it in here when she took a drink and have reached the other room before she dropped dead?"

"Yes. But it would have had to have been in a bit of paper or a small bottle. However, if it was in paste form, a piece one-quarter the size of a pea would have done the work, and it could have been carried in a corner of a handkerchief. A speck of the stuff would cause death in some cases."

"Possibly, then, she committed suicide."

"But this poison cannot be obtained readily, even by chemists or members of the medical profession," the doctor protested. "And that girl was not the sort to commit suicide."

"You never can tell."

"That's true, of course," replied the doctor.

They went back into the room.

"Miss Higgins," the detective asked, "do you think it impossible that Miss Patton killed herself?"

"Oh, she wouldn't have done such a thing!" Mabel Higgins cried. "She was happy—glad to be alive—healthy—had no sorrows or trouble at all. She was joking with me just before——"

"Sure she didn't have any trouble?"

"I would have known it if she had been in trouble. We have been chums for about three years. She always told me everything—and I always told her everything. I'm sure that she wasn't in trouble, or anything like that."

"No man in the case?"

"Oh, no! She did not care much for men. Neither of us had a sweetheart, if that is what you want to know. We seldom went out evenings, except together, and no men called on us here. It wasn't anything like that."

"Did you ever know of her having an enemy?"

"Never! She wasn't the kind to have enemies!" Mabel Higgins declared.

"You are sure that you have told me everything?"

"Why, yes! She was sitting there working on the centerpiece and talking in an ordinary way about ordinary things. She just went into the bathroom to get a drink and bring me one. She said something about the water tasting queer——"

"You didn't tell me that before," the detective interrupted. He stopped her further talk with a gesture and whirled toward the landlady.

"Mrs. Burke," he said, "let nobody use water from any of the faucets in the house. Make sure of it! We don't want another tragedy here! I'll take a bottle of that water along and have it examined immediately. And I'll take that glass, too. Keep everybody out of that bathroom until we have an expert investigate the plumbing and fixtures."

"But what—what does it mean?" Mabel Higgins gasped.

"Your chum was poisoned," the detective replied. "You didn't have any poison around, did you?"

"Oh, no!"

"The doctor tells me that this poison causes almost instant death. She took a drink of water and died. She made the remark that the water tasted queer. It is just a supposition, of course, but we can't afford to be taking chances. Mrs. Burke, I'd put this young woman in some other room, where she will feel more at ease, and have this chamber closed for the time being. We may want to make another investigation in here."

"Come downstairs with me, Mabel," the landlady said in motherly tones.

"I—I can't believe it!" the girl exclaimed. "I can't realize it. Just a short time ago she was sitting there by the table, working on the centerpiece. See? There is the needle stuck through the edge of the cloth, just as she left it."

She picked up the piece of embroidery, fumbled at the needle, the tears streaming down her cheeks again.

"Come on with me, dear," Mrs. Burke said, putting an arm around her as the doctor motioned to get her out of the room. "Let's go downstairs."

She led the weeping girl away, Mabel Higgins still clutching to her breast the piece of embroidery upon which her chum had been working just before she died.

The physician stepped out into the hall. The detective had filled a bottle he had found, with water from the faucet in the bathroom, and took possession of the glass from which Alice Patton had drunk a few seconds before death claimed her. He turned out the lights and closed the door, locking it and putting the key into one of his pockets.

"If I need you again before the inquest, doctor, I'll call you by telephone," he said.

"Glad if I can be of service in any way."

"Oh, there may be nothing much to this case; and, again there may be a great deal. A man never can tell in a case like this, especially at the first glance. We may have to call in Terry Trimble before we are done, and Heaven knows it isn't safe to call upon him unless the affair is highly unusual and puzzling. He has helped the police out of several bad holes recently. We hate to call upon him, of course—professional jealousy—but sometimes we find it necessary."

"I've heard that he is good," the doctor said.

"Good? He's a wonder!" the detective replied, without any trace of the professional jealousy he had mentioned.

"He keeps his wits about him when he's on a case. He declares that there is no such thing as a mystery, and that what people call mysteries can be read as easily as print, providing that a man knows how to read."

"Exactly," the doctor said; "providing that a man knows how. But not every man does."

"Trimble doesn't look at a bit of dirt through a magnifying glass, and then tell you that a red-headed man with a crooked nose did the murder with an ax, and that you'll find him eating corned beef and cabbage at the restaurant on the corner. Trimble just uses common sense, that's all—common sense. That's why he's great!"

"You seem to admire him," said the doctor, starting to lead the way down the stairs... ..

"I do! He showed me up once; that's why. I thought that I was some detective before I watched him work. I'll never forget that case as long as I live. It was a poison case, too.⁽²⁻¹⁾ We were—— Now, what?"

They stopped, astounded. From the floor below there had come a screech, followed by a chorus of shrieks. A dozen female voices cried out in sudden alarm, the voice of Mrs. Burke being heard above the others.

The physician and the detective dashed on down the stairs and ran through the hallway to the rear of the building. They reached the door of the back parlor and there stopped.

Mabel Higgins was stretched upon the floor in the middle of the room, and the other girls were crowding back against one of the walls, badly frightened, their eyes wide with horror, some of them sobbing. Even Mrs. Burke, who usually was

self-possessed and calm, now seemed to be stricken with terror as she rushed toward the two men in the doorway, gasping, her arms outstretched, trying to explain the, thing.

"She just—just toppled over!" Mrs. Burke cried. "I was right there beside her when——"

The physician hurried into the room and knelt by the girl. The detective followed him, glancing quickly around the apartment.

"She has fainted, probably too much excitement and the horror of her chum's death," the detective said. "You'd better get her into a bed and give her something to make her sleep, doctor."

The physician got slowly to his feet and stepped back, turning his back to the other boarders and whispering to the detective without any of the others overhearing.

"You are wrong," he said. "The girl is dead—and from the same cause as the other. You'd better telephone for help!"

Chapter 3

Trimble Takes the Trail.

TERRY TRIMBLE looked up from the volume of poetry he was reading and glanced across the library table at Billings, his secretary and assistant.

"Billings," he said, "this is a terrible storm."

"Yes, sir," said Billings.

"Listen to that thunder! And the lightning display is something unusual. I am glad, Billings, that I have ample funds, a comfortable suite, an agreeable secretary, cases filled with books, an easy-chair before the gas grate, slippers and a dressing gown. This would be a terrible night, Billings, to venture out."

"Yes, sir."

"And so, naturally, I shall not do so," Terry Trimble declared. "If the governor stabs the mayor in some mysterious fashion, and causes the blame to be put upon an alderman, I shall not interfere. Let the police settle their own alleged puzzles. I have one of my own, Billings."

"A puzzle, sir?"

"Exactly. Here is a volume of verse—some critics allege that it is poetry. I am trying to ascertain what the publisher saw in it to cause him to risk his money and reputation to bring out the book. It is some puzzle, Billings; it is, indeed."

"I suppose so, sir."

"And, in addition to that——"

Terry Trimble stopped the sentence in the middle, one hand raised in the air after the manner of a professional lecturer, and grinned at Billings.

"Some fool is attempting to use the telephone, Billings," he said. "Nobody should use a telephone during a storm like this unless a doctor is needed. I am of the opinion that the storm has crossed all the wires, and, if you answer that call,

Billings, somebody will probably want to know if this is Jack, and will he come over to-night, despite the storm just to show that he truly loves her."

"I don't doubt it, sir," Billings said, smiling.

"You are an excellent secretary, Billings, with one exception. You are deaf on nights such as this. Were the telephone bell to ring, you would not hear it, would you, Billings? You would not! As I was saying, Billings, this alleged poet must have hypnotized the publisher, or else he saw him bury the body. I am of the opinion—
—Oh, answer the thing, Billings!"

Billings got up and walked toward the telephone, still smiling.

"And, Billings!"

"Sir?"

"If that is one of my alleged friends who wants me to come to the club, tell him I have been taken down with smallpox. If it is a lady I am busy on a case. I do not intend to leave the house tonight."

Billings took down the receiver and answered the call.

"I'm afraid that you cannot speak to Mr. Trimble, sir," Billings said. "He is busy and must not be disturbed." He turned his head, and Terry Trimble winked at him. "What's that, sir? Urgent, you say? Nevertheless, I feel quite sure——Oh, I'll tell him, sir."

He turned to Trimble and grinned again, putting one hand over the mouth of the transmitter.

"Police headquarters, sir," he said. "The commissioner speaking. He says he wouldn't bother you, except that it is urgent."

"Everything is always urgent with the commissioner," Terry Trimble grumbled.

He left the comfortable chair and stepped across to the telephone.

"Hello!" he cried. "Commissioner? What seems to be the trouble now? One of your patrolmen got lost in the rain, or something like that? What's that? Don't know whether it's murder, suicide or accident? Why, in Heaven's name, don't you find out before you bother me? Oh, I see. You want me to find out, eh? Well, tell me about it."

Billings, standing a few feet away, watched Terry Trimble's face as he listened at the telephone. He analyzed the expressions of it with wisdom. Soon he turned and slipped from the room. When he returned Trimble was still listening at the telephone. Billings had Trimble's overshoes, coat, raincoat, hat and gloves.

"Very well. I suppose I'll have to look into it," Trimble said. "I'll be over immediately, yes!"

Billings reached out and pressed the button that warned the chauffeur to have Terry Trimble's big limousine in front immediately. Then, as Trimble turned around, his secretary advanced with the coat.

"Um!" Terry Trimble said. "All ready for me, are you?" One of these times, Billings, you'll guess wrong. Some day I'll turn around, see you with my coat ready, and, just for spite, will refuse to answer the call."

Billings continued to grin as he helped Trimble on with his things and handed him his gloves.

"I am to accompany you, sir?" Billings asked.

"No, Billings. I'll telephone if I need you. It is your good fortune, Billings, to remain before the fire. Take a look at that book and see if you find merit in it."

Terry Trimble hurried down in the elevator, gave his chauffeur the address of Mrs. Burke's boarding house, sprang into the limousine, and lighted a cigarette. The commissioner had told him a great deal about the case, but Terry Trimble had forgotten it as soon as he had decided to answer the call. Trimble always liked to gain his first impressions on the scene of a crime. Other men might have an incorrect idea, pass it on to him, and set him off on a wrong trail.

The big machine skidded along the streets. The rain pelted the windows. Terry Trimble, glancing out, saw that there were few vehicles and fewer pedestrians abroad.

"I trust this is an easy case, that can be solved indoors," he told himself. "This is no night for chasing criminals, interesting or otherwise."

The limousine stopped at the curb before Mrs. Burke's, and Terry Trimble got out, shielded his face against the raging storm, and darted up the steps. He did not even speak to the chauffeur, who had been in his employ for some time and knew what to do. The chauffeur would get inside the limousine and remain there, smoking and watching the storm, until Terry Trimble put in an appearance again and issued orders. From experience the chauffeur knew that this might be in fifteen minutes or twenty-four hours.

Trimble was met at the door by the city detective who first had been sent out on the case.

"Well, Darter, we meet again!" Trimble said.

He removed his coat and hat and gloves, rearranged his cravat, rubbed his hands, and scowled at the water on his shoes. Instead of reporting to solve the mystery of a crime Terry Trimble might have been calling as a guest at a reception, except that he was not in evening clothes. Then Trimble adjusted his monocle, glared at Darter through it, and cleared his throat.

"The commissioner told me something of this case, but I have forgotten it," he said.

Detective Darter grinned. He knew Trimble's methods, because he had worked with him before.

"Two girls are dead," Darter said. "The doctor—he is in the rear parlor treating half a dozen cases of hysteria—says they both died of poison, a peculiar poison that is hard to obtain and seems to kill a person as quick as a shot through the heart."

"Well, well!" Trimble said. "And why call me?"

Darter scratched his head a moment before he replied. He never knew quite how to speak to Terry Trimble.

"Well, we don't see how they could get the stuff," he admitted. "Neither girl seems to have had an enemy and——"

"That'll do!" Trimble said. "I'm asking for facts, not conjectures, my dear Darter. Let me attack this problem with an open mind. Where are the dead girls?"

"Undertaking establishment. The coroner's assistant ordered the bodies removed."

"Let us hope that he has not caused us a lot of unnecessary work," Trimble said.

"I'll take you up to the room where——"

"I fancy the front parlor at present," Trimble said, walking into it and beckoning the detective to follow. "Sit down, Darter, and make yourself comfortable. Two girls have died of poison, have they? Then we may safely assume that the case is either suicide, accident, or foul play."

"Naturally," said Darter.

Trimble glared at him.

"The workings of a nimble mind," he said, as if to nobody in particular. "I have stated the case, however. No doubt that the girls are dead?"

"Not the slightest. I'll call the doctor."

"One moment. I want to hear your story first," Terry Trimble told him. "Let us consider the suicide theory. Did these girls die at the same time?"

"No. The body of the first had been removed before the second died."

"We'll talk about the first."

"Her name was Alice Patton. She didn't commit suicide. Mrs. Burke and the girls here say that would be the last thing she would do."

"You seem to be certain of it, so we'll pass the suicide theory for the time being. How about accident?"

"Exactly what I think it was," Darter declared.

"I think I'll let you talk."

Detective Darter talked. He told Terry Trimble what Mabel Higgins had said before she died, how Alice Patton had gone to the bathroom, had taken a drink of water and remarked that it tasted queerly, and then had stepped back into the other room and dropped dead.

"Analyzing the water and having the glass examined?" Terry Trimble asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Let us consider the second girl, then. Miss Higgins, I believe you said her name was. Did she drink of the water?"

"That is the funny part of it—she didn't."

"So she couldn't have obtained the poison by drinking water, as you think her chum did. Have you considered a suicide pact?"

"I thought of it," Darter admitted. "But the landlady and the rest of the girls declare Alice Patton and Mabel Higgins were not that sort. They seemed glad to be alive—both healthy and happy and working. A suicide pact doesn't seem possible."

"Anything is possible," Trimble said. "Suppose we assume that Alice Patton had some secret trouble and Mabel Higgins knew of it. Alice had threatened to take her life, and her chum coaxed her out of the notion and told nobody. Finally Miss Patton does the deed. Her chum thinks a lot of her, the horror of her death grips her, and she takes poison herself. That might be the case without the world being aware of the girls' trouble, you know."

"By Jove, I believe you've hit it already!" Darter exclaimed, with enthusiasm.

"Ass!" Trimble commented. "Where would the second girl get the poison? If it is a poison difficult to obtain, she wouldn't have some of it around, would she, awaiting the day she might decide to take her own life? And you told me that the landlady was with her all the time after her chum's death. Don't jump to conclusions, Darter. Some day you'll land wrong and snap an ankle."

Darter expressed his chagrin, but managed to smile at the same time.

"Well?" he asked.

"It may have been an accident, but I doubt it when I remember that there were two victims and that they died almost a couple of hours apart, and especially do I doubt it when I remember that Miss Higgins did not take a drink of water. When we get the report of the analysis of the water and glass, we may know more about that. And now let us consider the idea of foul play."

"Everybody says neither of the girls had an enemy."

"Everybody doesn't know everything," Trimble commented. "They may have had an enemy without knowing it themselves."

"How could that be?" Darter asked.

"Great heavens! Suppose some foolish fellow saw the girls day after day and grew infatuated with one or both of them. Suppose they repulsed him, laughed at him, forgot him. But if he was a man who didn't forget a thing like that, a man with mind perverted enough to plan murder——"

"I see," said Darter.

"You're as blind as an owl in daytime," Trimble told him. "That's just a supposition. I suppose I shall have to look into this matter, confound it! And I was reading an excellent book of poetry. Get me right—rotten poetry, but an excellent book!"

"I am yours to command, Mr, Trimble," Darter said.

"How soon shall we know about that water and glass?"

"Very soon, sir. I told headquarters to telephone to me as soon as the chemist got through."

"Then, while we are waiting for the report of the chemist, I'll have an interview with Mrs. Burke," Trimble said.

The doctor came into the room as Trimble spoke. His face was white, his breath seemed to come in gasps, he acted as if he faced a horror that he could not understand.

"Pardon me, Mr. Trimble, but you cannot have an interview with Mrs. Burke," he said.

"Why not?"

"Mrs. Burke is dead."

"Dead?" cried Terry Trimble and Detective Darter in a breath.

"We were in her little sitting room," the physician said. "I was suggesting methods of quieting the young ladies, the boarders, who are almost panic-stricken. Mrs. Burke gasped as she was speaking to me, and then collapsed. She died instantly, Mr. Trimble. Her death was caused by poison—the same sort of poison that killed the two girls!"

Chapter 4

The Bride-Elect.

WHEN Terry Trimble heard the unexpected intelligence the physician had to impart he allowed his monocle to drop from his eye and clasped his hands behind his back. Those were the only ways in which he betrayed the surprise he felt.

There was silence for a moment, save for Darter's heavy breathing and the physician's gasps of horror, and then Trimble spoke in his usual quiet voice.

"Well, well!" he said. "This is unexpected, to say the least. This case grows interesting. It gives promise of being a thing out of the ordinary."

"For heaven's sake, sir!" the physician cried. "Can you realize what has happened? Three women have died mysteriously in this house within three hours—died of poison. And it does not seem to shock you! Can you not do something? Are you utterly without a heart, sir?"

"Rubbish!" Trimble exclaimed, screwing his monocle into his eye again. "Collect your wits, doctor. It would do a lot of good, I presume, if I exclaimed at the horror of it, cried out that the guilty person should be apprehended, took off my coat and waistcoat and ran around in a circle! Let us be calm, doctor! We cannot return the dead to life, but we may find the murderer, if there is one. Excitement will not aid us."

Darter and the physician looked ashamed. The latter gulped as he glanced at the self-possessed Trimble.

"It must be murder; yet I cannot see how, either," he said. "This particular poison——"

"What is it?" Trimble asked.

The physician told him.

"I know about it," Trimble surprised him by saying. "You cannot get it at one pharmacy in a thousand—which is as it should be. You are certain that all three women died from this poison? Very well. Our first task is to find out how they obtained it, how it was introduced into their systems."

"The Patton girl said something about the water tasting unusual," the doctor said.

"So I understand," Trimble replied. "But did the Higgins girl drink water after Miss Patton died? Did Mrs. Burke take a drink of water afterward from any faucet in the building?"

"I know that Mrs. Burke did not. I was with her all the time after Detective Darter warned her about the water."

"And our idea of a suicide pact is gone," Trimble continued. "Two girl chums of the romantic age might indulge in a suicide pact, as often has been the case, but such a woman as Mrs. Burke would not. It is either accident or murder. Let us go into Mrs. Burke's sitting room."

The agitated physician led the way, moving quickly along the hall toward the rear of the house, where Mrs. Burke had used a suite. He had not informed the boarders of their landlady's death, and he whispered that fact to Trimble now. Trimble, in turn, asked Detective Darter to see that a policeman was stationed in front of the house to allow anybody to enter, but to prevent anybody inside leaving.

"Just keep this quiet for the time being," Trimble instructed him. "We'll tell the boarders later."

They went into the sitting room. The body of Mrs. Burke was on the floor. Terry Trimble bent over it and regarded it carefully for a time, and then got up, adjusted his monocle, and looked around the room. His inspection was slow, painstaking, minute.

Then he asked to be shown to Mabel Higgins' room, where Alice Patton had died, and he made another investigation there. He ordered the doctor and Detective Darter to tell their stories again from the beginning, to relate everything that had happened, that had been said and done.

When they had finished Trimble shook his head in perplexity.

"There seems to be something missing," he said. "We have overlooked something vital, probably something small and insignificant on its face. I find no connection between the facts you have given me and a solution of these crimes."

"You mean that you are up against a stone wall?" Darter asked. "If you are this is a case that will go down in history as an unsolved mystery!"

Trimble glared at him.

"I admit that I am up against a stone wall at present," he said. "But I need not turn back. Why not climb the wall, or find a path round it, eh? The greater the seeming mystery, the better I like it. The solution probably will be simple. I have an idea, Darter, that the examination of the water and the glass will reveal nothing. We know for certain that neither Mabel Higgins or Mrs. Burke touched the glass after Alice Patton drank from it. We've got to look for something else. We've missed something."

He walked around the room again, looked into the bathroom, and then went into the hall and started down the stairs, the doctor and the detective following closely.

"Notify the coroner about Mrs. Burke, proceeding as usual," Trimble ordered. "I shall interview the other boarders. Take me in, Darter, and tell them my name and business here."

Darter escorted him in and made the proper announcement. The young women appeared more frightened than before. Trimble adjusted his monocle and smiled at them.

"Let us all be seated and make ourselves as comfortable as possible, please," he said. "No doubt these tragedies have shocked you, but unless we are calm we cannot explain them, and I feel sure that you want them explained. We cannot do anything worth while unless we get back our normal minds and look at things in a sane way. Do any of you know of anything that may help?"

He waited in vain for an answer. Some of the women shook their heads.

"Now I ask you to try to be calm, when I tell you something that you do not know," Trimble continued. "It is your right, I feel, that you should be acquainted with the facts at once. Your landlady, Mrs. Burke, has just died—as the others died."

He spoke the word quietly, but they seemed to strike his hearers as blows. They were far from being calm. They sprang from their chairs with exclamations of horror, some sobbing, some screeching, one declaring she was going to rush out into the storm, go anywhere to get away from the dreadful house.

<http://home.hiwaay.net/~ajohns/retro/Etext.htm>

"All of you will remain right here!" Terry Trimble declared, springing before the doorway. "There are policemen around this building to see that you do so. Remain right in this room for the time being. No doubt your nerves are on edge, but I'm pretty sure you'll be safe here!"

His brutality did more to bring them to their senses than anything else would have done. Trimble knew it, and that was why he used harsh methods.

There was a sudden commotion in the hall, and another girl came running into the room, to stop aghast when she saw the scene. She was drenched to the skin, as if she had run for blocks through the storm; she had lost her hat, and her hair was stringing down, and the expression in her face was one of horror.

"It isn't true! Tell me that it isn't true!" she cried. "They telephoned——"

Trimble took her by the arm and urged her toward the nearest chair.

"I am in charge here," he announced. "Try to calm yourself, young woman! Are you one of the boarders here?"

"No, sir. My name is Jessie Simpson. I used to chum with Alice Patton and Mabel Higgins. Somebody telephoned to me that they both had died—one of the girls here, I suppose, or else Mrs. Burke. Tell me that it isn't true!"

"I am very sorry, Miss Simpson, but it is true," Terry Trimble said, regarding her intently. "Sit down, Miss Simpson. Perhaps you can help us."

He waited until the girl had finished her first fit of sobbing and the others had returned to their chairs.

"How did it happen?" Jessie Simpson asked, after a time. "I can't believe that it is true!"

"Your two friends were poisoned," Trimble said as quietly as he could. "And Mrs. Burke, the landlady, has met a similar fate."

"I—I don't understand."

"Do you think that your two friends would have committed suicide?" Trimble asked.

"No! No!" Jessie Simpson cried. "They wouldn't do such a thing. They were both so happy and satisfied with life. They had no troubles. Why, they were embroidering a centerpiece as a wedding present for me! There was no reason——"

She broke down again, and Trimble, who wanted to question her more, was afraid that she would communicate panic to the half-hysterical girls in the room, and that he would have a group of unmanageable young women on his hands.

"Let us go into Mrs. Burke's suite and talk," he suggested. "Darter, you have telephoned to the coroner? Very well, then. Kindly remain here and keep these young ladies company for a time. Try to calm them. They may feel easier with a man in the room. Doctor, you come with Miss Simpson and me."

Darter understood, of course, that he was to keep all the girls there, in case Trimble should have need of them later. Trimble escorted the weeping Miss Simpson through the hall, and at a nod from him the doctor went ahead and closed the door between Mrs. Burke's little sitting room and her parlor, so that the girl would not see the body.

"Sit down, Miss Simpson," Terry Trimble said. "Try to compose yourself and answer my questions. You may help me bring the murderer of your friends to justice—if they were murdered."

"But who would take their lives?" she asked, fighting back her tears. "I knew them well. They didn't have an enemy in the world!"

"That is what everybody says, Miss Simpson, but we never can be quite sure."

"But we can in this case!" she persisted. "They never had any trouble with anybody, and they always were in high spirits. I cannot realize that they are dead. And to think that they were working on a centerpiece for my wedding present! See—here it is on the table!"

She picked it up and raised it before her tear-dimmed eyes.

"They showed it to me when they started working on it," she said. "Just think—every stitch has been made by them—and now they are dead. Why, I can't believe it! I'd—I'd like to have this—to remember them by."

"Take it, Miss Simpson, by all means," Trimble said. Anything to calm her, to get her in a condition where she could think sanely and talk properly!

Jessie Simpson started folding the big centerpiece. She was still sobbing, and Terry Trimble waited patiently for her to cease. He looked up at the doctor, and the physician shook his head to signify that he could do nothing; that, in such a case, the only thing was to wait until the tears had been shed.

"Did your chums have any particular men friends?" Trimble asked, after an interval.

"None in particular," the girl replied, clutching the big piece of fancy-work; "just the men at the place where they worked. They didn't seem to care much for men. Neither of them ever had a love affair. Other girls used to call us 'the old maids.' Finally I became engaged. But neither Alice nor Mabel was interested in one man more than another. They would have told me if they had been."

"Do you know of any man who was interested in either of them, who was repulsed by them?"

"No, I do not. I've heard the boys at the store say that the girls were just good pals. Everybody respected them; they didn't seem to want a romance."

"I suppose we must eliminate all thoughts of trouble with a man, then," Trimble said. "Did you ever know either of the girls to keep dangerous drugs about?"

"No; they didn't need drugs—except a headache pellet now and then," Jessie Simpson replied, putting the centerpiece on the table. "They were just normal, healthy, darling——"

Darter's voice, calling for the doctor, interrupted her. The physician hurried into the hall, and Terry Trimble paced the floor and waited for Jessie Simpson to have done with her fit of weeping and calm herself again. In a short time the doctor returned.

"Darter has just received a telephone message from headquarters, Mr. Trimble," he reported. "The water and the glass were examined, and the chemist found nothing unusual."

"That is as I expected," Terry Trimble said. "And, as I said before, there seems to be something vital missing in this case. To me that means that we are on the wrong track."

"And what do you propose——"

"Think!" Trimble interrupted. "Think!" he repeated. For a moment he stood quietly, meditating deeply. Then, with a start he exclaimed: "Ah! I believe I have it now Doctor——"

"If there is anything that I can do, command me, sir," the doctor hastily said.

"I'll appreciate it if you'll try to calm those young women in the back parlor," Trimble replied. "I'll want to talk to them soon."

He stepped forward, turning toward Miss Simpson; and, at the same instant, the doctor looked past him at the chair in which she was sitting. They were just in time to see her head drop forward and her body slip from the chair to the floor.

"Great heavens, doctor! I'm afraid we've another death to account for," Trimble cried. "See if you can do anything for her."

They hurried across the room to the girl's side. The doctor bent over her and an instant later looked up at Terry Trimble.

"Thank God!" he exclaimed. "She has only swooned. The ordeal has been too much for her. I don't wonder. But I'll soon bring her round."

Chapter 5

Wanted—A Motive.

AS Terry Trimble glanced at the fainting girl again, he decided to inform the doctor of his theory about the deaths, and opened his mouth to speak. But the statement he had decided upon was not voiced. Behind them they heard a gasp, a sort of gurgle, and then a shrill cry that was half hysteria and half terror, and could be heard throughout the house.

They whirled around, startled, to see one of Mrs. Burke's boarders standing just inside the doorway and staring at the girl on the floor. They ascertained later that she had managed to slip from the rear parlor through a passageway, had been trying to dodge Darter and get out of the house, had heard enough to compel her to step to the door, and now thought she knew additional cause for fear.

Terry Trimble sprang toward her instantly, in an attempt to prevent her spreading alarming, though false news, but he was too late. The terrified girl turned, and, holding her arms high above her head, rushed shrieking along the hall to the room where the other boarders were being watched by Detective Darter.

"She's dead! Jessie Simpson is dead!" she shrieked, before she could be prevented. "We'll all die if we stay here!"

There was instant panic. It was a culmination of the horrors of the night. Detective Darter found himself hurled suddenly to one side by terror-stricken girls as they rushed into the hallway. They brushed Trimble and the physician aside, also. They did not consider the raging storm, did not think of waiting to get their wraps, did not stop for hats or umbrellas. They thought only of getting away from that house of horror as speedily as possible. They tore open the front door and charged down the flight of steps to the street level, overwhelming the two policemen Darter had stationed there on guard. Down the street they ran, shrieking, sobbing, fleeing they knew not where, from they knew not what, scattering the news of the tragedies to the four winds.

Terry Trimble stood beside Detective Darter in the doorway, getting drenched by the storm, watching the two policemen picking themselves up from the gutter and the girls dashing around the nearest corner.

"Panic!" he said. "It couldn't be helped, I suppose. They'll spread the news, true and false both, all over the city in an hour. Come in, Darter, and let the patrolmen step inside and get dry. Send for more men and scatter them around the block. We'll have a crowd of curious persons around us soon, for the storm is abating."

Terry Trimble went into Mrs. Burke's suite again, where the doctor was standing beside Miss Simpson, who, very pale and frail-looking, was lying on a sofa. Detective Darter followed Trimble, after he had telephoned to the coroner and headquarters, and sank into the nearest chair.

"Pardon me, Mr. Trimble, but do you—er—want any help?" Darter asked.

"Think I am going to need it, eh? Just have your men scattered around to keep the crowd away, that's all. We don't want a lot of curious and morbid folk about."

"I have men in the alley already, and I just asked headquarters to send up a lot more."

"Very well. Listen to me now, Darter. I want your men to pretend to watch the block carefully. I want them to nab anybody they see leaving this building. But, if any person attempts to get in, I want that person to succeed in doing so, without being annoyed at all. Do you understand?"

"I think I do, sir. You are working on the old saw that a murderer always returns to the scene of his crime."

"Ass!" Trimble commented. "If we waited for that we'd have to take a long-term lease on the building, I'm afraid. The solution to the mystery is right here in this house."

"It gives a man the creeps," Detective Darter admitted. "Makes him almost afraid to touch anything, almost afraid to breathe. If there should be more of that confounded poison around—It may have been in the food!"

"Mabel Higgins was ill and ate no dinner," Trimble reminded him. "And not all the girls who did eat dinner died."

"Three victims within a few hours—and all of them women!" the doctor said.

"So you think that there may be something significant in that?" Trimble asked. "And by the same sort of poison, too—don't forget that—and a poison that is almost unobtainable. One thing is certain—we have not had an epidemic of suicide."

"But who on earth would want to kill a kind, motherly old woman like Mrs. Burke?" Darter asked. "Do you suppose that one of the girl boarders, angry because of favoritism or something like that, would have done it? Maybe I'd better have headquarters round up all those girls and hold them for examination."

"Good heavens!" Trimble cried. "The poor girls have been frightened badly enough as it is. Don't bother them. Let them get over their panic."

"It is my idea that they should be taken into custody and given the third degree," Darter said.

"Very well," Terry Trimble replied. "If your regular police methods are to be used in this case you won't need me. I'll go home and finish reading that book of alleged poetry. I can see that we are not going to agree."

Detective Darter sprang to his feet.

"Sit down, Trimble!" he cried. "Have everything your own way! You'll never be able to say that I drove you out of this case. The commissioner would skin me alive! Sit down! You're in command, so issue your orders."

"That is better," Trimble responded, smiling a bit. "Doctor, you may go if you wish. I trust that there'll be no more victims in this house."

"I have other patients," the doctor began, clearing his throat, and glancing around anxiously, and Miss Simpson seems to be all right now. If you have no objection I'll take her to her home and notify her fiance that she is safe."

The doctor and Miss Simpson prepared for immediate departure. The doctor, a physician of years' experience, was glad to be out of the house. He had seen misery, tragedy, violence, but in Mrs. Burke's boarding house Death seemed to walk unseen and to strike without the slightest warning.

After the departure of the doctor and Miss Simpson Terry Trimble picked up the centerpiece very carefully and, with Detective Darter, returned to the front parlor and sat down. Detective Darter waited for Trimble to speak.

This Terry Trimble did not hurry to do. Instead, he placed the centerpiece carefully on the table and then threw himself into a chair, as if exhausted, and lighted a cigarette. Then he adjusted his monocle and looked across at Darter silently.

"Anything I can do?" Darter asked finally.

"There are times," replied Terry Trimble, "when we take a tiny clew and trace it up to the big climax—which is the crime, of course. And, once in a great while, we must begin at the crime itself and trace backward, until we arrive at the little thing that explains it all. This is one of those times, Darter, I firmly believe."

"I don't understand you, sir."

"No matter," Trimble answered. "Perhaps I was just making talk. I have tried to reason this matter out, and right now I have a certain suspicion, Darter. There is a guilty person somewhere in the offing, of course—a person who intended to commit murder.

In such a case, we generally work from motive, don't we? And we seem to have no motive here. Does that convey anything to your nimble brain?"

"I don't quite see it."

"My suspicion is that the guilty person had not the slightest idea in the world of causing the death of Alice Patton, or Mabel Higgins, or motherly, kind Mrs. Burke."

"But, Trimble, what on earth are you getting at? You mean we are facing a series of accidents?"

"They were accidents in a way—but they are murders, of course, since the intent to kill was there. We have no motive now. We know the instrument of death, and how, I think, it was applied. But we do not know the name of the person who really was intended for the victim."

"I'm getting at it now, sir. That poison was meant for some other girl in this house, and the murderer, not knowing much about the stuff except that it was deadly, scattered it around and caught three persons he did not intend to kill. The one he did intend to kill has escaped."

"Something like that," Terry Trimble admitted; "But we are not sure the intended victim was a boarder in this house. The poison may have been carried

here accidentally from one of the stores or offices where the girls work. A speck of the stuff would be enough to cause a tragedy, remember. Touch your tongue to it—and you cease to exist in this world. Rub it into your eye, get it into a small cut, swallow it by accident—and you are gone! Can you understand how easy it would be?"

"Great heavens!" Detective Darter cried. "If that is the case, we have a big job ahead of us. Almost twenty girls live in this house. And they work all over the city—some in stores, some in office buildings, many in the financial district. We'd have to investigate every girl and every man and woman who works where they do—and some of them are clerks in department stores where thousands of persons are employed."

"It would be, indeed, a gigantic task; and so we shall not attempt it," Terry Trimble declared. "The mere thought of such a job gives me a headache."

"But you aren't going to drop this thing, are you?" Detective Darter cried.

"I am not in the habit of dropping things like this once I have started," Trimble rebuked him.

"If you want those girls rounded up——"

"It would only frighten them more—and I am afraid that it would not do us a bit of good," Trimble interrupted.

Darter looked at him helplessly.

"Then——" he began, but did, not continue the sentence.

Trimble puffed at his cigarette and regarded the detective through his monocle.

"It will not hurt us in the slightest to sit around and smoke—and think," he declared. "The storm has almost ceased, I notice. We shall have a lot of curiosity-seekers around here before long. And I hope that we shall have a visitor or two who has a heartfelt interest too."

He got up and walked to one of the windows, pulled back the side of the shade, and glanced out at the street. The wind and rain had ceased, but the gutters still ran full of water. Trimble's limousine was waiting opposite the house. Half a score of people were in the little Italian grocery, looking at the entrance of Mrs. Burke's place, and no doubt discussing the tragedies of the night.

"A regular tragedy trail!" Trimble mused. "A blind trail, too—in part. I wonder——"

He bent forward, all attention. Another limousine had turned the corner, running slowly, and now it pulled toward the curb and finally stopped in front of the entrance. The chauffeur sprang down and opened the door and raised an umbrella. A woman got from the car, took the umbrella and said something to the chauffeur, and then started up the flight of steps.

Trimble had obtained a good look at the woman. She was well-dressed, refined in appearance, and the limousine certainly indicated wealth. He dropped the side of the shade and whirled around.

"A visitor, Darter!" he announced to the detective. "Get to the door and usher her in yourself. In here, where I can talk to her."

As he finished speaking, the doorbell rang. Detective Darter hurried into the hall and toward the entrance. Terry Trimble extinguished his cigarette, flicked a bit of ash from one sleeve, adjusted his monocle anew, and stood with his hands behind his back and his back to the fireplace, waiting.

Darter opened the door. Trimble heard him speak and heard the low voice of the woman making reply. And then they approached the door of the front parlor.

Chapter 6

The Truth.

"I AM Mrs. Gordon Roberts," the woman said. "You are Mr. Terry Trimble, the detective?"

Trimble seemed to wince.

"Please do not call me a detective," he said. "It is a designation that I particularly detest. I call myself a trouble-maker—for criminals. Allow me to say that I have heard of you, Mrs. Roberts, and of your excellent work for working girls."

"That is why I am here, Mr. Trimble," Mrs. Roberts said, taking the chair that Trimble placed for her. "One of the girls boarding here telephoned me a short time ago that there was a series of tragedies. She said that Miss Alice Patton and also Mabel Higgins, two girls of whom I was very fond, had died mysteriously."

"Poisoned, Mrs. Roberts."

"Oh! That is horrible! The girl who telephoned said that they all had run away from the house. She appeared to be hysterical. So I thought I'd drive over and see if I could be of any service."

"We have had three tragedies," Terry Trimble told her. "Mrs. Burke, the landlady, also was a victim."

"This is terrible!"

"Perhaps you can aid us," Trimble said. "Let us take Alice Patton first."

"She was a glorious girl!" Mrs. Roberts said. "Always in good spirits, always willing to help others. She had a host of friends, too."

"It is enemies for whom we are seeking."

"I'm quite sure she didn't have an enemy in the world, Mr. Trimble."

"Do you know anything about her relations with men?"

"I do not think she had any. In fact, she and her chum, Mabel Higgins, used to be joked by the other girls about their attitude. They seemed to think that men were not necessary in their lives."

"You didn't know Mrs. Burke?"

"No; but I often heard the girls speak of her as a splendid, motherly woman. I cannot realize it, Mr. Trimble. Are you sure that they were victims of foul play?"

"Not exactly sure, but everything seems to point to that conclusion," Terry Trimble replied.

"I cannot understand it. They were such splendid girls. Alice and Mabel took a great interest in fancywork, which is one of my hobbies. They were making a centerpiece to be given to Jessie Simpson as a wedding present. I saw Mabel at noon; she ate luncheon at the girls' club and showed me the centerpiece. She had a headache, and I advised her to go home and rest. I gave her some embroidery needles——"

Mrs. Roberts lost control of herself for a moment and sobbed. And then she conquered her tears and looked up at Trimble again.

"If there is anything that I can do please inform me," she said. "I really expected to find some of the girls here, and comfort them."

"They grew panic-stricken and ran away in the storm," Trimble explained. "No doubt some of them will return to the neighborhood out of curiosity now that the storm has ceased. It will be a kind act, Mrs. Roberts, if you would calm them. They will want to find quarters elsewhere for the time being, of course."

"I can aid them to do that."

"The officers will allow them to get the few things they need, but I'd advise that they remove nothing now from their rooms that they can leave behind temporarily. It would be better if they took nothing now. There may be more poison in the house."

"I'll try to find them and do what I can," Mrs. Roberts said.

Darter appeared in the doorway.

"Pardon me, Mr. Trimble, but there is a man here you had better see," he said.

Trimble excused himself, asking Mrs. Roberts to wait a moment, and hurried into the hall. Near the front door was a small man who looked like a foreigner. He was stylishly dressed, very much the fop. He rushed at Trimble like a maniac.

"I have read the news in the extras!" he cried. "I am Giovanna Ricardo. I run a fancywork shop not far away."

"What brought you here?" Trimble demanded.

"Is it not enough that she is dead?"

"Whom do you mean?"

"Alice! My Alice!" Ricardo shrieked. "I loved her like life itself. She was just beginning to love me—had half promised to marry me. The paper says she is dead—poisoned! Who did it? How did it happen? If some man has taken her life, I swear to be avenged!"

"Be calm, Ricardo!" Trimble urged.

"How can I be calm—when my Alice is dead? And I have nothing—nothing by which to remember her. Our love was new;—we had not exchanged gifts. She was doing some fancywork, she told me. If I could have that——"

He ceased speaking, seemed to choke, and his eyes bulged. Terry Trimble whirled around to find that Mrs. Gordon Roberts had come from the parlor and was looking at Giovanna Ricardo in a peculiar manner.

"So you loved Alice Patton, did you?" she asked coolly.

"Ah! My dear Mrs. Roberts——"

"This is news to me," Mrs. Roberts said. "What manner of man are you, Ricardo?"

"Madame——"

"I believe you are half insane. I am quite sure that there was nothing between you and Alice Patton."

"But, madame——"

Terry Trimble interrupted.

"Let us all go into the parlor and talk about it," he suggested.

He signaled to Darter, who took up a position near the door. He ushered Mrs. Roberts to a chair, waved Ricardo toward another, sat down himself and regarded them. He could not quite analyze the expression on Mrs. Roberts' face.

"Now let us have the truth of the matter," Trimble said.

"This man Ricardo runs a shop where he sells fancywork and materials for making it," Mrs. Roberts said. "I purchased a lot of stuff from him, for he is excellent in his line. He is—well, temperamental. He fancied, a few days ago, that he was in love with me."

"Madame——" Ricardo began; but Trimble motioned for him to remain quiet.

"He even dared to speak to me of it," Mrs. Roberts continued. "When I laughed at him for his presumption he turned maniac. He declared that he would kill himself at my front door. When he saw that I did not believe him, and would not be frightened, he declared on oath that he would kill me!"

"I was crazed, madame!" Ricardo cried. "I did not mean it."

"And yet you say now that you were in love with Alice Patton," Trimble said.

"I worshiped Mrs. Roberts because she was so cultured, so refined," Ricardo explained. "I did not really love her, as I knew when I reflected. One day Miss Patton came to the shop with Mrs. Roberts. One look—and I knew! She was the one woman for Giovanna Ricardo. She did not care for men. But I managed to meet her often after that, and so——"

"She never told me anything about it," Mrs. Roberts said. "On the contrary, Alice Patton used to say what a funny little man you were. You were not the type to attract her."

"Love is peculiar," Ricardo declared. "Mine for her was so strong that she responded. She would have married me——"

He flashed a look of hatred at Mrs. Gordon Roberts, and Terry Trimble adjusted his monocle again.

"Ricardo," Mrs. Roberts said, "as late as yesterday morning I was in your shop to purchase embroidery needles. You spoke of your love for me again, and said it was consuming you, or something like that. I laughed at you, and you threatened me, and I said that you were silly and I would not trade with you any more. I got my needles and came away. And now, according to your story, you admit that you were violently in love with Alice Patton at that time."

"But, madame——"

"At ten o'clock this morning you were so violently in love with me that you threatened to kill me if I didn't marry you. I am quite sure that you didn't see Alice Patton after I was in your shop, for she was working, and she was at the girls' club for luncheon. And yet you had changed, fallen violently in love with her, and were winning her for your bride."

"You are a fast worker, Ricardo," Trimble said.

Ricardo wept again.

"I—I must explain," he said, "though it is humiliating. It is true that I loved Alice Patton from the first day she came into the shop with Mrs. Roberts. I fought to make her love me. I was between two fires, as the saying is. I wanted Alice for my wife—but I wanted money, too. If I could marry Mrs. Roberts, I could get money. But I really loved Alice."

"I see," Trimble commented, while Mrs. Roberts looked at the man with loathing. "If you could not marry money, then you would wed for love. Playing both ends, were you?"

"I am ashamed—but it is true," Ricardo said. "And now I have lost both. But I have the memory of my Alice. If I only possessed one little keepsake! The paper says she was working on a centerpiece just before she died. If I could have that—just as it is—to remember her by——"

Ricardo wept again. Trimble watched him closely and saw how he regarded Mrs. Gordon Roberts. He got up and stepped to the door, where Detective Darter was standing.

"Well, Darter," he whispered, "it is all over. We have the motive and everything else that we need. Come on into the parlor."

"I don't see it!" Darter said, stepping forward into the room.

"Watch!" Trimble whispered.

He went back across the room and touched Giovanna Ricardo on the shoulder.

"A man has the right to a keepsake of a person he loved," he said. "You shall have one."

"Thanks—thanks!" Ricardo gasped. "The fancywork, please, upon which she was working just before she died. I shall cherish it always."

"Won't something else do?" Trimble asked.

"I would rather have that. It is my own line of endeavor," Ricardo explained. "I showed her many stitches myself."

"Very well; you shall have it," Trimble said.

He crossed to the table and carefully picked up the centerpiece. Then he turned to Mrs. Roberts.

"Mrs. Roberts, shall I give this centerpiece to Mr. Ricardo, or would you desire it?" Trimble asked.

"I loved Alice so much! But Mrs. Roberts admired her also," Ricardo said. "And I have, perhaps, done Mrs. Roberts a wrong. If she wishes the centerpiece, sir, give it to her—and let me have some other keepsake."

Trimble whirled upon him.

"Very good!" he said, allowing his monocle to drop. "I wanted to hear you say something like that, Ricardo. It confirms a little theory I had. I think you had better have the centerpiece. See, Ricardo! Here is the needle, just as Alice Patton used it."

He extracted it cautiously from the edge of the centerpiece, and then suddenly bent forward and jabbed at Ricardo's arm with it. Ricardo gave a shriek of fear and plunged from the chair and against the wall. Terror was in his face.

"As I expected!" Terry Trimble said. "Darter! Handcuffs here!"

"I—I don't understand——" Ricardo began.

Darter thrust him against the wall and snapped the handcuffs into place.

"What does this mean?" Ricardo gasped. "You arrest me when my heart already is burdened with——"

"Quite simple!" Terry Trimble declared, adjusting his monocle again and glancing across the room at Mrs. Gordon Roberts.

"But I don't——"

"Silence!" Trimble commanded. "We lacked a motive for a while, and small wonder, for we were indeed on the wrong track. But everything is clear to me now. As I suspected, there was no intention to kill any of the three persons who were victims. Mrs. Roberts, you have had a very narrow escape."

"I?" Mrs. Roberts gasped.

"Ricardo did love you in his way, I think. When you laughed at his presumption his love turned to hate. He threatened to take your life, and he meant that threat. You purchased some embroidery needles from him yesterday morning—it is now after midnight—and on the tip of one of them Ricardo put a fleck of deadly poison. A person who works at embroidery always wounds the fingers more or less with the needle, I understand. One prick with the poisoned needle—and then death!"

"Oh!" Mrs. Roberts gasped, her face suddenly white.

"And during the luncheon hour at your girls' club," Trimble went on, "you gave some embroidery needles to Mabel Higgins, according to what you have told me. After dinner here Alice Patton worked on the centerpiece, because Miss Higgins was ill with a headache. She pricked her finger with the needle—and died. Just before she died, she took a drink of water and, made the remark that it tasted queerly. That was because the deadly poison already had her life in its clutch and had affected her sense of taste. That remark of hers worried us for a time, until we had the water examined.

"She died, and Mabel Higgins, hysterical at her chum's death, took the centerpiece downstairs with her. She fumbled with the needle, pricked her finger, and died! Mrs. Burke did the same.

"And you, Giovanna Ricardo, came here to-night with your cooked-up story of loving Alice Patton, in an attempt to gain possession of the centerpiece— and the needle, of course—so you could destroy the evidence against you and save your skin. But at the last moment, when I asked Mrs. Roberts whether she wanted the centerpiece, you were willing for her to have it, hoping death would reach her as you had intended. Now you're going to the electric chair!"

Ricardo whimpered. Mrs. Gordon Roberts looked at him in horror.

"Isn't that the truth, Ricardo?" Trimble demanded, darting at him with the poisoned needle again.

Ricardo shrieked and crouched against the wall.

"It—it is the truth!" he gasped.

(2-1) »Murderer's Mail«, in the June 3, 1919, issue of DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE.