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BY "OLD SLEUTH."

A SERIES OF THE MOST THRILLING DETECTIVE STORIES EVER PUBLISHED.

No. 99.

{ SINGLE
NUMBER. }

GEORGE MUNRO'S SONS, PUBLISHERS,
Nos. 17 to 27 VANDEWATER STREET, NEW YORK.

{ PRICE
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VOL. V.

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Mademoiselle Lucie,

THE FRENCH LADY DETECTIVE

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CHAPTER I.

"TAKE that, and that!"

The words came from beneath a veil. A seemingly delicate arm was twice raised aloft and as quickly descended, and two men fell to the ground.

Several tragic and startling incidents led up to the scene with which we open our narrative, and these will be unfolded as the story proceeds, while the immediate series of incidents which terminated as described were as follows:

A veiled lady came forth from a flat house located in the upper part of New York City. Upon gaining the street, she looked around furtively for a moment, and then started off at a rapid pace.

The veiled woman had seen no one, and yet two men were laying low, and saw her issue from the house.

As she started off up the street, one of the men said to the other:

"There she goes! And it's pennies to dollars she has the document on her person. Now is our time!"

The men separated, but both started to follow the veiled woman. It was early in the evening of a clear, cold night.

The woman, as intimated, had not seen the two men when she first started from the house; but she had not traveled far ere an exclamation betrayed the fact that she had speedily become aware of the fact that she was being followed.

She was a plucky and nervy woman, as will be recognized when our readers learn more of her qualities.

"It's strange," she muttered, "how those men got on my track, and it is very unfortunate. But let them have a care! I am but a woman, but it may go hard with them if they seek to molest me."

The lady made several turns and changes in her course, but realized that the men were still following her, and finally she muttered:

"It will not do; I must return to my rooms. I will surely be safe there, and I will try again some other time. One thing is certain: I know what they are after. They shall not succeed."

She did start to return to her apartment, and had proceeded but a few steps when the two men suddenly joined forces and approached her.

"Good-evening, miss," said one of them, as he drew close to her and projected his ugly face close to her face.

"How dare you speak to me?"

"We've a little business with you."

"It's false. You two men are ruffians. You have been following me. I will summon assistance and have you both arrested."

The men laughed, and one of them said:

"Do you hear what she says, Curley? She is going to summon assistance and have us arrested."

"Do you want an officer, miss?" demanded the fellow who had been addressed as Curley.

"I will summon an officer," said the woman.

"You can do so, miss, and you needn't holler very loud; an officer is at hand."

As the man spoke, he threw back the lapel of his coat and displayed a badge.

"Oh, that is your game!" said the woman in a determined tone.

"I have an order to arrest you, miss."

The two men stepped close to the veiled woman. She carried in her hand a small net-work reticule, and one of the men made a dash to seize it; and it was then the woman dealt the blows described in the opening paragraph of our narrative. As the two men fell to the ground she moved rapidly away, and a short time later re-entered the flat house from which she had issued when the two men started upon her trail.

Upon entering the house she ascended the stairs to a suite of rooms on the top floor, entered the front apartment, and was met by a fair-faced, beautiful young lady about twenty years of age.

"Well, I am back, my dear!" exclaimed the veiled lady.

As she spoke she cast aside her veil. The face was not strikingly handsome, but it was a remarkable one in some respects, and the eyes were truly beautiful. But the general contour of the face was plain, save in its marvelous expression of will and intelligence.

"Did you succeed?" asked the younger woman, anxiously.

"No; I was followed by two men. They made an attempt to rob me of my reticule, and I was compelled to knock them both down."

The younger woman started back in surprise and exclaimed:

"You knocked them down?"

"Yes, I did, and I'll do it over again; and, if need be, I'll shoot them down. They shall learn, Agnes, that, although a woman, I have the will and determination of a man."

"Oh, what shall we do, Lucie?" moaned the fair Agnes.

"What shall we do? We will solve this mystery. We will defy and eventually overmatch those schemers. For, my dear child, I believe more firmly than ever that there is a deeper mystery and greater villainy in all this affair than you dare suspect. I will say nothing further now; but I will prove my words."

"But you will be arrested, and then what will I do?"

"No; you need not fear. They will not dare to have me arrested. They hope to get that paper, but they never will."

A moment Agnes remained silent, and then she said:

"I will return to my country home; I will not permit you to encounter these perils in my behalf."

"Listen to me, Agnes. Nothing would be gained by your retiring from the field. Those people will pursue you. Their schemes are menaced so long as you live. You can not escape from them. They will follow you wherever you go. As long as you live they can never get legal possession of that estate. They must either prove you a vile woman—an outcast—or kill you. They are prepared to do either, but they shall do neither. I am but a woman, but I will prove a match for them. I have a certain suspicion. That suspicion, if proven to be a truth, promises not only their defeat, but honor and happiness for you. We will stay right here and fight this thing out, and I will win—yes, my dear, I will win. There is a life besides your own at stake. But hark; there is some one ascending the stairs! You hide. Let me face the rascals; I do not fear them."

CHAPTER II.

MADEMOISELLE LUCIE was known to a few people as a lady artist, and she was known as Mademoiselle Lucie only. It was known

that she came from Paris. She said very little about herself, even to the few whom she knew as passing friends. No one knew her real name. She merely passed as Mademoiselle Lucie. There was a mystery about her. She was about twenty-five years of age, and a very accomplished woman. She was a linguist, and appeared to have enjoyed a great experience as a traveler. She had suddenly appeared in New York, had secured rooms in an apartment house, which she furnished very comfortably, and devoted her time to painting, and her rooms were adorned with many very beautiful specimens of her handiwork. She had been known to sell a few paintings, and it was through these transactions that she made the acquaintance of the few people who knew her.

As a rule she kept very much to herself, and appeared to be very independent and self-reliant. She rarely had any company, and the few who occasionally called upon her were lady patrons who purchased her paintings. She dressed plainly, but tastefully and neatly. She went out at all hours, frequently visiting the opera and theater, and always alone. She was a very charming and fascinating woman, one of the few who, lacking special features of beauty, possess illuminated countenances which by their expressions are so captivating.

In the street, as a rule, she went veiled; but, when occasion demanded it, moved about with her striking face revealed, proving that she was not seeking concealment by veiling herself.

One night she was returning from the opera afoot, and when passing through a great thoroughfare she came upon a girlish figure leaning against the rail of an elegant mansion. There were two lights in front of the house, and under their glare mademoiselle had a passing glimpse of the girl's face. She saw written upon it a look of despair and anguish and exhaustion.

She passed on, but after having gone a few steps she halted. That fair face haunted her; its look of sorrow and distress aroused all her sympathies. She determined to turn back and speak to the poor creature.

As Mademoiselle Lucie turned the girl had started to move away, and the French woman hastened toward her, and overtaking her, laid her hand lightly on the stranger's arm and said, in a voice rich in sympathy:

"You are in trouble. Can I be of any service to you?"

Mademoiselle Lucie upon coming closer was enabled to discern that the face of the suffering girl was not only delicate, pure, and refined, but wondrously beautiful.

"Thank you, no," came the answer to mademoiselle's question.

"But you appear to be in distress. I may be able to help you."

"No, thank you," again came the answer; but tears followed the words.

"Come, tell me your trouble. Take my arm and walk along with me. I will accompany you to your home. You seem to be very weak."

With a look of terror upon her beautiful face the distressed maiden exclaimed:

"I have no home. I am penniless and homeless. Oh, I wish I were dead!"

Penniless and homeless! A fearful admission to come from a well-dressed, beautiful girl at the midnight hour in a great city.

"Excuse me; but it seems very strange that you should have no home."

"Tis true; but please go away and leave me to my sorrow."

"But what will you do?"

There came a frightened look to the beautiful face and in a pleading tone its owner answered:

"Please leave me and go your way."

"Very well; I am sorry you will not trust me. Good-night."

"I thank you for your expressions of sympathy, but you can not aid me; no one can aid me; but it will be all right soon—yes, I will soon have a home where I will no more be turned adrift."

It was evident to Mademoiselle Lucie that the fair girl was speaking half unconsciously, and she said:

"I am sorry for you. I hope all will come right. Good-night."

Mademoiselle Lucie turned away, and the poor, distressed girl marched on with weary steps.

A weird suspicion crossed the French woman's mind. Those words, "I will soon have a home," struck upon her with ominous significance. She turned and walked away, as stated; but now she determined to follow and watch the movements of the beautiful and distressed stranger, and after following her a block or two her suspicions were confirmed. She saw that the poor girl was making directly toward the river.

It seemed a singular and remarkable thing that one so beautiful and so helpless should have passed along at such an hour without encountering molestation; but so it happened. Not even a policeman was met as the girl staggered wearily onward toward the river.

"I do not know," Mademoiselle Lucie muttered. "It may be as well to let her carry out her design. It will soon be over, and she may not be saved to a life of misery and sin. It may be well. But no; if I permit her to carry out her design I will be a murderer morally. I pity her. Possibly, under the same circumstances, I would do as she is doing, and curse the one who would restrain me. I know her purpose. A duty is presented. I must, I will, save her, even though it be to a life of sin and sorrow!"

Having determined to rescue the girl from her own wild, frantic purpose, Mademoiselle Lucie determined to defer her action until the purpose should be so well indicated as to make her indeed a rescuer and give her a corresponding power to compel the unfortunate beauty to unfold her sad story.

The girl continued to move along toward the river at a slow pace, occasionally stopping to rest. Suddenly a laugh rang out on the midnight air, and a few minutes later two young men were seen staggering up the street. The mademoiselle saw that they had been indulging freely in wine, and she knew that they would have to

pass the spot where the lone girl was standing clinging to the rail of a stoop. She moved forward, fearing that the young men might molest the girl, and she was not mistaken.

The young men, as they approached, did observe the poor girl who had been struggling toward the river with tragic intent. They were too much under the influence of wine to be sensitive to sentiments of pity. Their eyes were too greatly bleared to permit them to observe the look of anguish and suffering on the beautiful face.

"Hello!" cried one of the prowlers, as he caught hold of his companion and pointed toward the lone girl. "See there, Jack! If she ain't a beauty you can shoot me!"

The young men approached the poor sufferer, and one of them, in a maudlin tone, exclaimed:

"Hello, miss; how are you? Have you been there, too?"

Mademoiselle saw the look of terror on the poor girl's face as the young men approached her. One of them caught her by the arm, and the girl attempted to push him from her, but she seemed powerless to release herself from his grasp. At this moment Mademoiselle Lucie sprang forward and seized hold of the young man and drew him back; and when the young scamp discovered that he had been attacked by a woman he hiccupped:

"Hello, there's two of them!"

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself?" exclaimed Mademoiselle Lucie; and she pushed the staggering youth away from her.

"Well, I'll be shot!" ejaculated the youth. "You're a daisy; but you'll give me a kiss for that!"

The youth, who was less than twenty, and full of mischief, started to grasp Mademoiselle Lucie in his arms in order to enforce a kiss, when he received a smart slap on the cheek which caused him to utter an oath, and also aroused his drunken anger.

His companion, meantime, was helplessly overcome, and stood grasping a lamp-post; but he had sense and strength enough to laugh when his comrade received the rap, and he stammered out:

"Bully for you, old girl! Give to him again! He's a stuff!"

The young man who had received the rebuke, burning with anger and maudlin mortification, ran forward to seize his assailant.

Mademoiselle grasped him with both hands, held him powerless, and flashing her wonderful eyes upon him, exclaimed:

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself! Have you not a mother or sister? And yet you assail a helpless young lady in the street!"

"What's the matter with you?" demanded the youth.

"You poor little wretch," said mademoiselle, "you are too helplessly drunk to know what you are doing. You are past the point of being ashamed of anything you may do. Now go home; and if you can remember to-morrow how mean you have been, ask pardon of your God."

Again she pushed the youth away; but his blood was up. He made a rush at her again, when she dexterously, despite her dress, seized him, projected her foot, gave him a push and sent him reeling into the gutter. And there he lay. He made no immediate effort to rise to his feet, and his even more helpless companion, who stood clinging to the lamp-post, stammered out:

"Bully for you, old girl! It serves him right! Kick him in the head! He deserves it!"

During the struggle the girl who had attracted the two young rascals had moved away. She was some distance down the street, when mademoiselle started to overtake her. She was half tempted to speak to the poor creature; but decided to wait and let her design become fully developed. She was not compelled to wait long, for the street running along by the river had been reached. The intending suicide crossed to the pier and appeared to be suddenly inspired with greater strength and resolution, and she increased her speed. For the latter development Mademoiselle Lucie was not prepared, and came very near being too late. As it was, she arrived just in time to seize the would-be self-murderess at the very moment when about to plunge into the dark waters. She certainly possessed wonderful strength for a woman, for she dragged the frantic girl back with ease, and then exclaimed:

"No, no; you shall not seek a home in the river!"

The rescued girl, once dragged back from the string-piece to the pier, said, in a low tone:

"Why do you interfere with me?"

"My poor girl, what would you do?"

"Seek rest—rest!"

"Answer me one question: Are you a guilty woman?"

"A guilty woman?" repeated the rescued girl in a firm voice; and then she supplemented it by asking: "Are you?"

"No, no, my dear child!"

"Then I am not; I am as guiltless as yourself; but I am unfortunate. Oh, please let me go! In a moment it would have been all over, and I should have been at rest."

"You are young and beautiful: why should you die?"

"I am unfortunate."

"Live and repeat: it is never too late."

There came a startled look in the eyes of the would-be self-murderess; her beautiful orbs opened wide, and she said, in a low tone:

"You misunderstand me."

"You said you were unfortunate."

"I am; but not as you think."

"Will you go with me to my home?" asked Mademoiselle Lucie.

"Why should I go? No, no! Please leave me."

"If I were to leave you I would be even more guilty than yourself. You must go with me."

"I can not go with you."

"You must go with me, or I shall be compelled to hand you over to the police. It is my duty to do so."

There came a look of terror to the face of the poor girl, and she murmured:

"No, no; do not do that! You are a woman. You will not be so cruel as to hand me over to the police."

"I must do my duty. You must go with me, or I will be compelled to do as I threaten."

"Will you not pity me?" asked the girl, in tones of anguish.

"I do pity you, my poor child; and it is because I pity you that I insist upon your accompanying me to my home."

"Oh, what shall I do?" exclaimed the mad girl.

"You are unable to take care of yourself at present," said mademoiselle, persuadingly. "I live alone, and would be glad to have you spend a few days with me; and in the meantime you can decide upon your future course. At any rate, if you refuse to go with me I shall summon an officer and place you in his charge. It is my duty to do so."

"No, no; rather than that, I will go with you," said the girl.

"Take my arm. You are weak and need support."

The poor girl appeared to have lost all will-power, and she meekly obeyed. As mademoiselle started with her she said:

"You need not fear. I live alone, as I told you. No one will meet you, and you shall tell me your story. I can give you a home until something shall be decided upon."

"I can do nothing. I am helpless. I am pursued by bitter enemies. They would have been pleased had my body been found floating in the river. Had you left me to myself I would soon have been at rest."

"Have you been wronged?"

"Yes—yes!"

"By some wretch of a man, of course?"

"My bitterest enemy is a woman."

Mademoiselle Lucie could not help a start of surprise upon receiving this answer, and she ejaculated:

"How has a woman wronged you?"

"Oh, it is a long, long story; but my lips are sealed."

Mademoiselle, in her heart, was resolved that those fair lips should be unsealed. She was a woman possessed of skill and courage and self-reliance and persistence, and she said:

"Dismiss everything from your mind at present. You need food and rest. You shall have both when we reach my home."

CHAPTER III.

MADMOISELLE LUCIE had become deeply interested in her beautiful charge. She could not imagine what the circumstances could be that would thrust a helpless and beautiful woman upon the street at midnight and a man not be at the bottom of it; but she wanted to learn the story, and she was determined that she would learn it.

They were nearing the locality in which Mademoiselle Lucie's apartment was situated when a heavy hand was laid upon her shoulder, and turning her head she beheld a policeman.

"What are you doing on the streets at this hour, and without an escort?" came the question.

"There is no crime in proceeding to one's home at any hour, is there, sir?"

"That depends. Where do you live?"

At this moment a strange and really startling and suggestive incident occurred. The lovely girl, who was still leaning on the mademoiselle's arm, whispered:

"For my sake, do not tell him where you live."

The mademoiselle was amazed; but she took the hint, and answered promptly:

"It's none of your business where I live."

"It isn't, eh? Well, I will make it my business."

The officer had caught sight of the face of the rescued girl. He saw that she was beautiful. He also observed that there was something unusual in her appearance, and he said:

"If you will tell me where you live, it'll be all right."

"Don't tell him," again whispered her strange charge; and the mademoiselle whispered back:

"Leave it to me. I will deceive him."

Then she said to the officer:

"Although it is none of your business, I live at —————."

"Then why are you going this way?"

In her confusion and utter recklessness the mademoiselle had given a residence in a direction directly opposite to the course she had been pursuing, and the officer added:

"It's just as I suspected. There is something wrong here. You must go with me and explain matters at the station-house."

"There is no necessity for our going to the station-house. You are exceeding your duty. You had better be careful."

"I will take the chances on that. I gave you an opportunity to explain to me. I have caught you in a misrepresentation, and you must go with me and explain matters. Ladies who are on the street at two o'clock in the morning should be prepared to give all necessary explanations. And, besides, I have a suspicion."

"If you will explain your suspicion I may conclude to offer an explanation to you."

"Well," said the officer, "we have orders to look out for a missing young lady, and it strikes me that the girl leaning on your arm answers the description; and as you have attempted to deceive me, my suspicion is confirmed."

"One moment, if you please," said the mademoiselle; and she whispered the inquiry to the girl she was aiding:

"Is any one searching for you?"

"It is possible; but I do not believe it."

"Dare you go to the station-house?"

"Oh, no, no! Tell him where you live. I will be safe for tonight, and to-morrow I can go in hiding."

"Officer, neither of us is the person you seek, so you will please let us pass on."

"It is my duty to take you to the station-house, and I shall do so. And if you do not accompany me willingly, I will use force."

The mademoiselle let go the arm of her companion and said:

"Very well, take me; but let my companion go free. I will make all the necessary explanations."

This proposition increased the officer's suspicions, and he said:

"You must both go with me."

The officer advanced to take hold of the lady, and, not expecting any resistance, was off his guard. Suddenly he received a blow from some mysterious weapon which felled him to the ground.

The mademoiselle had struck the blow quickly, without any seeming exertion, and yet it proved effective, for the officer fell over insensible. Indeed, the mademoiselle caught him and let him fall over easily on a stoop.

She again clasped the arm of her charge and said, as she hurried her away:

"I hope we may reach home without further adventure."

"I fear you have killed the policeman," said the girl, in a frightened tone, as they hurried along.

"Oh, no; he is all right by this time, and is probably in pursuit of us. But we have not much further to go, and once in my house we will be all right."

They finally reached the home of the mademoiselle without further mishap. She breathed a sigh of relief when they had reached her apartment, and said:

"Thank Heaven, we are safe at last!"

The speaker, while making the remark above quoted, had her eyes fixed upon her companion, and she had made a discovery; but she said nothing, only deciding upon a certain course of action in her own mind.

"Now take a seat and make yourself at home," said the mademoiselle, "while I prepare a cup of tea. I know you are exhausted and need some refreshment."

"Oh, no, I do not need any refreshment; and if I did, it would be ridiculous to attempt to prepare it at this hour!"

"I always take a cup of warm tea before retiring. I should prepare it for myself, if not for you; so sit down and make yourself at home, and I will soon have it ready. Let me tell you that you are perfectly welcome here; in fact, our meeting is providential, and you will find it so before long; so be at home."

The guest sat down, and was interestingly looking around while her strange friend set about preparing the tea. It was soon ready on the table, with a few dainty-looking crackers, and the guest did not require much urging to sit down and partake.

"I will tell you something about myself," said the mademoiselle.

She did not ask her guest to tell her story, but proceeded to tell her own.

"I am known," she began, "as Mademoiselle Lucie. I am supposed to be a French woman, but I was born on the island of Corsica. My father moved to Paris when I was quite young. He was a lawyer, and a true and good man. He died when I was a girl of fifteen. He held large properties; but his partner was a villain, and he took advantage of my helplessness and robbed me of my property—that is, he thinks he did; but time will tell. He made it appear that my father and mother were not married. He established the pretended truth of his claim in court. He produced a will—a forgery—in which all the property was bequeathed to him; and thus, you see, at the age of fifteen I was thrown upon the world a helpless maiden."

"But I did not despair. I had in my possession papers that had belonged to my father, and from them I obtained the knowledge that the proofs of my father's marriage existed. I have traveled over a large part of the world to find the man who can establish those proofs. I have not found him yet; but I will find him. I was born with a talent for painting, and with my brush I have been able to sustain myself. I care not now so much for the fortune as for other reasons. I am anxious to establish the legitimacy of my birth. As it is, I have no name. My father's was an honorable name. As his only child, I have a right to bear his name. I will establish that right some day."

"I have lived in New York about two years. I am really a detective, not only in my own behalf, but I have been professionally engaged. I have even done work for several European governments. I am in communication with the chief detective bureaus of several great cities in Europe at this moment. They do not know who I am, but they do know that I have obtained accurate information of great value for them. They rely upon me. I paint largely for amusement. And now, my dear girl, you may consider yourself peculiarly honored, as I have told you more about myself than I have any other living soul."

"It is strange," said her guest, "that you should have imparted all this to me."

"No; I can trust you. I know whom I can trust. What is your name?"

"My name is Agnes."

"A pretty name. You are very beautiful, and, as it seems, you are also unfortunate. I would have been unfortunate had I not inherited from my father will power and courage and cunning. I am not afraid of the world, and I have a steady purpose in life. I expect to be really happy some day; but I have met with some very strange adventures in my travels about the world, and these adventures have been experiences of service to me. Agnes, I have been frank with you; why not tell me your story?"

The beautiful Agnes had been an interested listener to the remarkable tale related by the strange, fascinating woman who had befriended her; but she was reluctant to confide her troubles, even to one so sympathetic as her new-found friend, and she said:

"Do not press me to tell my story."

"Please do; I have told you mine. I am satisfied all you need is the friend I can prove myself to be. This is to be your home. I have saved your life, even against yourself. Having saved your life, I have a claim upon you. Come; tell me your story."

There was a moment's silence, during which Agnes seemed to be debating the question with herself. At length she said:
"I will tell you my strange history."

CHAPTER IV.

MADEMOISELLE LUCIE smiled when Agnes declared that she would tell her story. She recognized how skillfully she had managed to draw the narrative out, and although it was well on toward daylight, she was prepared to listen.

"There is a strange similarity between your experiences and mine," Agnes began. "My father was a farmer; my mother was the daughter of a clergyman, and a well-educated woman, and they were devotedly attached to each other. I was an only child. My mother died when I was in my fourteenth year. She had devoted a great deal of time to my instruction, and I was educated far in advance of my years. When my mother died my father became hopeless and took little interest in the farm. He never had been very successful, and it required hard work and the closest attention to details to make a living out of the farm. After my mother's death things went to the bad, and the mortgage which had always stood against the farm was foreclosed, and papa and I were sent adrift penniless. We came to New York, and I secured a position as a teacher through the influence of a clergyman who had known and loved my grandfather, and all looked well for us, when one day my father was run over by a street car and killed, and I was left alone in the world."

"How unfortunate!" interrupted Mademoiselle Lucie.

"Yes; it seems as though my life were to be crowned with misfortune. Then came the semi-annual examinations in our school, in which I took part. A lady who was present saw me and appeared to take a fancy to me. She was a wealthy lady, and she invited me to visit her at her home, and one evening she asked me to be present at a dance and reception. This was more than a year after my father's death, and when I was just nineteen. At this reception I met a handsome young man, and—"

Here Agnes broke down and commenced to weep. Mademoiselle waited for her to conquer her agitation, and at length the story was resumed.

"This young man asked me to dance with him. I declined. He persisted, and at length I yielded. After the dance we promenaded. The young man appeared to be very much taken with me. He was courteous and kind, and I suspected that he imagined I was some great lady. I really wished that I was a great lady, for I was charmed with the young man; but I knew that sooner or later he would learn that I was a poor farmer's daughter and a school-teacher, and I determined to tell the true facts at once.

"This is the first grand reception I ever attended," I said.

"Indeed!" he responded.

"Yes," I said. "I am a school-teacher. Mrs. H—— appears to have taken a kindly interest in me and invited me here to-night. I am glad that I came, but I do not think I shall ever accept another invitation, and it is not likely I shall ever receive one."

The young man changed the subject as quickly as politeness permitted, and we chatted on about other subjects. Having made a clean breast of it, as the saying is, I abandoned myself to the enjoyments of the hour. We danced together several times during the evening, and at the conclusion of the reception the young man requested permission to accompany me to my home. I at first protested; but he persisted, and I finally yielded. He accompanied me to my home, which was a large boarding-house. On the following day he met me as I came forth from school. He pretended that the meeting was accidental; but I knew better. Of course, I was flattered and pleased; but after leaving him I began to consider the danger of further acquaintance, and I determined not to permit him to visit me again or act as my escort. It is easy to resolve, but it is sometimes difficult to carry out your resolution."

"Yes," interrupted the mademoiselle; "when the resolution is on the part of a young and innocent girl concerning a young and handsome man."

"A few days passed," resumed Agnes, "and he met me again. I then protested against his accompanying me; but he persisted, and I yielded, declaring that it must be for the last time. He disregarded my commands, and a few days later met me again. I was resolved to be firm, and turned away from him. He followed me, and pleaded to be allowed to walk with me 'just this once,' as he put it; and again I yielded."

"Fatal step!" exclaimed the mademoiselle, involuntarily. "Pardon me; proceed with your story."

"I think you misapprehend," continued Agnes, a lovely smile suffusing her beautiful face. "Wait until my narrative is concluded."

The smile of Agnes was met by one on the face of the mademoiselle, and she said:

"I hope I do misapprehend. Proceed."

"I was compelled to permit him to accompany me, he pleaded so hard; and then he told me his story. He said that he was an orphan, and that he was rich; that the only relative he had in the world was a step-sister. He said that she was a worldly woman, devoted to fashion. He said that she was married to a man whom she worshiped—a man who was everything unworthy—a spendthrift and a gambler. He said he lived with his sister, and that his home was not pleasant, and he added:

"I desire to establish a home of my own. There is no reason why I should not do so. I am twenty-eight years old—getting to be a bachelor. I hate society life and society women. I have been looking for a sincere, refined, sensible, companionable young lady. I have met you, and I desire you to become my wife."

"And was he sincere?" asked Mademoiselle Lucie, in an eager tone.

"Let me proceed," said Agnes. "I protested; but he told me he had made inquiries about me and knew my whole history, and that he would consider himself the happiest man on earth if he could win me for his bride."

"And what did you say?" broke forth the mademoiselle, as if unable to restrain her interest in Agnes's romantic narrative.

"I told him he must never speak to me again."

"And why?" he demanded.

"I can never become your wife," I answered.

"We had been walking toward my home, and he said:

"Will you walk with me in the park?"

"No," I replied; "I must go home."

There came a sad look to his face. As I told you, he was a very handsome man, and he had a refined and delicate face, and an expression of truth and sincerity. I was touched, and I added:

"It is not well that we should spend any more time together."

"Listen to me," he pleaded: "I have made you the most complimentary offer a man can make to a woman. You can refuse my offer; but you at least owe me a little consideration. I am deeply disappointed; indeed, I shall never recover from my disappointment. I shall go away. It will be many years before I return again to New York. We may never meet again. I have done myself no discredit in asking you to become my wife. There is no reason why I should not have done so. I have told you that I am rich. My age warrants me in seeking a wife. You are the lady of my choice. Having learned during our short acquaintance to love you, I shall never love another."

"You need not fear that I will ever annoy you; you need not fear that I will follow you up and press my suit. No; I have misled myself. I thought my offer would give you pleasure. I see it gives you pain. You do not fully understand me or my position. But do come and walk with me a little way."

"How skillfully he pleaded!" exclaimed the mademoiselle.

"He was sincere," declared Agnes in firm tones, "and meant every word he said. I was pleased with him; but I did not discover how deep an impression he had made upon my heart until he spoke of going away and never seeing me more. I could not restrain myself; I could not part with him thus, and I consented to walk with him, and later on I said:

"Do not go away yet."

"Can you give me hope?" he demanded, eagerly.

"Give me time to think," I said. I had just spoken—we were crossing the main driveway of the park—when a carriage whirled by us. I saw a woman leaning forward and looking at me and my companion. He did not see the woman. He was intently listening to me. We then proceeded to my home, where we parted, with a promise on my part to meet him again."

"Ah!" sighed the mademoiselle; "there is where you laid the foundation of your troubles."

"Alas, that is so, mademoiselle! That night a lady called to see me at my boarding-house. I had never seen her before. She was deeply agitated, and she made a most startling statement. She said:

"A young man named Raymond Tift is paying you attentions. I bid you beware of him; never see him again. I can not explain, but you are in great peril. He is a wicked man, and means you harm. No matter how sincerely he may seem to talk, I bid you beware! His victims can be counted by the dozen."

The woman, who sat closely veiled during the interview, did not permit me to make any reply, but arose and left me with her wild words of warning ringing in my ears. Alas, I was very unhappy! I had feared and dreaded just the revelation that had come to me so quickly. On the day following I met Raymond Tift, and I was cold and bitter toward him, and I said to him:

"I have reached a decision. You must never speak to me again, not even as an acquaintance. I am a poor girl; all that I have is my character; if I have not lost it already I am thankful."

In my feeling of bitter disappointment and indignation I went beyond myself in the plainness of my speech. He was greatly surprised at my demeanor toward him, and he exclaimed:

"Merciful Heaven, can it be possible? Agnes, you may dismiss me if you please, but you must hear me, and you must answer one question truthfully. I see it all. Some one has visited you and has traduced me."

His readiness in discerning what had occurred appeared to me to confirm the warning of the veiled woman, and I said:

"Then you expected some one to visit me?"

"No," he replied; "I did not expect any one would visit you; but it is evident that some one has done so."

"Yes, some one has visited me," I said.

"And what was charged against me?" he asked.

"I will not repeat it," I answered.

"You were evidently left with the impression that I am a bad man. Is it not so?"

"Yes."

"Would you know the party who visited you were you to see her again?"

"I would not; she was veiled."

"Would you recognize her voice?"

"Yes, I think I would."

"I wish you had seen her face," he said. "It would have made my chance of vindication much easier. But, mark me, Agnes, I am entitled to a vindication. Whatever may have been said against me is a series of falsehoods. You are too just to allow me to rest under false charges. Say you will permit me to prove that I have been maligned?"

"We had better let the matter drop right here," I replied.

"I will not permit the matter to drop here. Had you dismissed me of your own volition I would have said 'Yea.' But when my character has been assailed, I say 'Nay.' It is my duty to prove to you that I am an honorable man; and I will do it in the most positive manner; and you shall, you must, permit me to do so."

"I was bewildered; I did not know what to say or do. There was a period of painful silence. Suddenly he said:

"Agnes, I know who your visitor was. It was my sister; and were her statements true, she would be the last one to declare the facts."

CHAPTER V.

"THERE was deep significance in that suggestion," remarked Mademoiselle Lucie.

"Yes; I saw the force of his declaration," assented Agnes.

"If it was his sister who visited you and maligned him, a motive could be established at once."

"Yes; he urged upon me the fact that when he proved my visitor was his sister, her statements would stand as very doubtful. He wanted me to employ a friend to investigate his character."

"I belong to an old family," he said. "I have lived in New York all my life, save when abroad at college. It can easily be proven whether or not those charges are true."

"Does your sister know of your acquaintance with me?" I asked.

"I did not know that she did; but it would appear now that she does. Remember, she is only my step-sister, otherwise I would not make the statement I propose to make to you. My sister's husband has squandered nearly all her estate, and she is largely indebted to me. I hold a mortgage on all her possessions. I would not have taken the lien were it not for the spendthrift character of her husband; but there is another motive for her not wishing me to get married. She is the residuary legatee of my father's estate. If I die without heirs, she comes into all my property; and there is this peculiarity in the will conveying the estate to me: I do not become possessed of it absolutely until I am married. So you see why my sister does not wish me to marry."

"It is a very singular will," interrupted Mademoiselle Lucie.

"Raymond made other statements," continued Agnes, "that led me to doubt the charges of the veiled woman, and I consented to the proposition that he should have the privilege of proving his innocence. I had a double reason for permitting him to do so, for I became possessed with a love as deep and ardent as his own. He determined upon a very odd plan for vindication. He arranged for me to go to a certain hotel, where he had hired two adjoining rooms. He placed me in one of the rooms, and then sent a note to his sister requesting her to meet him at the hotel. They were to meet in the room adjoining the one in which I was placed. The object was for me to overhear what occurred between them. I agreed to the plan. The sister came, and upon entering the room she said:

"What a fright you have given me, Raymond! Why have you sent for me to meet you here?"

"The moment I heard the voice I recognized it. It was the voice of the veiled woman who had called upon me.

"Jane, I sent for you to meet me here because I desired to talk over some business matters with you in private. Your husband always thrusts his presence upon us, and I wished to talk with you alone. Your husband has asked me to sign certain papers, Jane, releasing certain properties. I thought I would talk the matter over with you before I refused to grant his request."

"You will not refuse, Raymond?" she cried.

"Yes, I shall refuse, and I will give you my reasons."

"He did give her his reasons, which I will not repeat. She urged and protested, but he was firm, and finally he said:

"Jane, you are my bitter enemy."

"Why, what do you mean, Raymond?"

"Just what I say."

"My dear brother, you are mad, or else some one has been maligning me!" she exclaimed.

"No; it is the other way about; you have been maligning me."

"What in the world do you mean, Raymond?"

"Just what I say. And now tell me: how did you discover that I was acquainted with a young lady named Agnes Pratt?"

"The woman was greatly agitated. I was in a position where I could not only hear but see, and I saw the expression of blank amazement that overspread her face. She was a pretty woman, but she had cold, steely eyes, and a wicked look. A moment she was greatly disconcerted, but quickly recovering herself, she said:

"Ah, I see now! Raymond, I love you as devotedly as though you were my own brother instead of my step-brother, and I am anxious to see you happily married. The strange provisions of your father's will does not influence me; but I do not wish to see you made the victim of a designing woman."

"You are very kind; but you have not answered my question."

"I will answer it. I accidentally learned that you were paying attentions to a vile creature."

"My blood boiled when I heard the woman speak in this manner," said Agnes, almost overcome with emotion, "and I felt like rushing into the room and confronting her; but I restrained myself."

"When I made this discovery, my brother," the woman went on, "and knowing your confiding nature, I determined to make some inquiries about the woman, and I employed a reputable detective to do so. I was acting in your interest."

"I could see a pleased look come over Raymond's face as his vindication was being achieved so successfully."

"Were you acting in my interest when you gave me such a bad character?" asked Raymond, in a satirical tone.

"Yes. I thought that would be the best method I could employ to save you."

"And you say this creature, as you call her, is a bad character?"

"My dear brother, I dare not unfold to you all that I learned."

"I insist that you tell me all that you learned," said Raymond.

"You may save me yet."

"There was railing in Raymond's voice. I saw the point he was about to make."

"Yours is a strange romance," said the mademoiselle.

"Yes; but the most tragic part of my story is yet to come. I had schooled myself to let the woman go on without interruption. I knew then that I had a defender who would speak out in time, one who would convict the woman as a falsifier to her teeth."

"Do not press me, Raymond, to tell you all. It might wound your sensibilities."

"No; proceed," he said.

"But possibly I am mistaken; possibly the affair had not gone as far as I feared."

"It has gone pretty far," said Raymond.

"It can not be possible, Raymond, that she is your wife?"

"No; not quite as far as that."

"Thank Heaven! Then you are saved!"

"But I have asked her to become my wife."

"You have asked that creature to become your wife?"

"Yes; and she has refused me."

"Then, my brother, I have saved you!" she exclaimed.

"Well, please tell me about the woman."

"She is already a mother."

"Raymond recoiled; and I felt that I could stand it no longer."

"She is a mother, did you say?"

"Yes. I do not know whether she is a widow or otherwise; but her child lives, and I can prove it."

"My dear sister, if she is such a bad woman as you say, how is it you tried to save me by proving that I was bad? If she is what you suggest, my wickedness would have no deterrent effect upon her."

The woman appeared to see the point, and she said:

"I did not know when I went to see her what I know now."

"Then you admit that you called on her?"

"Yes; in your interest."

"And you admit that you maligned me?"

"Yes; in your interest, remember."

"And yet this woman, whom you claim is a wicked and designing creature, has refused to become my wife because she believed the tales you told about me."

"She has more sense than I gave her credit for. And so the matter is all off?"

"Not by a long shot, my dear sister, since you have vindicated me. Now, you will admit that what you said to her was false?"

"Yes, I will admit that; but I acted for your good."

"But why should you seek to influence a bad woman by such means? What would she care about my character if hers was so bad?"

"I tell you I did not know about her character at that time."

"Then why should you interfere if you believed her at that time to be a good woman? Why should you seek to make her believe that I was a bad man?"

"I did not want you to marry her. She is beneath you."

"Oh, was that all? Jane, you are indeed a nice sister to go telling such awful lies about your brother in order to interfere in his love affairs. But you shall not succeed in separating us. I love her, and I will make her my wife if she will marry me."

The woman's face assumed a terrible expression, and she said:

"You will not. You shall not be permitted to bring such disgrace upon the family."

"You forget that your family and mine are really nothing to each other; and since you have acted in such a treacherous manner I will not even acknowledge you as my step-sister. I see now that you are a bad woman, and if Agnes Pratt refuses to become my wife, I will marry the next girl I meet who will have me."

"Raymond, marry any one rather than that creature."

"Jane, Agnes Pratt is as pure as the driven snow. Your foul story does not impress me for one second. I know it is false. All I desired in sending for you to come here was to have you vindicate me. You have done so."

"How will she ever know that I have vindicated you? You may tell her what you please; but in order to save you I will prove my statements to her."

"I hardly think you will, my dear Jane. You have lost the power to do so."

"There was a peculiar emphasis in Raymond's tones.

"Then you lied to me, and that woman is already your wife."

"No, she is not my wife; but she has overheard every word you have spoken," said Raymond.

CHAPTER VI.

"IT would be impossible to describe the wild, terrible expression of that woman's face when Raymond declared that I had overheard every word she had spoken," said Agnes, continuing her narrative. "She glanced around with a gleam in her eyes like that of a cobra, and then, in a low, husky voice, she said:

"You can not fool me."

"I do not wish to fool you. Jane, I am sorry for you, notwithstanding your base conduct toward me, for that husband of yours has transformed you from a loving and honorable woman into a mere slave to his caprices. From this time we will be strangers. I will, by my marriage, destroy all claim that you may have in the will, and I will teach that husband of yours what it is to spend money honestly earned, or he will suffer. I will support him no longer in lazy extravagance. The last tie between us is severed. And now see here!"

Raymond crossed the floor and opened the door of the room where I had been concealed. I stood in the door-way. I was anxious to confront that woman, and did. She glared at me for a moment, and then said:

"I need no further proof, Raymond. If that creature is not a hussy, why is she alone in that room with you? Good-day, my brother; you will learn more within a few hours."

"What a dramatic scene it must have been!" said Mademoiselle Lucie.

"Yes, it was a dramatic scene, and would to mercy it had ended there! But no; the darkest chapters of my experience were yet to come. The woman swept from the room, and after she had gone Raymond turned to me and asked:

"Agnes, are you convinced now that I am an honorable man?"

"I was; and I could not do aught else than answer 'I am.'

"And now that you recognize that woman's motive you can no longer doubt my love and the purity of my affection."

"I do not," I said.

"Then why should I go away? I love you, Agnes," he said.

"The sincerity of his declaration was not to be doubted, and I could not refrain from answering:

"And I love you, Raymond."

"He clasped me in his arms and kissed me; then he said:

"Agnes, my darling, I must speak plainly now. You heard the last words that woman spoke. I did not fully realize the compromising position I was placing you in when I brought you here; but I realize it now. You must become my wife at once, Agnes, and we will silence her slanderous tongue."

"No, no!" I cried. "We can not marry yet."

"We will, this very day, this very hour, if possible."

"Raymond, you are mad."

"No, I am not mad. Something has occurred which I did not foresee. It is necessary for your honor and mine that we be married at once—before we leave this house. You have no friends to consult; neither have I. We are to marry some day; why not marry at once? Indeed we must. We will, in open day, right here before witnesses, and before the whole world I will declare you my wife."

"I did not know what to say or do. I was excited and unable to argue with Raymond. He rang the bell and summoned the clerk of the hotel, and said to him:

"Bring a clergyman here at once."

The clerk went away and returned a short time later with a dignified-looking gentleman who announced himself as a clergyman. Raymond told him we were to be married. The clergyman asked a few questions. Raymond made rapid explanations in a low tone, and the man agreed to perform the ceremony. I did not seem to have the power to make any resistance whatever to these proceedings. We took our place before the clergyman, and I became the wife of Raymond Tift.

The clergyman had a blank certificate. Raymond insisted that it should be filled out and given to me. The clergyman did as commanded. The clerk of the hotel signed it as a witness. A carriage was called and we drove straight to a lawyer's office, where my husband made a will. The document was properly witnessed. I was made the heir to all his property."

"Did he show the marriage certificate when he signed the will?" asked the mademoiselle.

"No; it was in my possession; nothing was said about showing it. After the signing of the will, Raymond drove me to my boarding-house. He bid me gather together all my possessions, saying that in an hour he would call for me. He went away after kissing me, and I have never seen him in life from that hour to this."

There followed a silence, broken by Mademoiselle Lucie, who said:

"I see you think he is dead."

"Yes, he is dead," said Agnes.

"And I think I remember the circumstances. His body was found floating in the river?"

"Yes."

"Did you proclaim yourself his wife?"

"I did; and was refused admission to his house."

"Did you ever see his dead body?"

"Yes; at the grave. I went there disguised. I watched my opportunity, and when the coffin was opened I stole forward and glanced at his dead face. I am sorry now that I ever did, for it was not recognizable."

Mademoiselle Lucie smiled in a peculiar manner and asked:

"Are you sure it was his face?"

A bewildered look overspread Agnes's face; but at length the full force of the mademoiselle's suggestion seemed to strike her, and in deeply agitated tones she said:

"What do you mean?"

"I believe it was not his face!" exclaimed the mademoiselle.

After the startling declaration of the mademoiselle there followed a long interval of silence. The beautiful Agnes was speechless through her extreme agitation. She finally regained control of herself, and, in a husky voice, inquired:

"Did you know my husband?"

"I never saw him."

"What reason have you for saying that it was not his face?"

"You will remember I told you I was a sort of female detective. For eight years I have studied along these lines a great deal, and I have become an expert in the study of incidents. I can group contrasting incidents and reason out the bearing of one upon the other. I reach conclusions through logical deductions. While listening to your narrative I have been weighing the facts, comparing the incidents, and I have reached a conclusion; and my conclusion is that your husband still lives, and that he is either a victim of murder, or a villain, or—"

Mademoiselle Lucie stopped, as though it would not be best to express all the suspicions she had deduced from Agnes's narrative.

"Or what?" asked Agnes.

"I will not say now; but I am satisfied it was not your husband's face you beheld in that coffin."

"Then you really believe he still lives?"

"It is possible."

"Then do you think he has deserted me?"

"No, I do not believe he has deserted you. Now, Agnes, I wish

to ask you a few questions. Control your agitation, and when you have answered all my interrogations I may have something very encouraging to say to you. How long was it after your marriage that your husband left you?"

"Within four hours, I should say."

"And when he left you, what did he say?"

"He told me to gather my things together, and in an hour he would call for me."

"You are satisfied he was a perfectly sane man?"

"He was one of the most calm and level-headed of men. You can judge by the manner in which he proved his character to me."

"Who has possession of the will which your husband had drawn up in your favor after your marriage?"

"The lawyer who drew it up."

"Who witnessed the will?"

"The lawyer's clerk."

"And your marriage certificate?"

"I have that."

"After your husband's death you claimed to be his wife?"

"Yes."

"To whom did you go to make the claim?"

"I went first to his sister."

"And how did she receive you?"

"She laughed in my face, and denounced me as a vile impostor."

"Did you tell her you had the marriage certificate?"

"I did."

"Did you show her the certificate?"

"No; I was afraid to do so. She was so furious I was afraid she might destroy it."

"Did she ask to see it?"

"Yes; and I was about to show it to her; but her eagerness so alarmed me that I told her the certificate was at home. Had I not told her this untruth I believe she would have assaulted me and torn it from me. She also came to my house and demanded to see it; but I told her I had put it in the custody of a friend."

"You are sure you still have it?"

"Yes, I am sure."

"Did you ever visit the lawyer who drew up the will?"

"I did. He laughed at me, and told me the will was worthless. He said I was not Raymond's wife; that he had no right to make a will; that the property went to the residuary legatee."

"Was the will ever presented for probate?"

"No; that will was never presented; but I saw by the papers that the original will had been presented, and under its provisions my husband's sister, Jane Fountain, had entered into possession of the property as residuary legatee."

"Did you ever consult another lawyer?"

"No; I did not dare do so."

"Why not?"

"My life is in danger. I have been pursued almost hourly, and I have been threatened with bodily harm unless I give up my marriage certificate."

"What propositions have they made you?"

"Well, not long ago a man called on me and offered me ten thousand dollars in cash to surrender the certificate. I refused to do so."

"And since then?"

"I have managed to elude them. But I know they have been searching for me. Yesterday they discovered my whereabouts and I fled. I wandered around for hours, then despair seized me and I determined to die. You interposed. I am glad you did. With your help, I know what to do."

"What will you do?"

"I will return to the town where I was born."

"You will do no such thing," said Mademoiselle Lucie. "You will make your home with me. I will take up your case. I am satisfied that you are the victim of a conspiracy. I will prove a match for that woman Jane Fountain. I have had experience. I can control influences of which they do not dream. And now, Agnes, I will promise you some very remarkable revelations within the next ten days."

CHAPTER VII.

It was well on toward daylight when the mademoiselle persuaded Agnes to retire; and after bidding her good-night, the French woman muttered:

"I fear her. I will watch awhile."

Mademoiselle Lucie did watch, and soon had the satisfaction of knowing that her beautiful charge was sleeping soundly.

It was well into the morning when Agnes awoke. The mademoiselle was at her side, and said, in the most cheery tones:

"Good-morning, my dear. Have you slept well?"

"Yes; I have had the best night's rest I have had in a long time."

"I am glad to hear that," said the mademoiselle. "But you must get up now, as I have breakfast almost ready."

Later, when the two ladies were seated at the breakfast table, the mademoiselle said:

"Now, you must remember that I am your friend; and, let me add, without egotism, that you could not have found a better friend under the circumstances. I make up in cunning what I may lack in strength. I will prove an overmatch for these conspirators. I have been thinking the matter all over while you slept. I am certain that it is all a conspiracy, that you are being robbed; and I have still another suspicion."

"I will not let you interest yourself in my affairs," said Agnes.

"You will only draw down upon yourself the wrath of these people. It is useless to attempt to combat their schemes. All I can do is to escape from them."

"I will interest myself in your affairs whether you permit it or not," said the mademoiselle, her eyes flashing. "I do not fear those

people. Agnes, I must speak plainly. Your proposed conduct is cowardly. You are deserting your husband."

"Deserting my husband?" ejaculated Agnes, her eyes opening wide. "I certainly do not understand you."

"Agnes, I believe that your husband lives, and is a victim as well as yourself."

"My husband lives?" exclaimed Agnes. "How do you know?"

"I have reached the conclusion through logical analysis. There is no doubt in my mind as to the correctness of my conclusion."

The mademoiselle proceeded and explained the reasoning by which she had reached her conclusion, and Agnes listened with interest and amazement.

"You shall learn to have confidence in me," said the mademoiselle. "We are two lone women. You must decide to remain with me, to follow my advice, and I promise to restore you to your husband, and in so doing restore you both to freedom and the possession of your fortune. I am determined, and I know I shall succeed. Will you promise to trust me?"

"I will."

"Remember, we shall meet with difficulties. It will require courage and address; but you must also remember that your husband is the victim of this conspiracy as well as yourself. We will work to solve the mystery of his disappearance. You owe it to him if living; you owe it to his memory if he is dead."

"You are indeed a wonderful woman."

"You will learn something about me as we proceed; but you must make up your mind to go forward unfalteringly with me."

"I will," said Agnes, determinedly.

"You need not fear as to the ultimate outcome. The first thing we do will be to solve the mystery and establish your rights; by that time you will learn to have perfect faith in me, I trust."

"I am sure I shall."

"You will not attempt to run away?"

Agnes smiled. She understood the real meaning of the question, and she said:

"I will never attempt again that from which you saved me."

"I trust you will not, Agnes. You are safe here. No one knows you are here. For some days you must remain in absolute seclusion, and I will make some inquiries. I will know within twenty-four hours whether or not your missing husband is living or dead. Have you a photograph of your husband, Agnes?"

"No."

"We must get one."

"I do not know how we can procure it."

"I will have one before night. And now, Agnes, have faith in me, and I will have news for you before yonder sun goes down."

An hour later, after some further conversation, the mademoiselle, "got up" after an idea of her own, prepared to go forth. She had left Agnes sitting in the front room. Agnes was looking out of the window, when she heard a strange voice, and turning beheld an old woman. She did not know what to say in her confusion, but finally managed to ask:

"Who do you desire to see?"

"Is Mademoiselle Lucie at home?"

"She is. I will call her."

She rose to go to an adjoining room, when to her surprise the visitor said:

"Do not go, Agnes. I see you do not recognize me."

Agnes now recognized the voice, but gazed at the old woman in a bewildered manner until a laugh greeted her ears, and then she exclaimed:

"Is it possible, Mademoiselle Lucie, that it is you?"

"Yes, my dear, it is possible."

"What a wonderful transform you have worked in your appearance!" said the astonished girl. "You are a regular detective."

"Certainly I am. Did I not tell you I was? This is only one of my many disguises; but it will serve my purpose for to-day. And all my time shall now be devoted to your case, until the mystery has been unraveled, after which I shall resume my efforts in my own behalf."

"You are indeed a remarkable woman."

"We will wait and see. But, Agnes, I can not permit you to speak all the compliments. You are a beautiful woman, and I do not wonder that your husband fell in love with you at first sight."

"Hush!" cried Agnes.

"Now, my dear, you will remain here. If any one calls you can say that I will not be home this afternoon; and should one of my very inquisitive lady patrons call you can tell her you are my pupil. And now, my dear, a kiss and good-bye for a little while."

Mademoiselle Lucie had a well-defined purpose in her mind. She determined to commence at the very bottom of the mystery and work up in her investigations. She proceeded direct to the home of Mrs. Jane Fountain.

It proved to be a magnificent residence, and Mademoiselle Lucie walked past the mansion several times, taking it in all its bearings, and finally she ascended the great stone stoop and rang the bell. A Frenchman opened the door.

"Is Mrs. Fountain at home?"

"She is; but she is engaged at present. You must call later."

"I must see her at once," said the mademoiselle, speaking in French. "Go tell her a lady wishes to see her."

The man was pleased. He recognized that the queer-looking visitor was a fellow countrywoman, and he said:

"I do not think she will see you, but I will ask her."

The man opened the door, and mademoiselle was admitted into the reception-room at one side of the hall.

The man ascended the grand staircase, and the visitor ran across the hall to the parlor, and thence to the library. She found an album, opened it, and saw that it contained what were undoubtedly family photographs. She rapidly turned the pages, and at length came to the picture of a very handsome young man. She tore the

card from the album, put it in her pocket, and hastened back to the reception-room, which she reached just in time; as an instant later the servant reappeared.

"The madam will not see you this morning."

"I am very sorry. When can I see her?"

"Come this afternoon, about three o'clock."

The mademoiselle was shown from the house.

"I reckon that was well done," she muttered to herself after she reached the street, "and I believe I have got the right picture. I will play a trick now that will puzzle them all. Yes, yes, madame, I will come to see you again, but not to-day, nor to-morrow; and I will make you quake when I do come."

The mademoiselle went directly down town. She proceeded to a large office building. She studied the directory, and finally muttered:

"Ah, here is my man!"

The mademoiselle entered the elevator and was carried to the top floor of the great building. She went along to an office in the rear, on the door of which was a sign reading "Conrad Haas, Attorney and Counselor at Law." She entered the outer office, and seeing no one there passed on to a rear room, where she beheld a shrewd-faced man sitting at a desk. The man was busy, but when his visitor made a slight noise he turned.

"Is this Mr. Conrad Haas?"

"That is my name."

The mademoiselle sat down, threw aside her veil, and fixed her eyes on the lawyer. The latter submitted a moment to the gaze, and then demanded in a sharp tone:

"Well, what is your business?"

The mademoiselle made no answer, but drew from her pocket a different pair of glasses, deliberately adjusted them, and again fixed her eyes on the lawyer. The latter appeared annoyed, and said in a sharp tone:

"Have you business to transact with me?"

"Yes, sir."

"Please state the nature of your business."

"Wait; I am studying."

"What are you studying, pray?"

"Your face."

The lawyer started.

"You are a queer lady. Why do you study my face?"

"I wish to see if you are honest."

The lawyer smiled and said:

"I am sorry that is not patent at a glance."

"I am afraid a long study would not lead to that conclusion."

The lawyer again smiled. He saw he had a queer customer, but was not disposed to be angry. He was amused, and said:

"I claim to be an honest man, madame."

"Then why don't you act honestly?" came the pertinent question.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE lawyer was not disposed to take the last sally in good humor. The woman evidently referred to some past transaction of his, and he said:

"Madame, my time is precious. Why do you not name your business, if you have any business with me?"

"Do you speak German?"

"I do."

"You were born in Germany?"

"I was born in New York. My parents came here from Germany. But I can not see how these facts concern you. Please state your business," said the lawyer, impatiently.

"You drew up a will for Raymond Tift?"

The lawyer gave a start and there came over him a complete change in demeanor. His face hardened and he became stiff and formal. He was settling down to business, and he answered, slowly:

"I drew up a paper for the late Mr. Tift."

"The paper was his will?"

"Not legally. But, madame, who are you, and what interest have you in this affair?"

"We will come to that later on. You admit drawing up a will?"

"I admit drawing up what purported to be a will. The young man had no authority to bequeath the property. It did not belong to him. He might as well have bequeathed the moon as to have bequeathed any of the property mentioned in the paper I drew up."

"What right had you to decide on its legality? Why did you not present it for probate and let the courts decide as to its legality?"

The lawyer winced.

"I do not propose to discuss that matter with you."

"You would prefer to discuss it before the surrogate?"

Again the lawyer winced.

"Will you tell me whether or not you are a party at interest?"

"I am; and you have made yourself liable by the suppression of a last will and testament, and you know it."

The lawyer turned pale.

"It was not a last will and testament in the eyes of the law."

"That is your decision; but the surrogate may decide differently. There is absolute proof of the existence of that paper."

"I beg your pardon, the paper is not in existence."

"Where is it?"

"It was destroyed."

"By whom?"

"By Raymond Tift himself."

"When?"

"The day after it was made."

Mademoiselle Lucie smiled and said:

"That is a strange admission on your part."

"Who are you, madame?"

"It does not matter who I am. One thing is certain: there is ab-

solute proof that the will was drawn, signed, and witnessed. Can you prove that the will was destroyed the day after it was signed by the signer himself?"

"I can."

"Then a ghost came here and destroyed it."

The lawyer glared.

"What do you mean, madame?"

"I mean it was proven that the signer of that will died the same day the will was drawn. You say he came here the following day and destroyed it. Consequently, you are an important witness. It was proven that the body taken from the river was that of a man drowned on the thirteenth of the month. The evidence on that point was positive; and now you say you saw the supposed dead man the day after his supposed death; that he came to this office and destroyed that will. If your statement is true, where is he now—for you have proved that it was not the body of Raymond Tift that was taken from the river."

The lawyer turned all colors. The fact was he had been out of town during the week that the body of the supposed Raymond Tift was taken from the river, and he had not read the testimony. There was a wide discrepancy between his declaration and what the woman affirmed were the proven facts at the inquest.

"I may be mistaken as to dates," said the lawyer.

"You made a positive declaration, and you repeated it. I tell you that it can be proven that the will was drawn and signed. You will have to prove that it was destroyed by the maker the day following his supposed death."

"Will you tell me your interest in this matter?"

"No, I will not; but you have made me a competent witness, and I have other witnesses. Where is the witness to the will?"

The lawyer turned deathly pale, and unguardedly said:

"Ah, I know now! That scoundrel is at the bottom of all this!" Mademoiselle Lucie had gained two great points. One was the lawyer's statement as to the destruction of the will by Raymond Tift the day after his supposed death, and the other the fact that there had followed a disagreement between the lawyer and his late clerk—for the mademoiselle decided that there had been a separation. She made up her mind that "that scoundrel" was the dark witness, and she decided to let the lawyer think her information had come from him, although she did not even know his name; but she knew that it would be an easy matter to ascertain that fact.

"It makes no difference, sir, who is at the bottom of this matter. The facts of the case are what we are talking about; and it will be a novel feature when you go into court and prove that a ghost came to your office and destroyed a will."

"Madame, if you will tell me who you are I may talk this matter over with you."

"My identity does not count; it is the facts in the case we are to discuss."

"I am ready to discuss the facts."

"It will be to your interest to do so," said the mademoiselle.

There followed a moment's silence. The lawyer was uneasy, and Mademoiselle Lucie was satisfied, from his actions and words, that all her conclusions were fully correct, and she broke the silence with the question:

"On what ground do you make the claim that the will, according to your own interpretation, was not a will but a valueless piece of paper?"

"The young man had no property to will."

"How is that?"

"Do you know the terms of the original will?"

"I do. By the terms of the original will the moment the young man married he became possessed of the property and acquired a testamentary right."

"Yes, when he married; but he did not marry."

"Can you prove it?"

"I can."

"Why did you not submit the will and prove it in the courts? That would have been better for your clients. Then there would have been no cloud on the title of your clients, and they would not be compelled to pursue and try to murder a defenseless young girl as they murdered Raymond Tift on the day of his marriage."

The lawyer actually trembled. He discerned that he was dealing with a very shrewd person, and one who had all the facts and knew well how to use them. He, as a lawyer, knew that every point made was well taken, and he said:

"There was no marriage."

"But there is a certificate of marriage."

"A forged certificate, I believe, is in existence."

"Oh, you claim it is a forged certificate?"

"I do."

"And you can prove your statement?"

"I can."

"By whom?"

"The witness to the marriage."

The mademoiselle smiled. She recognized that the lawyer was sadly confused.

"If there was no marriage, how could there be a witness?"

"The name signed as a witness is a forgery."

"How do you know?"

"I have the affidavit of the party whose name was signed. He swears there never was such a marriage performed in his presence, and that he did not sign the certificate."

"You say you have that affidavit?"

"Yes."

"That paper must become an exhibit in the court."

The lawyer again winced.

"And then its signer will stand convicted of perjury when the marriage is proved."

"But the marriage never took place."

"How about the clergyman who performed the ceremony?"

"His name also is a forgery."

"And you also have his affidavit, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"When you considered it necessary to secure these affidavits, why did you not make the matter absolute by presenting the will and proving its worthlessness?"

"It was not necessary. The paper, being a forgery, had no legal value."

"That is your decision. We may claim differently, and we may prove that the witness was present at the ceremony and that he did sign the certificate. We may prove that the clergyman did perform the ceremony and that he also signed the certificate."

"These men having made sworn affidavits to the contrary, how will you prove the statements you make?"

"I will prove them by Raymond Tift!"

The lawyer actually leaped from his seat. He trembled like an aspen leaf, and he exclaimed:

"What arrant nonsense this is! Raymond Tift is dead, and has been for nearly a year."

"But according to your own declaration, he was not dead on the fourteenth of last October, and the man who was buried in Greenwood died on the thirteenth. So, you see, there is at least a question."

"I have told you I made a mistake about that. It was the thirteenth when Raymond Tift came here and destroyed the will."

"I will swear that you calmly and deliberately stated that it was on the fourteenth."

"I will deny the statement."

"But you admitted you made it, and called it a mistake."

"You have been employed in this matter, I suppose?"

"I am investigating this matter. I am a witness and not a party at interest. So, you see, all that you have said to me holds as evidence."

"It will be your word against mine."

"You are mistaken. I will prove that Raymond Tift did not come here on the thirteenth and destroy that will."

"It is impossible for you to prove it."

"That remains to be seen. Your party may be good at manufacturing witnesses, but in this case they have manufactured too many."

The lawyer was completely undone. He did not know what to say, and the mademoiselle went on:

"You said the will was destroyed on the fourteenth. You now say it was destroyed on the thirteenth. I will prove it was not destroyed on the latter date."

"By whom will you prove it?"

"The witness to the will!" was the startling answer.

The face of the lawyer blanched, and for a moment he was silent; but at length he exclaimed:

"I think I know the source of your information, and it is all as false as hell."

"I reckon the witness I have can tell a great deal concerning your doings. He may prove his character, and force you to proof as to yours; and we may bring out some strange developments. So you had better be very careful. Your veracity in court may be discounted."

"Curse you! I wish I knew who you are. I believe you are here in disguise."

"Oh, you do?"

A moment the lawyer looked steadily at the old lady as if studying her carefully; then a light broke over his face, and he said:

"This is a nice little game, Percy Black! I know you now!"

Mademoiselle Lucie laughed. She had got the name of the clerk; and what was more, she had piped down to the strained relations existing between the late clerk and his employer.

"You may laugh, but I know you."

"You're a fool, Haas!" exclaimed the mademoiselle.

"Be careful what you say!"

"Oh, I am always careful! You think I am a man in disguise. See there!"

The mademoiselle raised her skirt a few inches and thrust forward a dainty little foot, and said:

"If Percy Black will wear the shoe on that foot for one second, I will back out of this case and let your villainy go on."

The lawyer glanced at the dainty little foot and saw that he had indeed made a mistake, and he said:

"Yes, you are a woman; but you are disguised, all the same."

"That is my business."

"You will not tell me who you are?"

"I will tell you nothing."

"We shall see," said the lawyer; and he suddenly leaped across the intervening space and sought to grasp the old lady.

But the latter quickly rose to her feet and dealt the lawyer a blow with a mysterious instrument, and he fell back in his chair, momentarily stunned. The mademoiselle thought her visit had been eminently satisfactory and she hastily left the office.

In a moment the lawyer recovered, and he ran to the hall; but his visitor had disappeared, and he returned to his office muttering:

"Great guns! This is a most mysterious affair!"

A few moments later Mr. Haas put on his hat, and telling the office boy, who had just returned from an errand, that he would be back in a couple of hours, left the office.

Fifteen minutes later the lawyer appeared at the residence of Mrs. Fountain. He was admitted, and the servant ascended the stairs and announced his presence. Mrs. Fountain was preparing to go out, and when the lawyer's card was handed to her she uttered an impatient exclamation and said:

"That fellow is a nuisance! I have no further use for him. I wish he were out of the way. I will dispose of him at once."

Mrs. Fountain descended the stairs. She was prepared to express her displeasure; but she beheld the lawyer pacing the floor to and

fro, and the instant she glanced at his face she saw that something very important had occurred.

"Well, Mr. Haas, I am glad to see you. What is the occasion of your visit? You appear excited."

"And you are calm, madame?"

"Perfectly calm, sir."

"I am glad to hear it. But very soon, perhaps, you may be as excited as I am."

"What has happened, sir?"

"The devil's to pay, madame; that is the long and short of it!"

"Well, explain yourself as quickly as you can, for I have but little time to spare, as I have a pressing engagement."

"I reckon you will defer your visit, madame."

The fact was the lawyer was somewhat pleased at the turn affairs had taken, as far as Mrs. Fountain was concerned, for the woman had treated him rather cavalierly the last few times he had seen her.

"Please explain, sir."

There was a little tremor in the woman's tones.

"Is your husband at home?"

"I believe he is."

"You had better summon him here."

"He is not well, and I do not wish to disturb him. You can state your business to me."

"Very well; but it would be better to have your husband here."

"Why so?"

"He has a good head. We will need a good level head now."

"But we depend a great deal upon you."

"I am in peril—the fact is, we are all in peril."

"Well, what is it?"

"They are onto us; they are onto our whole scheme."

"Who is onto us?"

"Some one who knows just what they are about. We must make some move to checkmate them, or we will all be in jail inside of two days."

"Will you tell me just what you mean?"

"I will presently," the lawyer answered, slowly as though gathering his wits together.

CHAPTER IX.

A MOMENT the lawyer hesitated, and then said:

"As I said, some one is onto our whole scheme."

Mrs. Fountain looked at the lawyer with a seemingly puzzled expression on her face and said:

"Your language is somewhat obscure to me, sir. I do not understand what you mean when you say *our* whole scheme. I know of no scheme."

"Oh, you don't! Let me ask you a question: When the body of Raymond Tift was found, and the inquest was held, what was proven?"

"It was proven that he died before the time that his marriage was supposed to have taken place. I was very particular in procuring that evidence," said Mrs. Fountain, smiling.

"Great Scott! They've got me! I swore that Raymond came to my office and destroyed that will on the fourteenth of the month."

"What difference does it make what you swore to, sir?"

"It makes this difference: the drawing up of the will can be proven."

"It can be?"

"Yes. And you, madame, brought about the quarrel that made Percy Black our enemy."

"We have nothing to fear from Percy Black."

"He has managed to tell his story, all the same."

Mrs. Fountain seemed to have become suddenly awakened to a realization of the fact that something of serious import had occurred. She became very much interested, and asked:

"Mr. Haas, will you please tell me what has occurred?"

The lawyer proceeded and related in detail all that had happened in his office. Mrs. Fountain listened with distended eyes, and when the lawyer had concluded she exclaimed:

"You are a fool! That disguised woman was that creature who claims to be Mrs. Tift. Why did you not unmask her?"

"At first I thought it was Percy Black in disguise, and I accused her of being him. When she showed me a foot no larger than that of a Chinese girl, I then suspected it might be the self-styled Mrs. Tift. I tried to pull off her mask, and was knocked down as easily as though I had been a glass jar on a shelf, and the woman suddenly disappeared."

"This is indeed alarming," said Mrs. Fountain. "Who could the woman have been?"

"I am sure it was not Agnes Tift."

"What do mean? How dare you say Agnes Tift, sir?"

"She may prove herself to be Mrs. Agnes Tift. I tell you the affair has an ominous look."

"Mr. Haas, I told you some time ago that it was necessary to get possession of that marriage certificate."

"I believe now that it is necessary."

"We must have it."

"How can we get it?"

"Secure the services of two or three men who will get it at any price."

"I will do so."

"You must also ascertain the identity of the creature who called on you. Spare no money to accomplish these objects."

"I will make the attempt."

"She may visit you again."

"Quite likely."

"Secure a shadow; have a man at your heels wherever you go, night or day."

"I will."

"We must secure the woman and obtain that paper."

"We will if we can."

"We will then follow your original advice and present the will in court and prove its invalidity."

"Yes; we should have done that in the first place."

"We can do it now."

"Only at great risk now. You forget the woman who visited my office."

"We must secure her also. Now go, and get to work at once; and come here to-night and let me hear what you have done."

The lawyer departed. He was walking along the street slowly, preoccupied by his thoughts, when a man accosted him and said:

"Hello, Haas! How are you?"

"Why, how are you, Curley? You are just the man I want to see."

"And you are just the man I want to see."

"Then it is fortunate that we have met."

"Just so. You had a strange visitor this morning?" said Curley, interrogatively.

"Yes, I did. But how did you know it?"

"Oh, I always have an eye to business!"

"How did you learn that fact?"

"That's my secret. But that visit upset you a little."

"Oh, no!"

"Bah! I've an eye to what's going on. You can't fool me. Come right down and open up."

"Well, you beat me, Curley!"

"That's all right, Mr. Haas. I know you need me."

"You are an odd fellow, Curley. But you are right; I do want you. You saw the woman, then, who visited me this morning?"

"Yes, I did."

"Would you know her again if you saw her?"

"I would if she appeared in the same rig."

"Ah! Then you know she was disguised?"

"Yes."

"How did you come to make that discovery?"

"That's my secret. But do you want to find that woman?"

"Yes, I do."

"All right, sir. I can put you right onto her identity, I can."

The lawyer knew well the character of the man Curley. He was what is known as a snide detective. He was an active fellow, on the make, and unscrupulous in his methods. He was an inveterate gambler, and had been mixed up in great many shady transactions in his time. Haas did not wish to put himself altogether into the hands of the man Curley, and he said:

"I do not know as I am overanxious about ascertaining the woman's identity. I am not prepared to put up anything."

"If you are not prepared to put up anything I am not prepared to give out anything; so it's all right."

"But how did you know the woman called on me?"

"I tell you that is my secret."

"You have aroused my curiosity."

"Mebbe I can 'rouse it a little more. How about Mrs. Fountain?"

The lawyer gave a start. He did not know that the man Curley had any knowledge of Mrs. Fountain or the affair of Raymond Tift.

"You see I am a sort of wizard, Haas."

"You are fooling yourself."

"That's all right; but I am not fooling you."

The man made a move as though about to go away.

"Hold on, Curley," said the lawyer. "Come along with me to my office. We can talk better there."

"My time is valuable. I am onto something big. I will see you later; I've no time now."

"It may pay you to come, Curley."

"I am a business man. I have no time to waste beating about the bush."

"But I wish to talk business."

"Not with me. You practically say you have no interest in your strange visitor. You do not say that Mrs. Fountain has any interest in her. I reckon I know people who are interested, and I propose to go and see them."

"Come with me."

"It will cost you fifty dollars if I go with you. My time is worth that to-day."

Curley knew his advantage, and he was on the squeeze.

"I will give you ten dollars, Curley."

"You are very kind; but I can make more. I've some good pointers, I have."

"I will make it twenty-five dollars."

"I am a professional man, and I put my own value on my time."

"Well, if you won't accept twenty-five dollars just to go to my office for a little talk I've no use for you. Good-day."

"Good-day," said Curley; and he again made a move to go away when a second time Haas called him back.

"I've just thought of something. I may have a job for you."

"Is it worth fifty dollars."

"Yes."

"All right; then I am with you. But I want the dough in advance."

"I will pay you in advance if you will agree to be perfectly frank with me."

"I am always a frank man in business matters."

"Come along then."

They proceeded to the lawyer's office, which they soon reached. Mr. Haas bid Curley be seated, sat down himself, and said:

"What do you know about the woman who called upon me this morning?"

"Er—fifty dollars, please."

The lawyer turned to his desk and made out a check for the amount, handed it to Curley, and repeated the question.

"Well, I know she called on you about the Tift case."

The lawyer looked puzzled.

"What do you know about the Tift case?"

"I've been working on it."

"You've been working on it?" exclaimed the lawyer.

"Yes. I've been on it over a year."

"That's singular. I didn't know there was a Tift case."

"Oh, you didn't?"

"No, I didn't. But perhaps you will enlighten me about it."

"I can give you fifty dollars worth, anyhow," said Curley. "This young man Tift married a pretty young girl. By his marriage he came into possession of his property. On the day of his marriage he made a will in favor of his wife, as he had a perfect right to do. That same day he disappeared. His body, or, rather, a body, was found in the river. It is necessary for the residuary legatee to prove that the will is invalid. They can only do so by proving there was no marriage. Mrs. Fountain is the residuary legatee. The woman who called on you this morning knows something about the case. She has shaken up dry bones. You ran off to visit Mrs. Fountain. There is a high wind blowing, eh? How is that for the Tift case?"

While talking the man Curley fumbled the check in his hand, and when he concluded he said:

"I will hold a check for as many thousands in the near future, and don't you forget it."

The lawyer had listened in amazement, and finally he asked:

"Where did you get all this information?"

"That's my business. You know I've got it, though, and you're knocked endways. No one can pull you folks out but me. It will cost you something for my services, though. Don't forget that!"

"You say you know the woman who visited me this morning?"

"I know something about her; and I also know something about your late clerk, Percy Black."

"Is he the man who gave you all this false information?"

"Oh, no! I only wished to let you know that I was up in the whole business. I can find Black when I need him. I am now going out on little business, and I will return here in about an hour. During that time you can make up your mind whether you want my services or not, otherwise I may move in another direction."

The lawyer made no attempt to detain Curley. He was pleased to know that he was going, as it would give him an opportunity to do a little thinking and planning; and he said:

"All right, Curley. Be sure and come back."

After Curley's departure the lawyer muttered:

"By jinger, we are rapidly approaching a crisis in this matter!"

CHAPTER X.

THERE was a smile of satisfaction on Curley's face as he entered the elevator and descended to the street. He walked along to a certain corner and waited. In a few minutes he was joined by a rough-looking but shrewd-faced man.

"Well, Joe, what did you make out?"

"I'm onto 'em."

"Is there more than one of 'em?"

"Yes; there's two; and they're all right."

"How so?"

"Well, one of 'em is the purtiest gal I ever seen in my life, and the old woman, she's a gal, too, and a hummer!"

"The old one was under cover, eh?"

"Indeed an' she was."

"Tell me all about it, Joe."

The man repeated a remarkable story; and in order that the reader may understand it we will relate what had occurred.

On Mademoiselle Lucie's return to her room she found Agnes anxiously awaiting her. The mademoiselle cast aside her disguise in an adjoining room, returned to the presence of Agnes, and said:

"Well, my child, I promised you some startling revelations, and I shall keep my promise. But first tell me if you ever saw the original of that picture."

Mademoiselle Lucie handed to Agnes the photograph she had purloined from the album in Mrs. Fountain's house; and the instant the beautiful girl's eyes fell upon it she uttered a low cry, involuntarily kissed the pictured face, and burst into tears.

"Ah, I made no mistake! It is the picture of—"

"My husband!" exclaimed Agnes. "Where did you get it?"

"Oh, that is a little secret! Now sit down, be perfectly calm, and listen to me. I told you I had certain suspicions in regard to your husband, and now I have evidence confirming my suspicions."

"You have evidence?"

"Yes; I have what to my mind is positive evidence that the original of that picture is alive to-day."

"My husband is living?"

"Yes."

"Then why does he stay away from me?"

"That is the mystery we must solve. You can take my word for it that his absence is involuntary."

"Who could keep him away from me?"

"That is a question we must solve; but I am fully persuaded that your husband is not only living but faithful to you. It may be that they have furnished false testimony against your character. He may believe you are unworthy, or there may follow other explanations. But one thing is certain: I will solve the mystery. It is enough to know that he lives and that he still loves you."

"If he loves me, why has he permitted me to suffer? But for you I should be dead at this moment. And if he is living, who was buried from the house of Mrs. Fountain?"

"Those are all mysteries which we must solve. I will be frank with you: I visited Mrs. Fountain."

"And did you see her?"

"No; I did not care to see her; all I desired was to secure that picture, and I got it."

"And how did you secure it?"

Mademoiselle Lucie told how she had purloined the picture.

"How did you know it was the picture of Raymond?"

"I did not know. I guessed at it."

"And you did not see Mrs. Fountain?"

"No; but I will see her in good time, and I will have a great surprise for her. I also went to see the lawyer who drew up the will, and there I secured some very important evidence."

"You did?"

"Yes. I learned that your husband entered the lawyer's office the day following his death and destroyed the will."

Agnes looked puzzled, and the mademoiselle laughed in a pleased manner.

"My husband visited that office the day after his death and destroyed the will? I do not understand."

"That's according to the lawyer's story, don't you see? You will remember that, according to the evidence at the inquest, it was proven that Raymond Tift was seen to leap into the river from a ferry-boat on the very day of his marriage to you."

"Yes, it was so proven, I remember."

"Well, the lawyer says he came to his office and destroyed the will the following day—the day after he was drowned! You will remember you were married on the thirteenth of the month; he was proven to have committed suicide on the thirteenth, and the lawyer says he destroyed the will on the fourteenth."

"How can he say such a ridiculous thing?"

"It proves that they are not united in their manufactured testimony—it proves that there has been false swearing—it proves a deep-laid conspiracy—it proves that Raymond Tift is not dead."

"Oh, how strange it will be if your suspicions prove correct!"

"I will prove them to be correct; I am sure of that."

"Where do suppose my husband is?"

"I have a suspicion as to where he may be; and one other fact is assured: the will is not destroyed. They know you are legally married and that the property belongs to you."

"But what about the clergyman and the witness?" asked Agnes.

"That is one of the mysteries to be solved, and one which I think will be of easy solution. And now there comes the most serious part of this matter. A war, as it were, will begin. That lawyer will sound an alarm. Those people will start out to find you and to learn who I am. It will be a great game, and I have confidence in my ability to win, and I welcome them on the warpath. Agnes, have you your marriage certificate about your person?"

"Yes."

"It is not safe for you to carry that certificate around with you. At any moment you are liable to lose it. You might be murdered for the possession of that certificate. You must not carry it with you any longer."

"What can I do with it?"

"It must be put in a safe place."

"You can take care of it for me."

"No; that will not do. It must be hidden."

"Where can we hide it?"

"I will not decide now what I will do with it, but it must not be in this room. To-night I will dispose of it."

The two girls held a long consultation, and were still talking when the man Joe met his employer, Curley. We have revealed sufficient of their conversation, however, for the reader to understand the talk that took place between the two men as follows:

"You see," said the fellow Joe, "when you put me onto the woman's trail I just followed her up, and she went into a big flat house, an' when she went up in the elevator I waited till it come down. A kid was runnin' the elevator, an' I pumped him, an' found out that the woman went to the top floor. The kid showed me her door, an' I went an' peeked through the key-hole. There was a beauty sittin' there, an' in a few minutes the old woman I had been doggin' showed up in the room too, but she had shed her disguise. The two started in an' had a long talk."

The man proceeded and repeated almost word for word all the conversation that had taken place between Mademoiselle Lucie and Agnes. Curley was delighted, and when the narrative was concluded he said:

"You did it well, Joe."

"Thank you, ole man."

"We'll make a big haul out of this."

"Count me in."

"Sure."

The two men parted, and Curley returned to the office of the lawyer. The latter was awaiting him.

"I am here again, Mr. Haas."

"So I see," said the lawyer, suavely.

"Well, we may as well get down to biz."

"I have been thinking over what you said to me, Curley, during your absence; and, while you have considerable false information, I will admit that there is some truth in what you have said."

"Some truth! Well, go ahead."

"I may have use for you."

"I think so; and I will be of some use—if we come to terms. I am a wizard; and I'll prove it."

"Do so."

"A big fraud is on hand—"

"You're right," interrupted the lawyer. Curley was rather taken aback, but he understood when the lawyer proceeded and said: "There is a big fraud on hand—an attempt to steal a fortune. A woman, backed by some scoundrels, is seeking to blackmail my client, Mrs. Fountain."

"Oh, that's it, eh?"

There came a very significant smile to the face of Curley as he said, in a bantering tone:

"We will let it go at that for the present."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"I tell you I am a wizard."

"You are a very smart man, Curley, and I will have use for you in our efforts to defeat this bold conspiracy."

"Oh, I see! And I will be well paid?"

"Yes, you will be well paid."

"Could I get any more if I aided in carrying out the conspiracy?"

"No."

"Then we will let it go at that."

"What do you mean?"

"We will call it a blackmailing scheme."

"You think you are a very smart fellow."

"You will find that I am no fool," said Curley. "I can tell you something that will make your hair stand on end, Mr. Haas."

CHAPTER XI.

THE lawyer was a cunning man, but he was at a disadvantage. Still, he was playing the man before him just right, he thought.

"So you can tell me something that will make my hair stand on end, eh?"

"Yes, I can."

"Do so; I can comb it down."

"It's diamond cut diamond between us, Haas."

"Well?"

"We may as well understand each other. We're both on the make. You know me pretty well, and I know you better. If we were to compliment each other, we'd start in to prove which was the greater rogue."

"You are an odd fellow. I suppose I shall have to indulge you."

"You are troubled with the same oddness; but I am the better wizard, and I'll prove it."

"So you said before. I am waiting for the proof."

"You fellows haven't played this thing well."

"Oh, you will still run on the wrong track?"

"Yes; I will run on what you call the wrong track; but how wrong you were this morning when you told that woman that Raymond Tift destroyed that will on the fourteenth of the month!"

The lawyer had encountered several surprises that day, but the words of the man Curley were actually stunning, and he betrayed his surprise.

"I told you I was a wizard," said Curley, laughing. "Don't tell me that I am on the wrong track when you switched off as you did."

"I'll give you a thousand dollars if you will tell me how you got all this information."

"I wouldn't tell you for ten thousand. But, you see, I've got the facts, and you may as well work on the square with me. I am willing to let it go that there is a great conspiracy on foot. That's all right; it suits me, and makes it easy, you know, to work my end of it; but don't rub the conspiracy yarn in. You can't play me. Now let's get right down to business."

"Yes; let's get right down to business," repeated the lawyer.

"That will was not destroyed. You daren't destroy it as long as Mrs. Tift is alive; so what's the use of fooling."

"Hang it, you are a wizard!"

"Certainly I am! And let me tell you that even if Mrs. Tift were dead you would dare destroy the will as long as the marriage certificate is in existence. What you want is that marriage certificate, and until you get it Mrs. Fountain is in great jeopardy."

"You're a wonder, Curley."

"I'm simply a man of business. But how much will you give for that certificate?"

"I'll give a thousand dollars for it."

"Only a thousand? Why, man, it's worth many times that."

"How much do you want?"

"Fifty thousand."

"You're crazy."

"It's worth, I reckon, several hundred thousand to certain people. My price is very moderate."

"Have you got the paper?"

"That has nothing to do with it. How much is it worth?"

"Produce the certificate, then we'll talk price."

"I can get it in a day or two."

"Get it, and come here with it."

"Oh, no!"

"You would be perfectly safe in doing so. There is no legal way in which you could be compelled to surrender it."

"You don't charge for that legal opinion, do you?"

"You're a wit," said the lawyer, laughing.

"I've got my wits about me in this deal. I know you, and you know me. When we deal, it will be on our mutual knowledge of each other. So don't try any smart business."

"I dare not offer any sum."

"Oh, no! But I've named a sum. See if it can be had. And, mind you, there must be no funny business. The money must be guaranteed. Don't forget that part of it."

"Do you know where the woman hangs out who was here?"

"I do; and I know more."

"What more do you know?"

"I can put my hand on Mrs. Tift."

"The woman who came here was under cover?"

"Yes."

"Was it Mrs. Tift?"

"No."

"Who was it?"

"Fifty dollars does not pay me for my golden goose."

"I will guarantee you ten thousand dollars."

"For what?"

"The marriage certificate and a knowledge of the whereabouts of Mrs. Tift, or, rather, the woman who calls herself Mrs. Tift."

"She is Mrs. Tift, and she can prove it. I'll tell you something. They are onto you and the whole game."

"Who is onto us?"

"The parties who have taken up this case for Mrs. Tift; and you people will have to move quick, or the jig is up. I am giving it to you straight."

"What are they onto?"

"The whole business, murder and all."

"Nonsense! There has been no murder."

"Mebbe not," said Curley; and a broad grin overspread his face. "Oh, no! But we'll say it's murder. That's better than the real truth," was the singular declaration.

The lawyer was puzzled; but he, as stated, knew the man he was dealing with, and he said:

"Meet me here two hours from now."

"I will be here," said Curley; and again, with a satisfied smile upon his face, he departed.

Haas proceeded to the house of Mrs. Fountain. He had promised to report, and he certainly had some very startling news to communicate.

Mrs. Fountain met him, and her husband joined them.

Andrew Fountain was a reckless man, a fellow of few words, but as desperate a character at heart as ever lived. He was what would be called a handsome man, but his good looks were of the loud order. He would not have been considered handsome by really delicate and refined people; but those who floated around on the rim of the circle of the Four Hundred thought him just splendid; and it was with these people that his wife counted her intimates, and she was accustomed to the gratulation "What a lovely man your husband is, Mrs. Fountain!"

"Well, what have you to report, Mr. Haas?" demanded Mrs. Fountain.

"Matters are assuming a serious aspect, madame. Our enemies appear to have been making preparations for what we may call a grand assault. I think I can defeat them, however; but it will cost money."

"I do not care what it costs."

Here the man Fountain interposed and said:

"That was spoken like a woman. We do care what it costs. This is a conspiracy, and if we can crush it out for a few hundred dollars, all right. If it's to cost more than a few hundred, why, I say, we had better let it work out, that's all."

"It will cost more than a few hundred, sir, and more than a few thousand. It will cost a fortune."

Fountain glared and said:

"It's a nice game you are working, Haas; but I just want to tell you it will stand you in hand to go slow."

Haas knew the sort of man he had to deal with, and he said:

"Yes, I will go slow. I'll get out of the business altogether. I don't like it, anyhow; there's neither honor nor profit in it for me, and if you will come to my office I will turn over all the papers to you, and be glad to get out of it. You can have the will and all the papers."

"What do you mean, Mr. Haas?" asked the man Fountain in a more gentle tone.

"I will speak plainly, sir. I think they have got the bulge on us. I think it means State's prison for us. I am anxious to drop out of it altogether, as I told you, and if you will come with me to my office I will turn over all the papers and get out, and you can manage the business yourself."

"No need for you to get mad about it, Haas."

"I am not mad; but I am done. I've been trying to advise, but my advice has been met with insinuations as to my honesty. I will put the matter straight: you can't steal a million dollars by spending a few hundred. We are confronted by a menacing situation, and I will get out of it altogether, and you can run the business as cheaply as suits you."

"Andy," said Mrs. Fountain, "Mr. Haas must not desert us."

"He will not desert us."

"It is not a case of desertion; it's a matter of business. I've plenty to attend to without seeking to carry through this business hampered by lack of money. But I am finding no fault. Mr. Fountain is an able man. I'll give him all the points as far as I have them and he can run it."

"What are the points?" asked Mr. Fountain.

"The points are that some very smart people have taken up the case for this girl, and in some way they have got down to the facts. Mrs. Fountain quarreled with my clerk, Percy Black, and he has turned against us and opened up negotiations with the people who have taken up this girl's case. It is known that the marriage took place and that they have the certificate; and, between you and me, they know that the certificate is genuine. It's all right for us to say the hotel clerk denies the marriage; it's all right for us to say the clergyman denies having performed the marriage; but when that certificate is produced in court, and the evidence is also produced that a will was made after Raymond Tift's reputed marriage, there will be the devil to pay. The clerk will have to perjure himself. Will he do it? And may it not be possible for the other side to buy him back? Our clergyman will have to prove his identity. Will he be able to do it? I tell you it looks bad for us. They have all these points; and now that you know all about it you can do as you choose. I'll get out."

"You are not to get out of the case," said Mr. Fountain. "Now what do you propose to do, provided we furnish all the money you want?"

"I propose to get that certificate. As long as they hold that they hold a sword over your heads."

"Then all hinges upon that certificate?"

"Yes. And I had made arrangements to secure it; but it will require a large amount of money to secure it. You tell me to go

slow, and think a few hundred dollars will be sufficient to stave off the impending danger. So you can now do as you please."

"How much money will it require, Mr. Haas?"

"Fifty thousand dollars."

"When must the money be paid?"

"When the paper is delivered."

"And paid to whom?"

"The man who gets it."

"Have you a man who can get it?"

"I have a man who thinks he can; and I believe he can."

"We will give fifty thousand dollars for the certificate," said Fountain.

CHAPTER XII.

THE lawyer, as we have stated, was anxious to withdraw from the case altogether. He realized the dangerous position he was in, and he said:

"I will send you the man and you can conduct the negotiations yourself."

Mrs. Fountain here interposed and said:

"You can not withdraw from this case, Mr. Haas. You are a good and faithful man, and when that certificate is obtained you shall receive twenty-five thousand dollars also."

"Very well, madame. For you I will do what I can; but you must give me a check to work on at once—a check for a thousand dollars."

The check was given, and after a little more talk the lawyer departed. At his office he found the man Curley awaiting him. They had a long talk, and it was finally agreed that if the certificate was secured Curley was to receive ten thousand dollars.

Curley went out, and later met his man Joe. The two arranged a plan for the carrying out of their purpose, and then went to the house where Mademoiselle Lucie resided and laid low. In a short time they saw her leave the house. They were sure she had the certificate in her possession, and they determined to have it, even if they were compelled to drop her out and toss her body into the river. What occurred has been related. The two men were foiled. They were downed in the most mysterious manner, and the mademoiselle returned to her flat, and the conversation that occurred between her and Agnes has been detailed. When Agnes said "I will return to the country," the mademoiselle exclaimed:

"You will do nothing of the kind."

"It is evident we have been discovered, and it is known that I am here. Those people are dangerous. They will murder us both."

"You need have no fear. I just enjoy this little game," said the mademoiselle, laughing.

"But we must at least find another refuge. They may come to our rooms," said Agnes, fearfully.

"I hope they will. If they come sneaking around here they will be taught a lesson. My dear child, fear nothing and trust me. I am a match for two or three ordinary men any time. I have no fear of them at all."

While the foregoing conversation was in progress, the two men who had been downed were having a talk.

"By heavens, Joe," said Curley, "I can not see how that woman put us out of the game the way she did!"

"She's a devil, that's sure."

"Well, we know her now; but she'll know us. We'll beard the lioness in her den."

"What do you mean?"

"We must have that paper to-night while they have it about them. If we let this chance slip we are beaten. Joe, we must enter her rooms this very night and get that paper."

"Will you break into her rooms?"

"I reckon we know how to do that, don't we?"

"Well, we've done it before now."

"Meet me at midnight, and I'll have things all fixed."

"I'm with you. I'll take any chance you will."

"The risk is not much. We've only a couple of women to deal with. Be sure and be on time," said Curley; and the two men separated.

Mademoiselle Lucie did not leave her room again that night. During the evening she was very thoughtful and said little; but well along toward midnight she remarked:

"Agnes, I want you to go to bed now. You are a girl of nerve and courage, and if you hear a noise to-night do not move unless I call your name. Then run out by that door and scream with all your might. But do not do so, remember, unless I call your name. If you hear me, give an outcry, and then carry out my instructions."

Agnes turned deathly pale and asked:

"What do you contemplate doing?"

"I contemplate doing nothing; but I am apprehensive that something may happen to-night, and I want you to be prepared."

"This must not be, my friend. You shall not run any risk for me."

"I am not going to run any risk. I am going to have a little fun, that's all. I am going to find your husband. I am determined to rescue him and solve this mystery. Are you not willing to run a little risk to save your husband's life?"

Agnes stared in amazement.

"Do you really believe my husband is alive?"

"I do; and I as firmly believe that I will find him. But we will not talk about that now. All I desire is that you follow my instructions, and I may accomplish a great deal to-night."

"Are you going out?"

"No; I shall stay right here. I will not even retire at present."

"Why not let me stay here with you?"

"No; that would spoil my plans. You need have no fear, Agnes. All you need do is lay still, and do not be scared, and we may accomplish more than we expect this very night."

"What is it you expect?"

"We may receive some visitors to-night."

"Do you think those men will come here?"

"They may."

"Why not get a policeman to remain here?"

"No, no; that would upset my plans. I tell you once more that you need have no fear. I am more than a match for whoever may come here."

After much earnest persuasion, Agnes finally retired to her bed, and the mademoiselle set about making certain preparations, and when all was ready she muttered:

"Now let them come; I am ready to receive them."

The mademoiselle had no proof that she would receive a visit; but she did have a suspicion pointing in that direction, and ere the dawn of the following day her suspicion was confirmed.

Twelve o'clock struck and the mademoiselle still sat undisturbed. One o'clock struck and her expected visitors had not appeared.

"It is possible they will not come; but I will wait all night for them. I shall not be caught napping," she muttered.

Two o'clock struck and still the fellows she expected had not put in an appearance, and she again muttered:

"Really I am disappointed. I did hope they would come."

The words had hardly escaped her lips, when a sound fell upon her ears. She rose from her seat and listened, and then she heard a very indistinct rasping noise, and she located it at the lock of her door, and she muttered:

"They are here; and now the game opens."

The mademoiselle had been sitting in what she called her art-room. She now retired to the middle room. Agnes was sleeping, or pretending to sleep, in the rear room. The mademoiselle withdrew from sight, but in such a position that she could see into the room she had vacated. A few moments passed, when she saw the door of the front room slowly open, and the masked face and head of a man was projected through the opening. The man was very slow in his movements. He looked around the room and then stepped across the threshold, and, after waiting and listening, advanced another foot. The mademoiselle, with a smile upon her face and a glitter in her eye, was watching every movement, and in her hands she held a coil of strong, thin rope.

The masked man at length entered fully into the room, closed the door behind him, and for a moment stood gazing around. In the room, between the two front windows, was a bureau, and on the latter was a tin box such as is usually used to hold papers. The man's eyes fell upon the box; then, after listening a moment, he tiptoed across the room, seized the box, and forced the lid open. Some papers were revealed to his view, and these he began to examine. He stood with his back toward the door of the room where Mademoiselle Lucie stood watching, and so deeply interested was he in examining the contents of the box that he did not hear a step behind him. He did realize or suspect that he had fallen into a trap.

The mademoiselle appeared at the door of the middle room. It was a critical moment. One false step and all was lost; but the nerves running through that marvelous woman were like steel. She advanced a step or two as noiselessly as the tread of a fly upon the ceiling. She was within three feet of the man. The mirror in the dressing-case had been covered. It was evident the man had not noticed, in his eagerness, this suspicious circumstance.

The woman's arms were uplifted. She made a quick movement. No thug ever threw strangling-rope with greater dexterity. The noose fell over the man's neck. He started; but it was too late. The noose tightened: he was helpless. He could neither struggle nor make an outcry. He was at the mercy of the woman. She dragged him back, and caught him as he toppled over and let him go to the floor without noise. The fellow was black in the face. The mademoiselle bound him hand and foot with the greatest celerity, and he lay helpless. She removed the noose from his neck, tore the mask from his face, and dashed water on his head and face, and soon he began to revive. Not a sound had been made during the whole operation, so deftly had it been carried through.

The mademoiselle went to the door and listened. She turned up the gas and then flung the door wide open. She stepped into the hall and heard the sound of a fleeing step. She ran down the stairs, and when near the bottom a man's voice called out:

"Stand, you scoundrel, or I shoot!"

The fellow did not stand, but fled to the street door and passed out. The mademoiselle, with a smile of triumph upon her face, ascended the stairs and entered the room where her captive lay upon the floor absolutely helpless, but with recovered senses. The mademoiselle closed the door, and taking a seat said in the most agitating of tones:

"Why don't you call for help? You are not gagged."

Rage and baffled spite glowed in the man's eyes; but he made no reply.

"I caught you nicely, didn't I?" said the mademoiselle.

The man still maintained silence.

"You thought you had a weak woman to deal with, didn't you? You wretch, I just enjoy capturing a beast like you! I suppose I may as well give the alarm and hand you over."

"You did me up well," said the man.

"Well, yes, I did; and now I want to show you up as a curiosity. Since your pal ran away and left you, I'll call in my pal to look at you."

The mademoiselle entered the room where Agnes lay and said:

"Rise, my dear. Do not be frightened; but I want you to see what a big capture I have made. I have lassoed a monster who came here to eat us up."

Agnes had thrown herself upon the bed without removing her clothing. She was led into the prisoner's presence. She turned pale, but did not speak, and the mademoiselle said:

"This is the talking animal that I have captured. He and I are to have a little chat, my dear, and I want you to hear all we say."

The prisoner gritted his teeth in impotent rage.

"Now we will begin our chat," said the mademoiselle, tauntingly, to the helpless figure on the floor.

CHAPTER XIII.

"THE first question I want to ask you," began Mademoiselle Lucie, "is, who employed you to come here?"

The man glared, but made no answer.

"Come, my good rascal, you are not a common burglar. You did not come here to steal; you came here to procure a certain paper; and I will tell you now you will never get that paper. But I do want to know who sent you here."

"I may as well own up," said the man. "I am a common thief. I don't know anything about any paper."

"That answer won't do. How nicely I trapped you with that little box I placed on the bureau! Yes; I knew what you would make for. You're a smart man! You did not even notice that the mirror was covered so that you could not see me when I stole up behind you. Yes, you walked right into the trap."

"I thought there were jewels in the case."

"Then you are a common burglar."

"I am. I told you I was once before."

"Glad you own up before a witness. All I have to do is to call the police and hand you over; and as you were caught in the act you will go up the river in a short time, and then how will you get the paper?"

"You're a smart woman! Yes; you beat the world!"

"I'll beat the people who sent you here; and I tell you now you will never get that paper. You will go to Sing Sing, and I will lay for the next one they send along. As you won't tell all you know, I will call an officer and hand you over."

The mademoiselle stepped toward the door, when the man Joe—for it was he—exclaimed:

"Hold on! Don't call the cop!"

"Don't call the cop, eh? What shall I do, let you go?"

"I wish I dared open up, but I can't. I'm only a small fry in the affair, anyhow. They don't let me into their secrets. The man who got away was the one you should have nipped."

"Well, I've got you; and if you will open up I will let you go."

"What can I give you?"

"What were you after when you entered this room?"

"I was after a paper."

"The certificate of a certain lady's marriage?"

"That's about it."

"Who employed you?"

"My pal—the man who got away."

"What is his name?"

"You don't expect I'll give him away, do you?"

"You will, or I shall call the police."

"And if I squeal, you'll let me go, eh?"

"Yes; when you have answered all my questions satisfactorily I will let you go."

"The man who got away is a snide detective, and his name is Curley."

"Who employs him?"

"A lawyer."

"What is the lawyer's name?"

"I don't know. Curley don't let me into any more of his business than he can help."

"And this man Curley has contracted to deliver that paper?"

"That's about the size of it, I guess."

"Who is the lawyer working for?"

"I don't know."

"And the man who sent you here is Curley?"

"Yes."

"I am going to let you off, my man."

"Thank you."

"And you need not tell Curley that you gave him away."

"What shall I tell him?"

"Tell him anything you choose; it does not concern me; but you can deliver this message from me: they will never get that certificate; and if a hair of his head is injured it will go hard with those who do the harm; so let them go slow."

"And will you really let me off?"

"Certainly I will. I have no use for you; but I wish I had caught Curley. I will set a trap for him, and I will catch him yet."

The mademoiselle released the man from the rope that bound him. She did not appear to fear him at all. When he was free she said:

"Now you can go; but remember one thing: if you attempt any capers you will be a dead man!"

"I'm not up to any capers, miss."

The man did not appear to be in any hurry to depart. He lingered, and acted as though there was something troubling him. At length Mademoiselle Lucie said:

"Why do you not go?"

"Miss, I wish you'd take me into your service."

"Take you into my service? Why do you want to go into my service?"

"Because I've an idea you are going to be a winner, and I want to be on the winning side."

"I have no use for you."

"I might be of some use to you, miss."

"How?"

"Well, I am employed on the other side. I can stay there, and in your interest I can pick up a great deal."

The mademoiselle meditated a moment and said:

"I will talk to you about that some other time."

"I'd be as true as steel, miss. I have not been treated right on the other side."

"I will consider your proposition. If I should conclude to accept it I will let you know. I can find you when I want you," said the mademoiselle, significantly. "And now go."

The man slowly left the room. When he had gone, the mademoiselle burst into a hearty fit of laughter. Agnes gazed at her in astonishment.

"My dear Agnes, I am laughing for joy," said the mademoiselle. "We have struck a great blow to-night."

"Why did you let that fellow go?" asked Agnes. "Why did you not call the police?"

"I have no use for the police. I had good reasons for letting him go."

"You are indeed a remarkable woman."

"My dear child, I am now more than satisfied that all my suspicions are correct. Your husband lives. We will find him. We will circumvent these schemers. You shall yet be happy."

"It does not seem possible."

"Time will tell. And now, my dear, we must go to bed."

The two ladies passed to the rear room, after the mademoiselle had relocked the door of the sitting-room. Once in the rear room, she drew a pair of pistols and placed them under her pillow and said:

"Now for some much-needed rest."

The mademoiselle threw herself upon the bed and was soon sound asleep.

In the meantime the fellow Joe had made his way to a certain all-night resort, and the first man he met on entering the place was Curley. The latter uttered an exclamation of surprise when he saw his pal. He drew him into a rear room and asked:

"Well, old man, what has happened?"

"You ran away and left me, for one thing," said Joe.

"Yes, I did; but I was pursued."

"Who pursued you?"

"That I can not tell. But they had a regular detective in that house, I suppose."

"I don't know about that; but I've had the strangest experience a man ever went through."

"Tell me about it, Joe."

"I was caught."

"How did you get away?"

"She let me go."

"She let you go? Was it a woman?"

"Yes."

"What woman?"

"The one who downed us earlier in the evening."

"Who captured you?"

"She did."

"Well, this gets me!"

"Yes; and she got me."

"I don't understand it, Joe."

"Neither do I. But she let me off, and gave me a message for you."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I say. Yes, that woman is up to the whole business. She knows everything that's going on."

"And she sent a message to me? What does she know about me?"

"She knows all about you."

"What are you giving me, Joe?"

"I am giving it to you straight. When she set me free, she said: 'I've a message for that snide detective, Curley.'"

Curley betrayed his amazement and said:

"Tell me all about it, Joe."

"She told me to tell you that you would never get that paper."

"She must have expected us."

"Of course she did; and she set a trap for us. She said she only regretted that she had not caught you; but she says she will get you the next time."

"She will, eh? But how did she trap you?"

"Well, I got into the room all right. I saw a tin box on the bureau, and I said to myself 'That's what I'm after.' I thought I had things dead to rights. I got the box, and was hunting for the paper, when I got it. That box was a bait."

"How did you get it?"

"Well, I didn't know much for a few minutes; in fact, I don't know how long I was unconscious; but when I came round I was bound hand and foot, and the female devil sat on a chair smiling at me, and she said:

"Well, old man, why don't you call for help?"

"I didn't answer, and she laughed at me and said:

"I know what you came here for."

"By George," ejaculated Curley, "if you are telling the truth, that woman is a daisy!"

"She's a daisy all right! Well, then she teased me a little. She talked about sending for the police and having me railroaded, and finally she said:

"Well, I guess you are not the fellow I wanted to catch. You are the wrong fish. It was Curley I wanted."

"She said it was Curley she wanted?"

"Yes; and then she said I could go, and she gave me the message for you; and I tell you now she is onto the whole business. I learned more about the scheme from her than I ever did from you."

"What did you learn?"

"Well, she gave me several nuts to crack."

"In what shape?"

"You tell Curley," she said, "that if a hair of his head is injured I will hold them all responsible."

"Whose head did she mean?"

"That is something I can not tell you."
Curley meditated a moment, and then said:
"She has given me a few nuts to crack."

CHAPTER XIV.

On the afternoon of the day following the incidents we have recorded, Mrs. Fountain entered the office of Lawyer Haas. She was greatly excited.

"Well, Mr. Haas, what has been accomplished?" she asked.
"Nothing, madame; and I tell you now matters look very blue."
"How so?"
"A very remarkable person is pitted against us."
"When will you secure the certificate?"
"I do not think we will ever secure it. Our chance is lost."
"What chance?"
"The only chance we shall probably ever have to get it."
"Your answer does not enlighten me very much, sir. But who is the person who is pitted against us, as you say?"
"It appears to be a woman."
"What sort of a woman?"
"A perfect devil, I would call her."
"And will you be beaten by a woman?"
"Well, I'd rather meet a man in a game like this."
"A woman called to see me yesterday who acted rather mysteriously," said Mrs. Fountain.
"What did she look like?"
"I did not see her; but I was given to understand that she was a beggar."
"It must have been this woman. She will probably call again."
"I hope she will."
"Yes; then it will be woman against woman; and, madame, you are a very cunning person."
"Thank you. But who is urging this woman on, Mr. Haas?"
"That is something that puzzles me. I can not tell; but one thing is certain: she knows all."

"What does she know?"
"You can judge when I tell you the message she sent me."
"What was the message?"
"That I would never get the certificate, and that if one hair of his head was injured, every one of us would be held to a terrible account."
"To whom did she allude when she said 'his head'?"
"That is something for you to work out, madame."
Mrs. Fountain grew very pale.
"Do you know this woman's identity?"
"I do not."
"Can't you ascertain it?"
"I am trying to do so."
"And we must get that certificate, no matter what means it is necessary to employ to accomplish it."
"We will get it if we can; but I tell you the chances are against our success."
"What is to be done?"
"I have only one suggestion to offer, madame."

"What is that?"
The lawyer looked around, hesitated, and then said:
"If this woman is not got out of the way the jig is up, that's all."
"Why don't you get her out of the way then?"
"That business is not in my line, madame."
"You can have it done."
"You have met with better success in that direction."
"What do you mean, sir?"
"Where is Raymond Tift?"
"You know where he is."
"Oh, I do!"
"Yes; he is in his grave."

"Oh, he is! Well, it would be a good thing for you if this woman were in her grave also. But where is Percy Black?"
"I know nothing about him!"
"What does your husband know?"
"What are you hinting at, Mr. Haas?"
"It is stated that Percy Black was seen entering your house. He has not been seen since."
"What nonsense!"

"I don't know anything about it. I am only giving you what I heard. But you see how the matter stands."
"Are you striking for more money? If so, name your terms."
"I am not striking for more money. I do not see clearly how I can earn what you have already promised."
"You certainly can suggest something. Can't you give me some clew to this woman?"

"I may be able to before long; but let me tell you she is a very remarkable woman, and we have got to be careful. She is an overmatch for two or three men. She has already proven that."
"How so?"

"I have had one of the cleverest men in New York on her track and she baffled him at every turn; she has made sport of him."
"She will not make sport of me."

"Possibly not. You may have an opportunity to measure blades with her ere long. I think it probable the woman who called on you yesterday was she, and I also think it probable she will soon make you another visit, so be prepared for her."

"I will," said Mrs. Fountain, emphatically.

A week passed, and during that week no progress had been made by the conspirators.

Madeleine Lucie had remained in her rooms, and had been busy upon some little scheme of her own. She did not even permit Agnes to know what she was doing; and the beautiful Agnes mean-

time passed a fitful sort of existence. Sometimes she was in tears, and at others she appeared to be full of cheer and hopefulness; and the latter condition always followed a talk with the mademoiselle.

An active man was Curley. He had sought an interview with Andrew Fountain. He had not revealed much to him, but he had promised to accomplish great results in the near future.

His object was to learn who the woman was who had baffled him so well. He did not dare make another attempt to enter her house. He had twice had some experience with the woman, and he remembered Joe's words:

"She said she wished it were you she had captured."

Curley was not a coward; but all men are impressed by the mysterious, and there was something very mysterious about the woman who was advocating the claims of Agnes. And again, the man had not fully got onto the scheme of the Fountains. He owed them no loyalty, and was prepared to work on the side of the one that promised the best pay.

Thus matters stood, when one morning Mademoiselle Lucie called Agnes from the rear room and said:

"I am going to call upon Mrs. Fountain this morning, my dear. I am going to try to sell her a painting; and this is the painting."

As the mademoiselle spoke she removed a covering from a painting that stood on an easel, and Agnes uttered a cry of surprise and actually fell upon her knees before the picture, like one lost in admiration. For some minutes she contemplated the picture in silence; but finally she exclaimed:

"It's wonderful! It is perfect! You are a genius! But tell me: how could you make so realistic a picture?"

"I had the photograph."

"But the color of the hair, the eyes, are so exact. And are you going to sell this picture?"

"Possibly," said the mademoiselle, smiling.

"Why not sell it to me?"

"I will present it to you after I have used it for the one purpose for which it was painted."

Later in the day the mademoiselle, got up as a sort of staid old maid, called at the house of Mrs. Fountain. She carried a roll under her arm. She rang the bell, and when the servant opened the door, she said:

"I'd like to see Mrs. Fountain."

The servant had received his orders. He had been told to admit any woman who might call. The mademoiselle was shown into the parlor, and the servant ascended the stairs and announced:

"A woman wishes to see you, madame."

Mrs. Fountain was all excitement at once.

"What sort of a looking person, John?"

"An odd-looking person, madame."

"Ah, it is the very party I wish to see!" thought Mrs. Fountain. "An odd-looking person, yes! That creature is accomplished in the way of disguises!" Aloud she said: "I will see her, John."

The servant returned to the parlor and reported that Mrs. Fountain would be down directly. In the meantime she paced to and fro her room and muttered:

"Now I must be perfectly cool, and I must also be prepared."

She went to a drawer and took out a small ivory-mounted pistol, muttering:

"I do not know what may happen, but I will be ready for her."

There was a wicked glitter in the woman's eyes, for she was desperate. At length she calmed herself sufficiently to feel able to enter her visitor's presence in a composed manner and descended to the parlor. As she entered the great room, so magnificently furnished, her face was rather pale and her eyes glittered.

"Did you wish to see me?" she asked.

"Yes, madame."

Mrs. Fountain took a seat and fixed her eyes on her visitor, and she mentally concluded:

"Yes, she is disguised. She is a daring woman, no doubt; but she has walked into the lion's den this time." Aloud she said: "What is your business?"

"I have a picture to sell, madame."

There came a shade of disappointment over Mrs. Fountain's face. She feared that it was not her game after all.

"You have a picture to sell?"

"Yes, madame."

"Who is the artist?"

"I am, madame."

"I do not wish to buy any more pictures. I have a great many now."

"That is why I came to you. It is among those who appreciate art that I look for my customers."

"What is the character of your painting?"

"It is a portrait, madame."

"What use would I have for a portrait, especially if I did not know the original of the picture?"

"I would like to have you look at it, madame."

Madeleine Lucie started to unroll her bundle; but Mrs. Fountain said:

"No; I do not care to look at it. I've no use for a portrait."

"Do not decide until you look at it."

"Why do you urge me?"

"I think you will be very much interested in the portrait. Let me show it to you."

"Very well; I will look at it; but I tell you I do not wish to buy. I merely look at it to gratify you."

"I am very grateful, madame."

Madeleine Lucie unrolled her picture and presented it for inspection. The moment Mrs. Fountain's eyes fell on the portrait she screamed, jumped to her feet, and in tones of really startling agitation, demanded:

"Where did you get that picture?"

"It is a portrait I painted myself, madame."

"You lie, woman!" came the indelicate and violent declaration. Mademoiselle Lucie pretended to be frightened and amazed, and she said:

"Why, madame, what is the cause of your excitement?"

"Who are you?" demanded Mrs. Fountain.

"I am Miss Bray."

"Well, whoever you are, you are telling me a falsehood."

"Madame, how dare you?"

"You schemer, tell me where you got that picture."

"I tell you, madame, that I painted it."

"Where did you meet the subject?"

"I am not bound to tell you, madame; and you will excuse me. I will go away. I do not understand your conduct. I fear you are crazy, madame."

"I am not crazy, and you will not go away. Answer me: did you paint that portrait?"

"I did."

"From life?"

"Certainly."

"And when?"

"Within the last month."

The excitement of Mrs. Fountain was simply terrible to witness.

"You lie!" she exclaimed.

"Madame, what do mean?"

"Dare you repeat that you painted that picture from life and within a month?"

"Yes."

"And you want to sell that picture?"

"I do."

"I will pay you one thousand dollars for that picture if you will tell me where you saw the original."

"I will tell you nothing more than I have already told you, madame. I will go away."

The mademoiselle rose to go, when Mrs. Fountain, in a commanding tone, said:

"You shall not go away just yet."

"I will not remain unless you are less violent and explain your excitement at the mere sight of a picture."

"You say you painted that picture within a month and from life," said Mrs. Fountain. "That is a portrait of my brother, and he has been dead over a year. Dare you say now that you have not lied to me? Do you wonder at my excitement?"

"You are mistaken, madame."

"In what way?"

"This can not be a portrait of your brother; and certainly not if your brother has been dead a year, for the original of this picture is living now."

The excitement of Mrs. Fountain became so great that she almost fainted, and she cried in tones of great agitation:

"You lie, and you know you lie! And now tell me where you got that picture and why you came here with it. Do you hear? Answer me at once!"

"Madame, you are crazy. I will go away. I will no longer listen to your insults. I came here to sell you a picture, not to be insulted."

"No; you came here to insult me. Who are you, anyway?"

"I told you my name was Miss Bray."

"It is false; you are not telling me the truth."

Again the mademoiselle rose from her seat as though to go.

"Sit down!" commanded Mrs. Fountain.

"No, madame; I shall go."

The mademoiselle stepped toward the door, when Mrs. Fountain drew her pistol and exclaimed:

"Sit down, you thief, or I will shoot you!"

The mademoiselle recoiled in seeming terror.

"Madame, I shall scream for assistance."

"Do so. Bring the police here. I want a policeman. I will give you in charge. You are a thief! That picture was stolen from this house. I have offered a large reward for it. You dare come here and claim you painted it from life when I can prove the picture belongs to me and that the original is dead! And now what have you to say? Scream for the police if you wish to; it's a policeman I want."

It was a sudden inspiration that had come to Mrs. Fountain. She had used the word "thief" without consideration; but the instant the word escaped her lips an idea came to her and, as she was a bright woman, she acted on her idea at once.

"Madame," said Mademoiselle Lucie, "you are laboring under a great mistake."

"Let me tell you one thing: you will prove what you assert, or you will go to prison. You will explain how that picture came into your possession, or you will be arrested at once."

"You say that picture is a portrait of your brother?"

"I do."

"And you say your brother is dead?"

"Yes; he has been dead over a year."

"You say the picture was stolen?"

"Yes."

"Under what circumstances?"

"A woman came here and cut it out of its frame. That may be only a copy of the original, but the original was stolen. Now will you please account for your possession of the portrait?"

"I have told you I painted the picture."

"From another portrait?"

"No."

"From life?"

"Yes."

"You persist in that declaration?"

"I do."

"Will you give me your address?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"After your ridiculous charges, I will not." Mrs. Fountain summoned her servant and said to him: "Send for an officer."

CHAPTER XV.

THE mademoiselle saw that the situation was becoming rather awkward, and she was quick to realize that she had placed herself in a perilous position. She was confronted by a contingency she had not anticipated.

"Madame," she said, "I trust you will recall that order."

"Wait, John!" called Mrs. Fountain. "Now, miss, what have you to say?" she added.

"I can only repeat, madame, that you are laboring under a great mistake."

At that instant there came a ring at the door-bell, and a gentleman was shown into the reception-room across the hall.

Mrs. Fountain went and spoke a few words to her servant, and the mademoiselle really became very uneasy. She could defend herself under most circumstances; but against a charge of having stolen property in her possession, that was another matter. She saw the disadvantage of her position. Mrs. Fountain was a wealthy woman. It was not known what her real character was. Before the community she was a person of the highest respectability. The mademoiselle fully realized that Mrs. Fountain's claim that the picture had been stolen would be readily believed. It was also generally known that Raymond Tift was dead. His death had been legally established. The mademoiselle was, indeed, in a bad fix.

Mrs. Fountain, too, realized her advantage. Her excitement had abated and she became cool and confident.

"I have been a fool," the mademoiselle muttered. "I did not look on both sides of my scheme; I did not consider all the possibilities."

Mrs. Fountain returned to the room after a moment and said:

"I am very sorry for you, miss. It is possible you are innocent of any wrong-doing in this affair, and I would be willing to believe it, were it not for one preposterous claim you have made. You have declared that you painted that picture from life. In your desire to sell it you may have told a fib. I do not think now you will persist in your claim."

"I do, nevertheless, madame."

"Then I tell you that you are the most consummate falsifier I ever listened to. I tell you that it is impossible you can be telling the truth."

"I am, madame."

"And you doubt my declarations?"

"No, madame, I do not."

"Then how do you reconcile our two statements?"

"I can suggest but one solution."

"And what is that?"

"A case of startling resemblance."

"If it is a case of startling resemblance, can you throw any light upon the mystery?"

"I think I can."

The mademoiselle blindly resolved to make up a tale. She just stepped off in the dark, so to speak, little dreaming of the singular exposition that was to follow.

"If you can throw any light on the matter it is your duty to do so; and, what is more, your safety requires it. You must give satisfactory proofs of your claim or go to jail. I claim the portrait was stolen. My duty will compel me to have you arrested. You are the party found in possession of the stolen property."

"It is a strange story, madame."

"Tell it, no matter how strange it is."

"I am a professional portrait painter, madame, and I can prove my standing by my customers in this city—many well-known people."

"It is fortunate for you that you can do so."

As the mademoiselle proceeded the little narrative she had concocted grew in her mind.

"Yes, madame," she repeated, "I can prove that I am an honest person, and a professional portrait painter. I tell you this in order to prepare you for the really strange and romantic story I am about to relate in explanation of my possession of this picture. I will say, to begin with, that you are right in one respect: that painting copied from a portrait."

"Aha! So you admit that?"

"Yes, madame; but a copy of a portrait I painted from life."

"Oh, you still persist in that statement?"

"I do. Remember, madame, I can prove my professional standing."

"Very well. Proceed with your story."

"One day a young lady called to see me. She was a very beautiful young lady, but she had a sad face and told me a very sad tale."

Mrs. Fountain was all interest at once, and she asked:

"Who was the young lady?"

"It does not matter, madame."

"Please describe the lady."

"No, madame; I do not wish to get her into trouble."

"What trouble can you get her into?"

"Strange things have already happened in connection with her, madame. Indeed, I may say her remarkable story has been confirmed in a most positive manner."

Mrs. Fountain betrayed considerable anxiety, and described the appearance of Agnes Tift, and asked Mademoiselle Lucie if the description fitted her visitor.

"I decline to answer your question," said the mademoiselle.

"Ah, I see! But your refusal to answer it confirms my suspicion. Go on with your story."

"I think I will say nothing further at present, madame. You will permit me to go. I will see you later."

"You can not put me off in this way, miss. You have explained nothing as yet, and you shall not go. You must account for the possession of that picture or go to jail. I certainly will have you arrested unless your explanation is satisfactory. I have an officer at hand."

Mademoiselle Lucie had seen the man admitted to the house. She did not believe it was an officer; but she knew that under any circumstances she was really in great peril.

"Come," said Mrs. Fountain; "I insist upon hearing your story."

"This young lady came to me and she told me a sad tale, as I said before. She said she had been married to a wealthy young man, that her husband had disappeared, and that it was made to appear that he was dead. She said that one night she had a dream—a very vivid dream—and in her dream she saw her husband, and he was calling upon her to come to his aid."

Mrs. Fountain was visibly excited, and she exclaimed in a husky voice:

"How ridiculous!"

"It may appear so to you, madame; but hear me out."

"Go on."

"The beautiful young lady told me the dream made a deep impression upon her mind, and that upon the following night she had a second dream. In this dream she saw her husband and he spoke to her. He told her that he was not dead, but that he was a prisoner, and—"

Mrs. Fountain fell off her chair in a faint. The mademoiselle thought it a good chance to get away; but a man stood in the doorway. Mrs. Fountain soon revived, and the man disappeared. A servant soon after entered the room with a glass of wine for his mistress. She looked around wildly and exclaimed:

"What has happened?"

"You were overcome, madame. Shall I send this woman away? She seems to have annoyed you."

"Woman? Oh, yes; I remember! No, John; leave the room. I have business with this woman."

Turning to Mademoiselle Lucie she said:

"I am subject to fainting spells. I remember you were telling me about a dream. Proceed with your story."

"Madame, you are not well. Had I not better wait until some other time?"

"Proceed, I say."

The mademoiselle was perfectly willing to proceed. She had stumbled upon a great clew. She saw her advantage and felt that it was her play to press it. She knew now the direction her narrative ought to take.

"The second dream the young lady had," resumed the mademoiselle, "as I said before, was even more vivid than the first one. Yes, her husband spoke to her and implored her to hasten to his rescue. He said he was confined in a lunatic asylum."

Mrs. Fountain's face was a study. It seemed as though a second time she would fall over in a faint; but she controlled herself by a great effort. The mademoiselle was observing her closely, and had ceased speaking for an instant.

"Proceed," faintly gasped Mrs. Fountain.

"The beautiful young lady told me that she had the same dream once again, and then she started out on a mission to find her husband. She said she learned the location of every asylum in the State. She traveled from one to the other, and at length she came upon one where one day she actually beheld her husband at the window. She pursued her investigations, gained an entrance into the asylum, and made the terrible discovery that her husband was really insane. She came to me and besought me to paint his portrait. I gained an entrance into the asylum. I had myself incarcerated as a subject, and I drew his portrait. I gave the original to the wife; the copy I have just offered to you for sale."

Mrs. Fountain had become wonderfully calm, and she said in icy tones:

"Do you expect me to believe this wildly concocted tale? If you do you are mistaken; and I tell you now yours would be a ridiculous narrative to tell to a judge in order to account for the possession of a portrait of a man who had been dead over a year."

"Madame, I did not expect you would believe my story."

"No; simply because you knew it was false."

"It appeared to deeply affect you, all the same, madame."

Mrs. Fountain, as has been stated, had recovered her nerve. She was perfectly cool and collected. She saw through the scheme.

"Miss Bray, you will have to tell me another story, or, in other words, you will have to tell me the truth, or go to jail. I see now you are a party to a cunning conspiracy, a conspiracy which has been called to my attention. You are an accomplice of a woman who calls herself Agnes Tiff. Own up to the truth, will you, and at once?"

"I will own up to nothing."

"I shall have you arrested if you do not."

"You dare not do it."

Mrs. Fountain was amazed.

"Do you think I fear to have you arrested?"

"You have good reason to fear taking such a step, madame."

"What have I to fear?"

"I can prove all I have said, and you know it."

CHAPTER XVI.

HERE followed an interval of silence. Both women were thoughtful; both were considering.

"I will not buy your picture. It is mine, and I claim it," said Mrs. Fountain.

"I will not surrender it, madame. It is not yours, and you can not prove it," rejoined the mademoiselle.

The mademoiselle rose and moved toward the door. At first it appeared as though Mrs. Fountain would prevent her departure; but she suddenly seemed to change her mind. The mademoiselle reached the door, and the servant opened it for her; and as she passed through the man whispered warningly in her ear:

"Beware! Be on your guard!"

The mademoiselle did not fully understand the meaning of the servant's warning; but she had an indistinct idea.

Once in the street, she hurried along. It was her intention to work a change in her appearance. She expected to be trailed, and did not wish to be successfully followed.

Meantime, immediately after the mademoiselle's departure, Mrs. Fountain ran into the reception-room. A sharp-faced but rather handsome man was there.

"You saw that woman?" exclaimed Mrs. Fountain.

"I did."

"She is a thief, or the confederate of thieves. She has stolen property in her possession at this very moment."

"Why did you permit her to go?"

"I can not explain now. Follow and arrest her."

"On what charge?"

"She has a portrait of my brother, that I value very highly, in her possession. It was stolen from this house. Arrest her, and report back to me."

The man left the house. He was a fellow who knew his business, and he got on her track at once. He soon came up with her. He touched her on the shoulder and said:

"I want you."

The mademoiselle came to a halt.

"You are my prisoner," said the man, as he rudely tore aside the woman's veil and exposed her face.

"Be careful what you do, sir!"

"Oh, I know what I am doing!"

"Have you a warrant for my arrest?"

"I do not need one; the charge is stealing. It is charged that you have stolen property in your possession."

"Are you an officer?"

"I am."

"Will you permit me to make an explanation?"

"Certainly; but not here on the street. We will step into a nearby restaurant, that I know to be a most respectable place, and you can make your explanation in entire privacy."

The man led the mademoiselle to a restaurant where there were private rooms. He secured one, ordered some light refreshment, and said, after the waiter had retired:

"Now what have you got to say?"

"Who charges me with stealing?" asked the mademoiselle.

"Mrs. Fountain."

"What does she charge me with stealing?"

"A portrait."

"Her charge is false."

"Appearances are against you."

"How so?"

"You are under cover. Innocent people do not go around under a disguise, as a rule."

"You are a detective, are you not?"

"Yes."

"You sometimes go around under cover, do you not?"

The man laughed and said:

"That was well put."

"Then sometimes innocent people do go around under cover?" said the mademoiselle, with a twinkle in her eyes.

"Well—yes."

"I am an innocent person."

"You make that statement; but unfortunately for you you have the property in your possession."

"Not stolen property, and I can convince you of it."

"Go ahead and do so."

The mademoiselle took a pencil and a piece of paper from her pocket, and as quickly as her pencil could go over the paper she made certain lines, and when she had finished she handed the paper to the detective. He looked at the drawing and uttered an exclamation of surprise; it was a striking and most wonderful likeness of himself.

"That was certainly well done."

"And quickly done, too, was it not?"

"It was. Why did you do it?"

"I will disclose my purpose later."

The mademoiselle made a second drawing, and she did it with the most marvelous rapidity, and when it was completed she passed the paper to the officer. He looked at it and said:

"That is a strange face to me. Why did you draw it?"

"My purpose is to convince you of the fact that I painted the portrait which I am accused of stealing."

"How will you prove it?"

"This is the picture."

The mademoiselle unrolled her portrait and let the detective look at it.

"You are certainly a woman of remarkable talent," he said.

"Do you really believe now that I stole that picture?"

"You could have copied it from another picture. However that may be I must do my duty."

"You will arrest me, then?"

"I shall."

"You have no warrant."

"But a charge is made that does not require me to have a warrant to make an arrest."

"You shall not arrest me."

Quick as thought the mademoiselle clapped something to the man's mouth. His head fell back, and she glided from the room, leaving him seated in his chair.

"I must move quickly now," she muttered.

The mademoiselle soon reached her home. She found Agnes awaiting her, and she said:

"My child, pack a few things quickly. We must move away from here temporarily."

"What has occurred?"

"I will tell you later on."

The mademoiselle quickly changed her attire, changed her whole appearance, and hurriedly left the room, saying:

"I will return within half an hour. Be ready to go with me."

Within half an hour the mademoiselle returned, and a cry of consternation escaped her lips as she entered the room.

Agnes packed the few things she had been ordered to get together and stood by a table looking at the portrait of Raymond Tift, which Mademoiselle Lucie had laid there when she first came in. She was intently gazing at the picture, when suddenly she was seized from behind, handcuffs were placed upon her wrists, and she was led from the room without a word having been spoken. She was so taken aback that she had not the strength to ask why the outrage was committed, no strength to protest, and she walked down the stairs in a sort of dazed condition.

She was led along a few steps, when her strength returned. She was about to ask a question, when a carriage drew up at the curb and she was forced into it. The driver then received his orders and he drove away.

After a short drive the carriage came to a halt, Agnes was bundled out, and the poor, distracted girl found herself in the station-house. A few questions were asked, but no attention was paid to her answers, and she was hustled down-stairs and put in a cell, and there left to meditate in anguish and surprise.

Our readers will remember that Mademoiselle Lucie suddenly went through some mysterious operation that had caused the detective who had arrested her to fall forward, seemingly unconscious. The woman then ran from the room and hastened to her residence. The detective in the meantime had recovered. He also ran from the room, and, by accident, got on the track of the mademoiselle. He trailed her to the house, and then, thinking he had her all right, went to telephone a confederate. While thus engaged, the mademoiselle, as our readers know, left the house; and while she was away the detective returned to the house, located her rooms, entered them, and beheld Agnes studying the portrait. He knew that the mademoiselle had been under a disguise, and he concluded that Agnes was the right person and arrested her without asking a question or making a remark.

The mademoiselle returned, as has been stated, and uttered a cry of alarm upon entering her rooms. She saw that Agnes was gone; also the portrait. She made up her mind the girl had fled. She did not for one moment dream of the real fact as it had occurred.

"I must find her the first thing I do," she muttered.

She immediately locked her rooms and went to the elevator man. He had not seen a lady descend; indeed, he had not seen any one. It was not strange. The detective had used the stairs instead of the elevator, for reasons best known to himself. The mademoiselle went to the street. She made inquiries in every direction, but could get no clew; and finally she returned to her room, muttering:

"How could she do it when all was working so well?"

She threw herself into a chair, when suddenly her eye fell upon a foot-print on the floor. She dropped to her knees and examined the foot-print, and a change came over her face, and she exclaimed:

"A man has been here! What does it all mean?"

A pallor overspread her face. She clasped her hands to her head and thought, and again she muttered:

"Can it be possible?"

"She looked around the room. She saw that the beautiful girl had carried out her instructions. She had packed the few things, as directed, for removal. The picture was gone also, and she muttered:

"Can it be possible?"

A suspicion of the real truth flashed through the mademoiselle's mind. She realized how it was possible that the detective had recovered, had got upon her trail, had entered the rooms, had found Agnes, and arrested her, supposing her to be the person who had come such a great trick over him.

"It is too bad," muttered the mademoiselle; "but I will not despair."

She went to the inner room. A few moments she was busy, and then issued forth. She locked her door, with the remark:

"The mischief is done. No need to move away now; but I will rectify this mistake the very first thing that I do."

The mademoiselle went straight to the station-house. She found a sergeant in charge. She requested to see him in private. She showed him a certain document when they were alone in a private room. It was signed by the chief of the detective force.

"Ah!" exclaimed the sergeant, after reading the document. "I am at your service, madame."

"You have a lady prisoner here, brought in by a regular detective a few hours ago, have you not?"

"Yes."

"I wish to see her."

"All right. She is in a cell down-stairs."

You understand the full meaning of this paper, I suppose?"

"I do, madame."

"I am not compelled to make any explanations, and you are to report my visit only to the chief."

"I understand."

"What is the charge against the lady?"

"Theft."

"When I have concluded my interview with the prisoner, for obvious reasons, I shall go away without a word to anybody."

"As you choose, madame."

The mademoiselle descended to the tier of cells. She walked along and finally came to where Agnes sat, lost in despair.

"Agnes!" said the mademoiselle in a low tone.

"Oh, I am so glad you have found me!" exclaimed Agnes.

"What does it all mean?"

The mademoiselle rapidly explained all that had occurred and said:

"Can you depend upon your courage?"

"I am resigned to anything."

"It only needs courage and all will come out right in the end. There is now no doubt as to the fact that your husband lives; that he is faithful to you; that he is the victim of his step-sister and her husband; but I will find him and all will go well."

"With such a hope in my heart I have courage for anything."

"Then all will be well, and I will be able to work out the mystery. And now, Agnes, it will be necessary for you to play a part."

"I will do anything you say, and try to act with resignation and courage."

"Let them suppose that you are the one who went to Mrs. Fountain's house. While they labor under that misapprehension I will be able to work more effectively."

"You can depend upon me."

"If any one questions you make no answer. Admit nothing, deny nothing; be like one deaf and dumb."

"I will."

"Now I will go away, Agnes; but remember, under all circumstances I will be near you, and at the last moment I can demand and secure your freedom. No great harm can come to you beyond a temporary confinement—a few hours at most."

The mademoiselle left the station-house and went to arrange certain plans. She was an energetic woman, and moved rapidly and in secret.

After having placed Agnes in a cell, the detective who had made the arrest proceeded direct to the house of Mrs. Fountain. He was admitted to that lady's presence, and said:

"I have made the arrest."

"Where is the woman?" she asked.

"Locked up in the station-house."

"Her arrest has not been made public?"

"No. Now, madame, I've a question to ask: Are you sure you are on the right track?"

"Certainly I am. Why do you ask?"

"If it is a mistake it may prove a very serious one."

"The portrait was stolen, and it was found in this woman's possession."

"But she claims to have painted the picture."

"Of course she will make that claim."

"But she is really a clever woman. She is undoubtedly an artist, and she will prove herself one when she is brought before the judge."

"What will she do to prove it?"

"She will draw the judge's portrait off-hand right in court."

"How do you know she will?"

"She drew my portrait in a few moments. It is a wonderfully correct likeness. Here it is. And she also drew a copy of the portrait you accuse her of stealing in order to demonstrate her ability to have painted it. I advise you to go very slow in this matter."

"That is certainly a wonderful piece of work!" exclaimed Mrs. Fountain. "Can we not prevent this case going before a judge?"

"She can and will demand a trial."

"I will go and see her. I may induce her to make a full confession, and then we can let her go free."

"She may not accept her freedom. She is a woman who knows her rights and dares maintain them. She will probably insist upon a trial in order to vindicate her character."

"Will you accompany me to the station-house?"

"I will."

"Await me here."

Mrs. Fountain left the room, and in a few moments reappeared ready to make her visit. She was plainly dressed and heavily veiled. A carriage was in waiting, and she and the detective entered it and were driven to the station-house. The woman was led down to the cells. She stood before an iron grating and looked in. Her gaze fell upon the beautiful Agnes. She uttered an exclamation of amazement.

"What is the matter?" asked the detective.

"Why, you have made a mistake! That is not the woman who called on me."

"Nonsense! I caught her with the portrait in her possession, and I have the stolen property."

"Under what circumstances did you make the arrest?"

The detective did not tell the real facts. He merely said that he had trailed the thief to her home, entered her apartments and made the arrest.

"And you have arrested the wrong person!"

"I can not see how such a mistake could have been possible; besides, she had the stolen property."

"She may be an accomplice; but the prisoner is not the woman who called on me."

"The woman who called on you was disguised."

"Yes; but I know the prisoner."

"And you will swear she is not the woman who called on you?"

"I will."

"Then, madame, we must rectify the mistake as soon as possible."

CHAPTER XVII.

A period of silence prevailed, during which Mrs. Fountain appeared to be thinking deeply. At length she said:

"This may prove a fortunate mistake, after all, officer."

"Indeed? How so?"

"I can not explain; but this woman is as guilty as the other one."

Indeed, I am satisfied she is the real thief; but we have not the evidence against her, unless we use the same evidence that would convict the other woman."

There came a far-away look to the officer's eyes, and in a low tone he said:

"What is behind all this, madame? I fear you are not making a full confidant of me."

"It is a robbery scheme, that's all."

"I will speak frankly, madame. I can not be made a tool of; but you may enlist my services in legitimate detective work. The prisoner is a beautiful woman, and looks innocent. The other woman—if there is another—is a very remarkable person. Why should these two women steal a portrait and then bring that portrait to you and offer it for sale? Can you not see, madame, that all this looks very strange?"

"At some future time I will make a full explanation."

"It may be too late at some future time, madame. Matters may go too far."

"You know me by reputation, and you know my husband well, do you not?"

"I do."

"Then why can you not accept my statement that I am in the right? There are reasons why I do not wish to make an explanation at present. I will pay you a large sum of money to do as I wish without asking questions."

"I can not work in the dark."

"Then I shall have to secure the services of another detective."

"You can; but he will have to commence where I did."

"What do you mean?"

"I will release this girl unless I know why she is held."

The officer spoke in a firm tone.

"I should like to have a few moments' talk with the prisoner in private, if you will be so kind as to step out of hearing," said Mrs. Fountain.

"Very well, madame."

The officer walked away, and Mrs. Fountain, who was still veiled, went to the cell in which Agnes was incarcerated and said:

"I am very sorry for you, miss."

Agnes recognized the voice, notwithstanding Mrs. Fountain's attempt to disguise it. She made no answer.

"On what charge were you arrested?"

Agnes made no answer.

"I may be able to assist you if you will answer my questions."

Agnes still maintained silence.

"It will be to your interest to confide in me, miss."

There came no answer, and meantime an idea had entered Mrs. Fountain's head. She saw a chance to strike a telling blow toward the accomplishment of her designs, and she walked to where the officer stood at the end of the corridor and said to him:

"Come with me."

"One moment, madame. I think it is my duty to release that lady. You have admitted she is the wrong person."

"Will you wait until I have consulted with my husband?"

"Yes, I will do that."

"Then come with me."

They left the station-house and were driven to Mrs. Fountain's home, and when they arrived there she said:

"Will you let matters stand, and come here in three hours?"

"Madame, understand that I will stand for no scheme."

"Do you suggest such a thing as a scheme, sir? I wish to consult my lawyer. I dare not act save under advice. You have made the consultation necessary. I know this woman is the real thief; but we have not the necessary evidence to convict her, and I wish to learn what can be done."

The woman's statement seemed reasonable, and the detective said:

"Very well; I will call here in three hours."

The detective was satisfied that there was something shady about the whole affair, and he determined to have a talk with the prisoner. He had ample time to do so within the three hours at his disposal, and he went directly to the station house.

After the detective's departure Mrs. Fountain dispatched a messenger for Mr. Haas. The lawyer happened to be in, and he at once went to Mrs. Fountain's home. He found her laboring under great excitement. She explained the situation to him, and he said:

"I hardly know what to advise off-hand," said the lawyer. "The mixing-up of the detective in this affair complicates matters."

"Something must be done. We need not mind the detective."

"You are mistaken. He is an honest man, and one of the shrewdest men on the force, and he can not be ignored. It is evident that he already suspects something wrong. He will get at the bottom of it. Madame, the affair has taken a serious turn."

"Something can be done, surely."

"Then it must be done without the co-operation of the detective."

"We can use him and he not know it."

"You do not know the man!" exclaimed the lawyer.

"Mr. Haas, we must get possession of that woman."

"Yes; it would be a great thing if we could."

"Now, I have a plan," said Mrs. Fountain; and she unfolded a bold scheme.

The plan she proposed was certainly a well devised one. She suggested that she tell the detective that she had concluded to have the prisoner released, and she added:

"It will be evening before she is set free. We can have men and a carriage at hand. We can bring her here."

The lawyer sat for some time lost in thought, but at length he said:

"It might be done; but it is a very risky undertaking because of the advent of the detective in the case."

"When he releases the girl he is out of the case."

"That may be; but he may secretly watch our movements."

"We will take the chance. Will you go and make the necessary arrangements?"

"I am subject to your orders; but I warn you that your action is contrary to my advice."

"I will assume all the responsibility."

The lawyer departed to make his arrangements, after having learned all the necessary facts for the carrying out of the scheme.

While Mrs. Fountain was perfecting her plans, the detective proceeded to the station-house. He descended to the cell where Agnes was confined. He said:

"Miss, I wish to have a talk with you."

Agnes made no answer.

"There is a possibility that your arrest was a mistake. I can establish it if you will answer me a few questions."

Agnes maintained silence, and the detective tried in several ways to induce her to speak, but failed, and finally he said:

"I'm sorry you refuse to talk with me. I might prove your friend."

"We will here state that Agnes feared the detective. She knew he had come there in company with her most bitter enemy. She did not know but he might be an accomplice. She was determined to maintain silence.

The detective had a long talk with the sergeant in charge at the station-house and said:

"I fear a mistake has been made. You have made no report of this arrest?"

"No."

"I will get an order and have it ready for the girl's release in case it develops that we have locked up the wrong person."

When the detective appeared at Mrs. Fountain's house he had the necessary paper for the release of the prisoner.

"Well, madame," he said, "what have you decided to do?"

"I am fully satisfied that the prisoner is guilty; but we lack the evidence, and my lawyer advises that we release her."

"What would be her object in stealing a portrait and then coming to you with it and offering it for sale?"

"My lawyer thinks it was all part of a plan to perpetrate another robbery. When the woman came here I sent for you as the best thing to do. The one against whom we have the evidence appears to have escaped. We will await further developments. I am acting under the advice of my counsel."

The woman's story appeared reasonable enough. To the detective Mrs. Fountain was known only as a lady of the highest standing, and there seemed to be nothing suspicious in ending the affair as she suggested, and he said:

"Very well, madame. I will release the girl."

"Do just as you choose. The mistake was not mine."

"How about the other woman?"

"My counsel will take charge of the matter, sir."

"Then you will no longer need my services?"

"No, sir; my lawyer will take entire charge of the case."

The detective went away; but he was a very thoughtful man. He was an experienced man, and he was satisfied that there was something more in the affair than appeared on the surface.

"If I could only get the girl to talk!" he muttered, as he proceeded toward the station-house.

When the detective arrived at the station-house he produced his order, and Agnes was brought upstairs and informed that she was free. Without a word she hurried out into the night, for evening had set in, and a drizzling rain was falling. She had proceeded but a few steps when the detective accosted her. He said:

"Miss, now that you are free, you are entitled to an explanation as to the cause of your arrest."

Agnes made no answer.

"Do you not want to know why you were arrested?"

Agnes still remained silent.

"Your conduct is very strange, miss. I desire to set myself right in this matter. Why do you not answer my questions?"

Agnes walked on without having said a word. The detective was baffled; but he determined upon a new plan. He walked slowly and soon fell some distance to the rear of Agnes. Suddenly a man rushed up to him and said:

"Are you an officer?"

"I am."

"There is a lady around the corner who wishes to talk with you."

"Who is the lady?"

"You will recognize her. She wears a long, dark cloak. She wishes to speak to you at once on business of importance."

The thought flashed through the detective's mind that it was the woman he had originally started out to arrest. He walked back, turned the corner, and looked around in every direction, but did not see the lady in the long cloak. He waited a few moments; but no such person put in an appearance.

"This is a trick," he muttered. "I've been fooled!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE little incident that had occurred aroused a great many suspicions in the detective's mind. He concluded that it was a trick to draw him off the trail of the girl whom he had just released.

The question was, in whose interest was the trick perpetrated? His first idea was that some confederate of the lady he had arrested and released was at the bottom of it, and he muttered:

"It's all right. I'll know what all this means."

Jerry Mack was not at the time attached to the regular force. He had been a regular detective, but had resigned, and had started as a private detective. It was for a private detective that Mrs. Fountain had sent, and her reasons were good for doing so at the time.

Jerry walked along lost in deep thought, and he walked toward the flat house where Mademoiselle Lucie and Agnes lodged, and as he sauntered along he muttered:

"I will lay low and get the right one. She will be more likely to

talk. There is something under the surface here. It doesn't show up yet; but I'll know what it means."

The detective reached the house. He lay around for awhile, and finally he saw a woman enter the house. He followed her.

As the reader will remember, the mademoiselle, after her interview with Agnes at the station-house, had gone away, saying she would watch the girl every minute; and she did lie in wait for a long time. She saw the detective go in and talk to Agnes. She was at hand, and overheard his talk, and witnessed how faithfully the lovely girl obeyed instructions. She left the station-house again to await developments, and then determined to go to her rooms and secure a certain document. She then returned to the station-house, only to learn that Agnes had been released.

The mademoiselle had expected this result, and she had been prepared for a certain little game, and the moment she learned that Agnes had been released she became anxious and hastily returned to her apartment. It was on her return that the detective followed her. The mademoiselle ascended to her room, opened the door, and entered; and as she turned up the gas there came a glitter to her wonderful eyes as she muttered:

"I was a fool; but it's all right. Matters are running directly toward a remarkable *dénouement*; but I must be moving. My first suspicions were correct. The detective has been fooled, I think; but I know where Agnes is, and I will make Rome howl soon, and—"

There came a rap at the door.

"Come in," said the mademoiselle.

The door opened and Jerry Mack stood on the threshold.

The mademoiselle betrayed no surprise on beholding the detective. She was prepared for any development the case might assume and felt herself equal to any emergency.

"Sit down," said the mademoiselle; and she closed the door.

The detective eyed the woman a moment, and then said:

"That was a nice trick you played on me."

The mademoiselle laughed heartily, which somewhat disconcerted the detective.

"Then you recognize me?"

"Certainly I do. And, madame, I am here to arrest you."

"I should think one arrest a day was enough for you."

"That arrest was a mistake. I thought I had arrested you."

"You would have had your trouble for nothing if you had arrested me."

"How so?"

"I can give a satisfactory account of myself without any trouble. Oh, no, I do not fear arrest!"

"If you do not fear arrest, why did you take the means you did to escape arrest?"

"I could not spare the time then."

The detective was, in plain language, knocked endwise. He did not understand the woman.

"The party I arrested has been released."

"I know it."

"Then she has returned here?"

"No."

The fact that Agnes had not returned to her home confirmed certain suspicions that the detective entertained. The whole case interested him very much, and after a moment he said:

"Say, madame, let me into this business."

"What business, sir?"

"There is a deep game going on."

"You appear to know all about it."

"Not all about it; but I have my suspicions."

"What do you suspect?"

"I have a suspicion that Mrs. Fountain is at the bottom of some scheme."

Again the mademoiselle laughed and said:

"Your little trick won't work. You are losing time with me."

"It might be to your interest to let me into this matter, madame."

"You really appear like a man who knows something. Why don't you open up? Why waste time beating about the bush?"

"I am not wasting time," said the detective. "I am trying to find out the true inwardness of this case before I make any further arrests."

"I do not fear arrest, sir."

"Well, explain why you do not."

"Mrs. Fountain knows as well as I do that I did not steal that portrait. She has no case against me at all. Had you succeeded in arresting me I would have become free in two hours. I could have freed the young lady whom you arrested had it become necessary; but I was almost certain she would not be held. Now I tell you, who probably knows all about Mrs. Fountain's schemes, that I defy you all."

"You will not defy me. I can speak one word, miss, that will bring you square down."

As the detective uttered these words he fixed his gray eyes flashingly upon the mademoiselle, and there was a singular significance in his tones. The mademoiselle felt a tremor at her heart. There came over her a singular premonition that there was a deeper meaning in the detective's words than she imagined. There followed a moment's silence. At length Jerry Mack said:

"Madame, it will be better for you if you change your tune."

"You can not scare me by threats. I have nothing to fear. I am not a thief. I have done no criminal act. I do not fear arrest. I have no use for you, and you had better go away, unless you wish to arrest me."

"Oh, I do not wish to arrest you!"

"Then why do you linger here?"

"I've an idea. It has come over me that you and I should be friends. There is but one woman in the world of your stamp; at least, I never met one like you; and, I repeat, you and I should be friends."

"Why should you and I be friends?"

"I think I can be of service to you."

"In what direction?"

"Where is the young lady whom I arrested?"

"Do you know where she is?"

"I have an idea, madame," said the detective. "To be frank with you, I believe she is at this moment in the power of Mrs. Fountain."

The mademoiselle gazed aghast.

"You are under a wrong impression concerning me, madame. I am not in league with Mrs. Fountain. I was merely called in to arrest you for theft. I made an arrest. I arrested the wrong person, and that mistake led to certain developments. Mrs. Fountain has discharged me from her service. She has no more use for me."

"How is that?"

"I gave her to understand that I suspected all was not right. I dared to intimate that I did not believe you were a thief. Let me tell you everything that has happened since you gave me the upset."

The detective proceeded and related all that had occurred. The mademoiselle listened in silence, and when the narrative was completed she said:

"You are a very cunning man. With some people your cunning might go; but not with me, however."

"You do not know who you are talking to, mademoiselle. I am a detective, and my connection with this case has made it necessary for me to make a few inquiries about you."

The mademoiselle gave a start, but instantly remembered that a detective would naturally make inquiries.

"I believe you are known in New York as Mademoiselle Lucie. I did not want to meddle in your affairs; but I've been looking for you for some time. Chance brought us together. I recognize you. Do you catch on? Come, you and I must be good friends. I will aid you in this affair with Mrs. Fountain, and then we will go into the affairs of Mademoiselle Morene."

A faint cry fell from the mademoiselle's lips. She glared at the man, and when she gained sufficient resolution she demanded:

"Who are you?"

"Oh, I am only Jerry Mack, a detective!"

"What do you know about Mademoiselle Morene?"

"I thought I'd bring you down from your high perch; but you and I will not quarrel."

"Possibly not; and yet we may."

"Do not attempt it. I know you now. I am on my guard. You can not come the old trick on me. I say you and I must be friends. I can be of great assistance to you; and I will if you will let me. I've some very important information for you."

"What is its nature?"

"I asked you a question. You did not answer me. When you have answered my question I will answer yours."

"Please repeat your question."

"I asked you what there is in this affair with Mrs. Fountain."

"You ought to know; you are in with that woman."

"I swear I am not; I'd like to unmask her."

"Is there anything to unmask?"

"I've an idea there is."

"You are a detective; why don't you run the thing down."

"That's what I'm doing. I am going to get all the information from you."

"I have no information to impart."

"If that is the ground you take, I think I will obey your command and go away. It is plain you have no use for me. You said so, and I see you mean it; but the day may come when you will regret you did not open up. You will find me a good man and a true friend."

"But you are the friend of Mrs. Fountain."

"I have told you I was not."

"And do you think I believe you know nothing about her game?"

"I know nothing about her game."

"Didn't Haas let you into the scheme?"

"Who is Haas?"

"You do not know him?"

"I never met him; or, rather, I know of a lawyer named Haas. I've no personal acquaintance with him."

"And he did not bring you and Mrs. Fountain together?"

"He did not. I told you how I chanced to be in Mrs. Fountain's house."

"Will you come here in about an hour?"

"And find you gone?"

"No; I've no need to run away now. Matters have taken a different turn from what I expected. It may now be an open warfare."

"Very well," said the detective; "I will go, as you desire, and return in about an hour."

CHAPTER XIX.

In about an hour the detective returned. He found the mademoiselle awaiting him, and her manner was very cordial; and we will here betray the fact that the mademoiselle had been making inquiries concerning the detective's character, and she had learned that he was a straightforward, honorable man. He had come down from the interior of the State, had been appointed to the police force when a very young man, had risen in the service, and had been promoted to the position of a detective. He had done good work in that position; but shortly after the death of his young and beautiful wife, whom he had met and married under very romantic circumstances, he had resigned and started as a private detective.

The detective had suspected the purpose of the mademoiselle in dismissing him for an hour, and upon recognizing her changed manner, he said:

"Well, is it all right?"

The mademoiselle divined his suspicions, and laughed and said:

"You are correct in your surmises; and I will tell you that, al-

though I do not really need the services of an aid, still I am willing to permit you to assist me if you choose. You are a good fellow, I reckon, and you may make some money."

"I would be very glad to make some money honestly, for I have not succeeded in accumulating any very great sum; but I've a little."

The mademoiselle proceeded and opened up the whole Fountain business to her new friend. He listened to her narrative with the deepest attention, and when she had concluded he said:

"You are a remarkably bright woman; and I will now tell you I never did have much of an opinion of that man Andrew Fountain."

"You know him?"

"Yes, I know something of him; and he is a very bad man, capable, in my opinion, of committing almost any crime to obtain money. He is the most inveterate and reckless gambler in New York, and on account of his recklessness an almost continuous loser; in fact, he seems to enjoy losing. A reckless life appears to please him. He is a handsome fellow, and his wife adores him, and little dreams how little he cares for her; but, according to your narrative, she is as lacking in principle as he is."

"She is, no doubt, influenced by her husband; but she can not be a woman of assured principles."

"No; and now what is your conclusion as concerns young Tift?"

"I do not believe he is dead."

"I do," came the depressing answer.

The mademoiselle called attention to several points in her narrative, and the detective said:

"I recognize all this; but you must remember that these seeming betrayals mean nothing. They can be accounted for on the theory that his death was foul in some way; that these people are responsible for his taking off, and some one holds the criminal knowledge of the deed. In my mind there is no doubt of his death."

"I differ with you, and in the end I will prove that he lives."

"I trust you may. But now, how about his widow?"

"I believe she is in the custody of the Fountains."

"What's makes you think so?"

"They have been trying to gain possession of her person and also her marriage certificate."

"Has she the certificate in her possession?"

"Oh, no! I have possession of it."

"Do you think they will do her any harm?"

"No. They know an avenger is on their track. They will try to keep her out of the way, that's all. My idea is to leave her in their possession, in the hope that it may help me to trace the whereabouts of Raymond Tift."

"You still cling to the idea that Raymond Tift is alive?"

"I do. Now, I have been perfectly frank with you. You know something about me. You mentioned my real name. How did you come to identify me?"

The detective meditated a moment, and then said:

"About six months ago I arrested a man—a Frenchman. He was very anxious to escape, and he told me a strange story. He said there was a woman in New York who would pay me many thousands of dollars for his release. I asked him about the woman, and he told me that he had the proofs which would put her in possession of a large fortune."

The mademoiselle turned pale, and asked, eagerly:

"Where is the man?"

"He was convicted, but in some way escaped after his conviction. I do not know where he is now, but it is possible I could find him."

"But how did he give you the points that enabled you to identify me? This man has not seen me since I was a mere child."

"He met a man who told him all about you—described your appearance and told him your mission."

"Told him it was my mission to find him?"

"Yes."

"And why did he not find me?"

"He had been searching for you but had failed in finding you. The points he gave me were very slight as indications. I worked up a supposition, and, as it appears, I struck it right. That is my revelation as far as it goes."

"And you think you can find this man?"

"It is possible that I can."

"If you will search for him, I will attend to the affairs of Agnes Tift."

"I can attend to the one and aid you in the other. No one must know of our alliance. I will work with the other people, and thus be able to secure valuable points for you. Come; shall we work together?"

"Yes."

"Very good," said the detective. "Now we can get right down to business. You said you believed that Agnes Tift was in the hands of her enemies. How do you suppose they got possession of her?"

"They played you," said the mademoiselle. "They agreed with you to release her, and after you let her go free they abducted her. That is my theory."

The detective pondered a moment, and then said:

"Yes, you are right; and I was called around the corner with a false message, in order to give them a chance. They hoped to find the marriage certificate on her person."

"That is it, undoubtedly."

"I am afraid that, not finding the certificate on her person, they will make away with her, and thus render the certificate worthless," said the detective.

CHAPTER XX.

MADEMOISELLE LUCIE, as it was afterward proved, was correct in her theory as to what had become of the beautiful Agnes. The latter had been proceeding on her way, when suddenly two men accosted her. She was seized, and a hand was thrust over her mouth

to prevent an outcry. A carriage was at hand, and she was lifted into it and driven rapidly away. In less than twenty minutes the carriage stopped before the elegant mansion of the Fountains. The door was opened, and Agnes was borne into the house in an insensible condition. She was carried to the fourth floor of the house and there bound and gagged and thrown on a bed. The men who had performed the foul deed descended and passed from the house, and Mrs. Fountain, with a look of triumph upon her face, paced the floor of her room.

It was near midnight when her husband returned home. She had been awaiting his return, and had not visited her prisoner. When her husband came home she met him at the door of her room. She was greatly excited, and Andrew Fountain asked:

"What has happened?"

"We are safe now! Agnes Tift is in my possession."

"That's good! How did you secure possession of her?"

"I had her abducted."

Mrs. Fountain then told her husband all that had occurred, and when she had concluded he exclaimed:

"And she is here—under this roof?"

"Certainly!"

"You have played a bold game; but have you calculated the risks?"

"Of course I have!"

"I think not. It is more likely that you have increased your perils."

"How so?"

"Remember how many people are now in possession, indirectly, of your secret."

"No one is, save those who knew before."

"The men who abducted the woman—"

"They think she is my sister—my insane sister."

"Nonsense! Do you suppose you can fool men of that stripe? No, no; they are fully aware that they are not employed only when there is crooked business on hand. Have you been to speak with the woman?"

"No; I waited for you to return."

"We will visit her. She may have the marriage certificate on her person. If she has, we will secure it and let her go. The certificate once in our possession, we need not fear her. It is that infernal paper that is a menace to us. We must approach her in a kindly spirit. We must act on the theory that she has been deceived. We will make concessions to her, pretend we are sorry that she has been victimized, and agree to pay her a large sum of money, and ship her away forever. Anyhow, if we can get the paper, and get her away for only a few months, we are all right, and need never fear her more."

"Andrew, you are a darling fellow! You have opened up a clear course for us. You always were a better planner than I."

"Well, we will now go to see her. We must act to-night. There is no time to be lost. And we must manage this matter ourselves—trust no one but ourselves, my dear."

"The girl is bound and gagged."

"That is unfortunate. It will imbitter her."

"She is a very resolute creature; as resolute as she is beautiful." There came a sudden gleam to Andrew Fountain's eyes. He had never heard before that Agnes was so beautiful.

"You say she is resolute?"

"Yes."

"There is one thing we must not forget: there is some one working in her interest; and we can not know how much information this person possesses."

"So much the greater need of disposing of the girl."

"You do not mean to do her any harm?"

"No; but suppose we do not find the certificate?"

"Then, of course, we will have to change our plans. She must be got out of the way."

"The certificate will still be in existence?"

"Yes; but it will be valueless without the woman whom it represents as the wife."

"I do not think we will find the certificate in her possession."

"If we do not find it we will know how to act; but under any circumstances you must treat her kindly and sympathetically. And now come; we will go and see your captive."

We can not describe the emotions of poor Agnes as she lay, bound and gagged, on the bed where she had been placed. All hope had vanished from her heart. She was helpless, but fully conscious, and lay there in enforced silence, when the door opened and Mrs. Fountain came to the bedside and, speaking in a kindly tone, said:

"My poor dear, I am sorry circumstances have necessitated such rough treatment; but all can be arranged, and you can be happier than ever you were before in all your life. We may come to a very pleasant understanding with each other. Will you promise not to make an outcry if I release you?"

Agnes, who was suffering great physical distress, motioned as well as she could, bound as she was, affirmatively with her head.

Mrs. Fountain knew her husband was at hand. She knew if the poor, weak girl attempted to break her word that she could easily be secured again; and she removed the gag, unbound her, and assisted her to a seat upon a sofa.

Agnes was very much exhausted after her rough treatment, but she looked ravishingly beautiful, and even Mrs. Fountain was compelled to make the involuntary ejaculation:

"How beautiful you are! I wonder my poor brother could have made a victim of one so beautiful and innocent!"

Agnes made no reply.

Andrew Fountain was in the adjoining room. He was peeping through at the lovely girl, and as his eyes rested upon her he saw that she was indeed a most beautiful girl; and on the instant the darkest scheme arose in his mind, and, in his eagerness and surprise, he muttered:

"What a beauty! She shall be mine!"

In the meantime Mrs. Fountain was continuing her conversation with Agnes, but had not succeeded in getting the girl to say one word in reply to her questions.

"My dear young girl," said Mrs. Fountain, persuasively, "all along you have misunderstood me. I desired to be your friend."

With a smile of absolute contempt Agnes answered:

"I do not trust you."

"How can you say so?"

"If you are my friend why do you not restore my husband to me?"

"My dear child, do you still indulge the delusion that Raymond Tift was your husband?"

"He is my husband, and you know it."

"Even if he were your husband, how can I restore him to you? I can not call back the dead."

"My husband is not dead."

"Poor child!" muttered Mrs. Fountain in a low tone, as though she were talking to herself. "She is demented. She must be, or she would have known I was her real friend."

"I am not demented, and you are not my friend."

"I am sorry you feel so bitterly toward me."

"I have every reason to feel bitterly toward you."

"And you indulge the delusion that Raymond Tift lives?"

"I know he lives."

"If he lives, why does he not come to you, if you are really his wife? I should think if you ever loved him that you would rather believe him dead—better dead than false."

"Some day he will come to me."

"Poor child! Indeed you are mad! I am sorry for you."

"If you are really sorry for me, please let me go away."

"You shall go away; but first let us have a little chat together. You must learn to trust me, and I will be your friend."

"Why did you bring me here?"

"It was a friendly act."

"A friendly act to have me abducted?"

"Yes. I was compelled to adopt extreme measures because of the wicked people who are making a tool of you."

"Who is making a tool of me?"

"There are some designing people who are using you as an instrument for blackmail. These people have come to me with outrageous propositions. They have even offered to guarantee your death for a price—these very people who are pretending to be your friends, and who have filled your head with all the extravagant notions that at this moment possess you."

Agnes pondered a moment, and Mrs. Fountain believed she was making some headway, and she continued:

"Yes, Agnes, these people are only using you as a tool. They are trying to extort money from us. The woman who came here with a picture to sell told me out and out that she was willing to enter my service, and she named her price."

Agnes was still silent, apparently in deep thought, and Mrs. Fountain continued:

"If you would only trust me, I could prove my friendship. I am willing to make up for the wrong that has been done you."

"There is but one way you can do that, and that is to return to me my husband."

"Poor child! You still cling to that hallucination! I tell you your husband is dead. I can prove that to you beyond all question."

"I would like to have you do so."

"I will."

CHAPTER XXI.

MRS. FOUNTAIN had said, "I will," but at the moment she did not know how she would make her word good. She continued for some time talking to the girl, all the time trying to invent some scheme whereby she could satisfy Agnes that Raymond Tift was dead. At length an idea entered her mind, and she said:

"I will go and get the proofs. I can prove the death of Raymond to your entire satisfaction. Will you promise to remain here a few moments while I go to get the proofs?"

Agnes promised, and Mrs. Fountain left the room. She met her husband in the hall, and said,

"You overheard what passed?"

"I did; and you were very discreet in all you said; but you better not continue the conversation now. Let her think over all you have said until morning."

"Shall we keep her here?"

"Certainly."

"But she may attempt to escape."

"Never mind; we will go down-stairs and talk the matter over. She can not get away unless she leaps out of the window, and she will not do that. She will await those proofs. The girl honestly believes that her husband lives."

The two descended the stairs. The husband poured out two glasses of wine. His wife drank one and he tossed off the other. They sat talking, when suddenly Mrs. Fountain began to sigh and gape, and she muttered, in a drowsy way:

"I am so sleepy!"

Could she have observed the glitter in her husband's eyes she would have known what the stupor meant; but she was too far gone under the influence of a powerful drug that had been administered to her in the wine.

As we intimated, Andrew Fountain had formed a plan in his mind, and he determined to carry it out at once. His wife's eyes finally closed and she fell into a deep slumber. He raised her in his arms and laid her upon the bed. He stood over her for a moment, and then stole from the room, locking the door and taking the key with him. He ascended the stairs and entered the room where Agnes sat awaiting the return of Mrs. Fountain. She started upon

seeing a gentleman enter the room. She had never seen Andrew Fountain.

"Do not be afraid," said the man. "I am your friend."

The girl gazed in amazement.

"I am here to rescue you from this house."

The look of amazement deepened on the face of the lovely captive.

"I am a friend of this family. I occupy the adjoining room. I came in late, and overhearing voices, I listened. I had previously overheard a conversation between Mrs. Fountain and her husband. I knew some wrong was being concocted. I have no particular love for these people. I am satisfied that some scheme is in progress; but I do not know what it is. Some day you can enlighten me. All I know now is that you are a captive and helpless, and I offer you my services to take you from this house. I will take you wherever you desire to go. I know you are in some sort of danger here. As I said before, I do not know the real nature of your peril, but I do know you wish to escape, and I will aid you."

Agnes was deceived. The man's statement appeared reasonable, and she said:

"If you will aid me to get away from this house you will do an act of great kindness."

"I will aid you. You can rely upon me. You wait here in patience, and I will arrange to carry out my plans. In the meantime you can get yourself in readiness to leave. And do you know where you want to go?"

"I do."

"I will take you anywhere you wish. I will be back in a few moments. I want to learn the intentions of the enemy."

The man smiled in a pleasant way as he uttered the last words and left the room. He descended to the room below. His wife was sleeping. He carried out certain arrangements in the room. He sought his wife's maid. We will not repeat what passed between them, but it was evident that they understood each other perfectly.

Mr. Fountain then left the house. He was gone but a short time, and when he returned he ascended to the room where he had left Agnes. He found the girl seated just where he had left her.

"Everything is all right now," he said. "Are you ready?"

"I am ready," she said.

"Where do you want to go?"

"Take me to my home," said Agnes; but she gave a wrong address. The one she gave him, however, was within a few blocks of Mademoiselle Lucie's apartment.

The fact was Agnes had an ill-defined suspicion of the man deep down in her heart which only asserted itself when she was about to give him her correct address.

He led the girl from the house. A carriage stood awaiting them. She stepped into it at his request. He closed the door to and the man drove off.

All the preparations the man had made for removing her from the house had been carried through with such evident deliberation that Agnes's suspicions that all was not right increased, and she said:

"It is strange those people permitted you to bring me away."

"They never would have permitted me to get you away; that you can rest assured of."

Agnes had formed a resolution. She had made up her mind to escape from her seeming benefactor. She determined to test the man.

"You have been very kind," she said.

"Don't mention it."

"If you will kindly stop the carriage now and let me get out I would thank you very much. I can find my way from here without any trouble."

"You forget that it is after midnight."

"It will be all right. I haven't far to go."

"But you must not think of it."

"You are not driving in the direction of my home."

"Is that so?" said the man.

Agnes saw that she was trapped, and made up her mind to scream for help; but at that instant she fell back insensible.

When Agnes awoke from the stupor that had overcome her, she found herself in an elegantly furnished room and a woman stood over her.

"Where am I?" she demanded, looking around wildly.

"You are safe, my dear, and among friends."

"It is false! I have been deceived!"

"All will be explained. You have not been deceived. Come now; you are safe. Compose yourself and go to sleep."

A greater terror than any that ever had come to Agnes was presented at that moment. She would have screamed, but the woman seized her and said:

"You must not make any outcry. If you do, I will be compelled to prevent it."

"You told me I was among friends."

"You are; but your presence here must not be known. You have enemies. You have been rescued from those enemies. They must not know of your whereabouts. If you scream you will imperil the life of one of the noblest men who ever lived—the man who dared everything to rescue you from your deadly foes."

"Where is that man?"

"You will see him in the morning, and he will explain everything to you. He is your friend, and he will see that all your wrongs are righted. You are fortunate, in your condition, to have such a friend."

"Who is this man?"

"He is a great detective. He has learned something about you. He thinks a great wrong has been done you, and he has determined to become your champion. He is a wonderful man. You are fortunate in having such a friend."

"Why did he not keep the promise he made to me?"

"What did he promise you?"

"To restore me to my friends."

"I am not at liberty to tell you all I know, miss. If I were, I would explain."

"Please tell me," said Agnes, imploringly. "I will not betray you."

"The people whom you think your friends are really your enemies. The detective who has become your friend knows all about it. He is your true friend, and he will see all your wrongs righted. He had good reasons for seeming to deceive you, and when he comes to see you to-morrow he will explain everything to your entire satisfaction."

Agnes did not know what to suspect. One thing was certain: she was in this man's power, and she could only patiently await developments. She was becoming quite experienced. Trials came upon her so thick and fast that she was acquiring a wonderful nerve.

Having disposed of his charge for the time being, Andrew Fountain returned to his own house. He had told the woman who had Agnes in charge just what to say. He had not fully developed his line of action, but he was resolved to win the love of Agnes, and he cared little as concerned all after consequences.

He was moving about the room on the following morning when his wife awoke. She looked around for a moment. Her mind appeared to be dazed, but at length she asked:

"Andrew, what has happened?"

"Why, you know what has happened as well as I do."

"My mind seems to be confused. I only know I have been sleeping soundly."

"And do you mean to tell me that you do not know what occurred last night?"

"I have an indistinct recollection that—"

"You certainly remember that you had that woman here."

"Oh, yes! Now I begin to remember! Where is she now?"

"If I knew, I'd tell you."

"What does this mean, Andrew?"

"You better ask your maid, Marie."

"Why should I ask her? Why can't you tell me?"

"She can tell you better than I can. But what nonsense! What is the use of your pretending that you do not know what has happened?"

"I certainly do not."

"Well, you remember your interview with that woman last night, don't you?"

"Yes."

"You remember you came down here to consult with me?"

"I do."

"You remember that while we were talking we heard a strange noise?"

"No; I don't remember hearing any noise whatever."

"That's strange. But you will recall it later on. However, there was a strange noise, and you ran from the room. You returned soon afterward and said the girl had escaped, and bid me pursue her. I summoned your maid, and then started in pursuit. When I came back I found you quietly sleeping in bed. And do you mean to tell me you do not remember all this?"

"I do not remember anything of what you are telling me."

The woman looked at her husband in a dazed manner and asked:

"Did you not recover possession of the girl?"

"I did not."

"How did the girl get away?"

"A confederate got into the house and stole her away."

"It is strange that all this could have happened and I know nothing about it."

"Marie found you on the floor in a dead faint, and she had great difficulty in reviving you. Of course you remember you are subject to fainting spells. When you were recovered, Marie gave you one of your powders and put you to bed, where I found you. But the worst of it is that the girl has got away."

"This is all very strange, Andrew."

"I wouldn't have believed myself that it was possible for any one to enter this house without being discovered; but it's true, nevertheless, for some one did enter the house and carry off the girl, and matters look very black for us."

CHAPTER XXII.

MADEMOISELLE LUCIE and Jerry Mack held a long consultation, and finally decided upon a course of action. The detective was to investigate as to what had become of Agnes, and the mademoiselle also determined to do a little investigating on her own account.

Jerry, on the day following the incidents we have related, proceeded to the home of Mrs. Fountain. He was shown into the reception-room, and some little time passed before the lady appeared, and when she did her face betrayed distress and anxiety.

"I thought I would like to see you, madame, and make a report."

"You forget, sir, that you are no longer in my service."

"Oh, no; I do not forget that you told me you would not need my services further. I come to you now as a friend."

"You are very bold, sir, to offer friendship where it is not sought."

"What use have I for your friendship?"

"In a spirit of friendliness I propose to serve you with a warning."

"Your words do not express a friendly sentiment."

"A friendly warning is an excellent thing, madame."

"Well, I am prepared to listen to you. Of what would you warn me?"

"I will first ask you a question," said the detective. "Where is the young lady?"

"What young lady?"

"The young lady I arrested under instructions from you."

"You did not arrest the woman you were instructed to arrest."

"I know; according to your declaration I made a mistake and arrested the wrong person."

"That is true; but immediate reparation was made; the prisoner was released."

"Yes; but it appears that she was immediately rearrested."

"Indeed?"

"Oh, don't pretend to be ignorant of the fact, madame! You know all about it."

"How dare you say such a thing, sir?"

"When I arrested the lady it was in the way of duty. When she was released, it was by the order of a responsible officer, certifying that a mistake had been made; but when you caused the re-arrest of the lady it was illegal—it was an abduction."

Mrs. Fountain became greatly agitated and said:

"How dare you come here and talk in this manner? You said you came here in a friendly spirit. I am unable to understand you, sir."

"Hear me through," said the detective. "I am constantly making observations and arriving at conclusions. I arrived at a conclusion in this case, and I determined to make investigations. I did so, and searched the records for a year or so back, and got onto certain facts. I followed up my line of investigations, and reached the most startling conclusions."

Mrs. Fountain was in a terrible state of excitement. She looked around helplessly, and finally, having nothing else to say, merely remarked:

"You have been misinformed."

"I do not remember of having stated that any one had informed me of anything. I merely said that I had investigated. Your step-brother, Raymond Tift, was supposed to have married a beautiful young lady. By that marriage he interfered with the provisions of a will as against you. The young lady I arrested was Mrs. Agnes Tift, or possibly Miss Agnes Pratt. At any rate, she is the young lady whom it is claimed your brother married. She is the legatee under the will, he having obtained the right of devising his property immediately upon his marriage."

Mrs. Fountain suddenly became very calm and cold in her demeanor. She was back to the old source of disturbance.

"You have been imposed upon, sir. My brother never married the woman."

"I did not say your brother had married the woman. All I said was that it was so claimed. At any rate, you have attached sufficient importance to the claim to seek to capture the lady. To speak plainly, you caused her to be abducted yesterday after I had secured her release."

"Your declaration is false."

"You will admit the young lady I arrested was this Miss Agnes Pratt, who claims to be Mrs. Tift?"

"I will admit nothing."

"That does not alter the facts in the case. I know she is the lady."

"I can see now you have joined the conspiracy!" exclaimed Mrs. Fountain.

"Ah! You confirm all that I claim."

"How, sir?"

"By your admission that there is a conspiracy, madame. It may be a double conspiracy. One thing is certain: you fear it. You are taking measures to defeat it, and that is a suggestion, to a man of my experience, that the conspiracy is not altogether one-sided. But of one thing I am certain: the lady is in your possession, either voluntarily or as a captive."

"Your statement is false."

"Denials amount to nothing. I followed up the girl after her release. I only pretended to yield to the trick that called me away from the game I was playing. I had a confederate. The girl was seized and put in a carriage."

"If she was, I know nothing about it. Neither you nor your confederate dare claim that I had anything to do with the affair."

"But, madame, the girl was brought to this house."

The effect of the detective's words were marked. For a moment it looked as though Mrs. Fountain would faint; but she recovered herself and said:

"This is the most astounding piece of impertinence I was ever subjected to, sir."

"Truth compels me to make the charge; and now, madame, I demand that you surrender the girl to me."

Mrs. Fountain had recovered her composure. She saw an opportunity to confound the detective, and she said:

"You say your confederate saw the young lady abducted?"

"Yes."

"Then why did he not interfere?"

"He was acting under instructions."

"He says the lady was brought to this house. Did his instructions cause him to keep a watch on this house?"

"Certainly."

The detective answered at random, for at that moment he was on uncertain ground.

"Then, if the lady was brought here, she could not be removed without his having known it."

The detective thought it better to go straight ahead, and he answered:

"That is true."

"Then, if she was brought here, and was not taken away, she must be here now. You have my permission to search this house, and satisfy yourself as to whether she is here or not. Every room and closet is open to you."

Jerry Mack had become satisfied of two facts. One was that the girl was not in the house at that moment; the second was that she had been there and had been removed. And he determined to make

an examination and prove the latter fact, or, at least, fully satisfy himself, and he said:

"I will avail myself of your permission, madame."

When Mrs. Fountain had made the offer she did not believe the man would avail himself of it. She believed the very offer would be satisfactory to him, and she was angry when he said, "I will avail myself of your permission."

"It is an impertinence," she said; "but I will submit to it."

"Will you accompany me, madame?"

"No, sir; you are at liberty to go where you choose. I will await you here."

The detective ascended the stairs, and, like a hound on the scent, he went directly to the rear room on the fourth floor of the house, and the moment he entered the room he uttered a grunt of satisfaction. He commenced a thorough search of the room, and he found positive evidence—such evidence as only a man of his experience would seek; for he established the matter beyond all doubt in his mind, and he formed a theory as to how the affair had been managed; and his theory, as will be disclosed, was wonderfully near to the real facts in the case.

The detective soon finished his search, and descended the stairs to the room where Mrs. Fountain was awaiting him, and she greeted him with the words:

"Well, sir, did you find the object of your search?"

"I am satisfied," said the detective in a pleasant tone.

A look of triumph came to the woman's face, and she said:

"You will not be so ready to make charges in the future."

"I certainly shall if I always meet with such immediate confirmation of my suspicions."

"I do not understand you, sir. Certainly you are satisfied that the woman was not in this house?"

"On the contrary, I have positive proof that she has been here. I can not see how you managed to remove her and escape observation; but she certainly was brought to this house, bound and gagged. She was carried to the fourth story rear room. Three men were engaged in the abduction. She was thrown, bound and gagged, upon the bed. She was afterward released. You held a talk with her, and she was later removed."

The woman's face expressed a terror such as it might have betrayed if suddenly confronted by an apparition. In a husky voice she managed to say:

"I never met your equal in cold-blooded insolence."

The detective knew he had hit the nail square on the head.

Mrs. Fountain, meantime, had come to believe her husband's statement that friends of the girl had actually entered the house and carried her off. A moment later, however, doubts again arose in her mind.

"Madame," said the detective, "I have but a few more words to say to you. Now my words of warning will be better understood. If any harm comes to that girl, it will go hard with you. She was last seen in your possession—under your care—by those whose statements will be accepted. And now, remember, if any harm comes to her you will be held responsible."

"I know nothing about the woman to whom you allude. I have no interest in her whatever. Your charges are false."

"Well, remember my words: you will be held responsible for her safety."

"I tell you I have no interest in the woman."

"You know she holds a certificate which imperils every cent of money you have in your possession. At this moment I believe you know that all this money is rightfully hers. Be that as it may, you fear her either as a fraud or a genuine claimant."

"I know nothing about her."

"You forget, madame, that you told me she was a thief. You told me that her arrest was a lucky mistake. I am not mistaken, then, and there is no question as to her identity. I happen to know, also, that the portrait offered to you for sale was a portrait of your brother; and that portrait was taken from life."

The detective had told Mademoiselle Lucie that he did not believe Raymond Tift was alive; but the effect of his words on Mrs. Fountain, spoken as a feeler, convinced him that Raymond Tift did live.

"Madame," he said, "this is a bad business. You are playing a losing game."

"You are a vile traitor!" exclaimed Mrs. Fountain.

The detective smiled, and, rising, said:

"Remember my warning: you will be held responsible for the safety of the girl!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

AFTER the departure of the detective, Mrs. Fountain sat for some time engrossed in thought. Finally she seemed to have reached a determination. She went up to her room and rang for her maid. As the latter entered the room she beheld her mistress standing with a revolver in her hand. The maid began to tremble.

"You need not fear, Marie. I do not intend to kill you; I mean to kill myself."

The maid hastily stepped toward her mistress.

"Do not come near me! Do not attempt to interfere with me, or I will shoot you!"

The maid recoiled, and was about to scream, when her mistress said:

"Make an outcry, and I am a dead woman!"

"Oh, madame, why would you attempt to take your own life?"

"Marie, I am driven to this act by your perfidy."

The maid's face assumed the hue of death. She was unable to speak.

"You lied to me, Marie. I have the most positive evidence that every word you said to me about my fainting last night was false."

"Oh, madame, I thought I was acting for the best! The master told me so."

The maid was badly frightened. Her admission was involuntary, but she had made a confession.

"How could you deceive me, Marie?"

"Oh, madame, I thought it was all for the best!"

"Tell me the real truth now and I will never reproach you."

"I admit that what I did tell you was false," said the maid, who was so frightened that she scarcely knew what she was saying; "but what really happened I can not tell, save that I came into the room and found you lying upon the bed in a stupor. I prepared you for the night, and then left you, and the story I told you I was directed to tell you by Mr. Fountain, who said that, on account of your nervous condition, we must tell you anything to soothe you."

Mrs. Fountain lowered the pistol, and dropping her dramatic tone and speaking in a perfectly natural manner, said:

"So you entered into a conspiracy against me?"

The maid had recovered from her fright. She saw that she had been fooled. But she really feared Mrs. Fountain more than she did the lady's husband, and she said:

"Oh, madame, forgive me!"

"I will forgive you on one condition: tell me the whole truth."

The maid determined to tell everything she knew and then quit the service of Mrs. Fountain. She decided upon a secret departure. She had that very morning received her pay to date, and she said:

"The master came to me and told me what to say and what to do."

"Well, what did he do?"

"I can not betray him, ma'am."

"Tell me all, or I will shoot you dead!"

Mrs. Fountain raised the weapon and aimed it at the girl. The latter was a nervous coward, and she cried out:

"I think, madame, he eloped with the girl who was brought to the house?"

"Eloped with the girl who was brought to the house?" repeated Mrs. Fountain.

"Yes, madame. After he gave you the sleeping potion he went upstairs. I followed and listened. He talked with the girl for a long time. He promised to be her friend and aid her to escape from the house. She believed him, and at length they left the house together. He returned after a while and arranged with me to tell you the story about your fainting, and all the rest of it; and that, madame, is the truth."

"You can go, Marie."

Half an hour later Mrs. Fountain left the house, and a few moments after Marie stole out, leaving word with John that she would send for her trunk. We will not repeat the talk between Marie and John; but John appeared to be very kindly disposed toward the escaping maid.

It was long after midday when Mrs. Fountain returned to her home, and a few moments later her husband entered the house. He went direct to his wife's sitting-room. He was all smiles, and appeared to be in excellent humor. His wife, on the contrary, looked as sober as a man appearing for trial for a great crime.

"What has happened now, my dear? Have you heard any bad news?"

"Yes, I have."

The woman rose, crossed the room and locked the door, and said:

"I propose to have a few words with you, Andrew."

"What in thunder is up now?" he asked.

The man began to betray signs of great uneasiness.

"Andrew," said the woman, as she resumed her seat, "repeat to me all that occurred last night, and tell me the truth."

A shadow overspread the man's face.

"You know what occurred. I told you all about it this morning."

"Andrew Fountain, the story you told me this morning is a lie, and you know it."

The man's face flushed. His wife had never talked to him in that way before; indeed, she had always been his willing slave.

"What has come over you, Jane?"

"Where did you take that woman?"

"What woman?"

"Mrs. Tift, my brother's wife."

"Great Scott! Janie, I do not understand you!"

"Oh, yes, you do! Do not attempt to deceive me! You wretch, listen: I know all. Where is that woman?"

Andrew Fountain was taken all aback; but he was determined to face the matter out, and he said:

"Jane, you are certainly crazy."

"I am not crazy, and you know it. Andrew, I love you, and I can stand almost anything from you. I have stood a great deal: I have stooped to all manner of wickedness to gratify your extravagance; but there is one thing I can not stand. I thought you loved me. I am no weak woman; you know that; and the moment I doubt your love, suspect you of unfaithfulness, that moment my love will turn to hate; and it will be a bitter day for you when I do."

"But, Jane, you are talking at random."

"Be careful, Andrew! An immediate confession may save you, and you may be able to explain your conduct; but attempt to deceive me, and I will find out the truth without your aid."

"As you doubt me, as you insult me by daring to doubt, all I can do, and still retain my self-respect, is to defy you, and tell you to go ahead."

Mrs. Fountain's face became livid with rage.

"Be careful, Andrew! Do you know what I will do if driven to extremities?"

"I do not care what you do."

"Then you have ceased to love me?"

"You will teach me to do so if you keep on this way."

"This is all evasion, Andrew."

"We had better change the subject."

"Where is that woman? If you do not tell me I will search for her myself."

"As you have a special interest in her, you had better do so."

"I know how to find her."

"So much the better for you, I reckon."

"Yes; and the worse for you."

"I am not a party at interest."

"Oh, yes, you are! And I will prove it by putting the police and the girl's friends on *your* track. Then she will be found."

Andrew Fountain's face became livid; his coolness and indifference deserted him. He said:

"This is becoming very serious, Jane. Will you tell me just what you mean?"

"I have told you that I know all. You carried that woman off. Yes, you betrayed me. You gave me a drug to make me unconscious. I remember all well enough. You asked me if I did not remember. I did remember; but I suspected you, and I was anxious to learn your scheme. I only pretended to be unconscious."

The man knew that the latter statement was not true.

"You accuse me of having drugged you. What could have been my purpose?"

"Your purpose was betrayed by your acts!" exclaimed Mrs. Fountain. "You went to that woman and represented yourself as another person—as her friend—yes, her friend. You offered to rescue her. She believed you, and you two left this house together. Now, Andrew Fountain, answer me: where is the woman?"

"I know nothing about the woman. If some one personated me, I can't help it."

"Don't attempt to fool me with such a weak pretense. No, no, Andrew; you know better. I am aroused; and if you will not tell me where the woman is I shall make good my threat."

"You will have to do as you threaten. I have nothing more to say, madame."

"Oh, it's 'madame' now to me, and 'Agnes' to the other woman! Well, we shall see!"

Mrs. Fountain crossed the room and unlocked the door. Her face was purple as she exclaimed:

"You can go! Never enter my presence again! From this time forth we are enemies!"

The woman looked like a female fiend. The man was scared.

"Oh, Jane!" he cried; "Jane, my love, you are beside yourself! I will not go. I am overcome by your mean suspicions. I love you too well to live. I will kill myself!"

"Do so, Andrew, and I will go in mourning for you. I will say you were not so bad, after all. Here is a weapon. Blow your brains out like a man. Prove your love. I will accept no other proof."

The man trembled and exclaimed:

"Jane, my love, you are mad!"

"Oh, no; not mad; only a little angry! When I get mad I will kill you; but I am only angry when I permit you to kill yourself. Yes, act like a man!"

"Give me the weapon."

The woman coolly cocked the pistol and handed it to her husband. He took it and raised it to his head, placing the muzzle against his temple.

"You are a good fellow, after all, Andrew. Good-bye, my love! Now fire!"

The man did not pull the trigger.

"Coward! If you have any manhood shoot yourself!"

"Woman, you are a devil! I will not kill myself for you!"

The woman laughed hysterically and shouted:

"No, you are not man enough! Well, then, go, leave my presence, you villain, and I will put a detective on your track!"

Mrs. Fountain would have said more, but suddenly she fell insensible to the floor.

CHAPTER XXIV.

ANDREW FOUNTAIN had encountered a new experience. He had called his wife a devil, but he was the real devil. A meaner wretch never walked the face of the earth. He had been the instigator of his wife all along, but had been very careful to avoid implicating himself in any way should there come an exposure. He was engaged in a criminal act behind a woman, and that woman his wife, and he was letting her take all the risks.

When his wife fell to the floor he went to summon her maid; but the maid could not be found. He found John, and the man told him the maid had left.

"Did Mrs. Fountain discharge her?"

"No, sir; she left."

A light broke in upon Andrew Fountain's mind. He saw that his wife had really suspected him, and in some way she had forced the maid to a confession. He quickly decided upon his course.

He returned to his wife, and found her returning to consciousness. He raised her in his arms and kissed her tenderly again and again. She recovered full consciousness in his arms, and he said:

"My poor dear! My poor dear!"

Mrs. Fountain's rage seemed to have subsided. She really loved the man.

"You here yet?" she said, faintly.

"Yes, my dear; and here I will remain. I did not realize that you were laboring under such a ridiculous misapprehension. I was offended. You know how sensitive I am. You came at me so roughly that I could not bring myself to make an explanation; but now I am ready to explain all."

"Do so."

"I did take the girl from the house, and in order to get her to leave quietly I made false statements. I have been aiding you when you did not know it. And now you shall know all. I am playing a deeper game than you. Several persons are onto our scheme; we are watched at every turn. It was well known that the girl was brought to this house. A signal was given me that our residence

was being watched. We could not have held the girl. I conceived an idea to frustrate the plans of her friends.

"I went to her and represented myself as a visitor in this house. I told her I knew she was a prisoner, and volunteered to aid her to escape. She had never seen me, and I had a good opportunity to work my scheme. I gained her confidence, and I helped her to escape, under the promise that she would communicate with me afterward. I have carried out this scheme in your interest."

"But it will be necessary now to change our tactics. The girl feels very grateful to me, and she looks upon me as her friend; in fact, she is prepared to make me her confidant. She thinks I am a detective, and she will place all her affairs in my hands. She will finally intrust the certificate to me, and when she learns that I have betrayed her, I will only be compelled to bear her reproaches, that's all; but our success and your approval and love will enable me to bear it all."

Mrs. Fountain looked at her husband approvingly. She was glad to listen to his explanation, and it appeared frank and reasonable; and if he were really telling her the truth, his scheme was indeed an inspiration.

"Why did you try to deceive me, Andrew? Why did you not take me into your confidence?"

"I feared you would not approve of my plan; I feared that I could not convince you it was the best one. I also dreaded your jealous love. But now that I have told you all I feel better, and hope you will approve of my little scheme."

"I do approve of it, and I am sorry you did not take me into your confidence at once."

"Then you forgive me, Jane?"

"I do, Andrew. But where did you take the girl?"

"I merely took her to the street and let her go. It was the best way to gain her confidence. She is to meet me to-night. You can be present at the meeting if you desire to do so, but she must not know you are present. Indeed, you can be present at all our meetings. And now trust me, and I will not only get that certificate, but I will get rid of that woman."

"Have you heard from her?"

"Yes."

"Where is the meeting to-night to take place?"

"In Union Square."

"How is it possible for me to be present at the meeting without disclosing my identity?"

"You can disguise yourself, and I will lead the girl to a seat, and you can be near by and overhear every word that passes."

"Andrew, will you forgive me?"

"Certainly, my dear! Your anger was justified, I know, before you heard my explanation; and, indeed, I came here to explain all; but you went at me at such a rate that I foolishly became angry."

"Andrew, I must say you have done well."

"You will see in the end that I have done well. I will have that woman in my power and get that certificate before long, and then the fortune will be ours beyond dispute, and we can do as we please. We will go on a trip to Europe, and shake New York for a year or two, and enjoy ourselves and be at peace."

The picture presented was a pleasant one to Mrs. Fountain. She had longed to go across the Atlantic, but did not dare go while matters concerning the fortune were in such an unsettled state.

"And now, my dear, I will go and make arrangements for the meeting to-night," said Andrew Fountain; and kissing his wife affectionately he took his departure.

When left alone, Mrs. Fountain sat for a long time thinking the whole matter over. She was only partially satisfied. Yet her husband's explanation seemed reasonable. She determined upon a bold game, however. She was resolved to dispel any lingering doubts.

When Andrew Fountain left his wife he went to make certain arrangements. He was a cunning schemer, and he arranged for a very cunning little game. It was evening when he returned home, and he entered his wife's presence with a bright smile upon his face.

"It's all working just right," he said; "and, my dear, I will never attempt to deceive you again. From this time out I will consult you in everything. Read that!" and he handed her a note.

Mrs. Fountain took the note and read as follows:

"DEAR SIR,—Be sure and meet me to-night. I am very grateful to you, and I have reason to believe that your intimations are correct. I do not believe that my supposed friends are my real friends. I overheard a conversation which convinces me that they are merely using me to serve their own purposes. I trust you, as you have given me positive proof of your disinterested friendship. I am watched. These people suspect something is wrong. They know that I had been waylaid and made a prisoner. They do not understand how I escaped.

"I told them a story. They pretend to believe it, and appear to be rejoiced; but I know they suspect something. They fear a compromise with the Fountain people. They are determined to prevent it, however, as a compromise would leave them out in the cold. I never will compromise; but these people shall not grow rich at my expense. They are watching me, so I will come disguised; and we must be very careful, as we do not know where they may be.

"There is a man on the case who pretends to be my friend. He is, like yourself—or pretends to be—a detective. He talks very reasonably; but I do not trust him. Strangely, I trust only you. I will be at the meeting-place on time. Yours,

AGNES.

"P.S.—They are suggesting that it is not safe for me to keep the certificate in my possession; but I will not surrender it. I am so glad I told you all the facts!

A."

Mrs. Fountain read the letter twice. It was evidently written by a woman.

"My dear, what do you think of that?"

"It looks as if your scheme was working all right."

"I could tell you something if I did not fear I would offend you."

"You need not fear."
"Is not this woman's sudden confidence in me very strange?"
"Yes, it is."
The husband smiled and asked:
"Is there not a possible explanation?"
"What is it?"
"I thought, as a woman, you would suspect it."
"Do you mean she has fallen in love with you?"
"It looks that way, does it not?"
"Yes; and it seems to please you!"
"I am pleased for what I can make out of her infatuation, and you know there is no danger. She has a husband."

"Hush, Andrew!"

"Well, that is between you and me."

"But should that husband ever appear on the scene?"

"He never will, my dear."

"Andrew, he lives!"

"What nonsense!"

The woman spoke with singular earnestness. The man answered with careless indifference.

"If you really work this right, Andrew—"

"You can trust me for that. I have taken the matter into my own hands now. All will go well after this meeting to-night, and possibly to-night I may get the certificate. Once I get that the woman is in our power. We will then make a compromise."

"That would be an admission, Andrew."

"You do not understand my plan."

"What is your plan?"

"The certificate once in our possession, we can then compel the girl to sign a paper that would shield us against Raymond Tift; and for this paper we can give her a thousand or so and compel her to go away from New York forever. Yes, we can make her blast her reputation forever, so that, in the case of a certain contingency, even Raymond Tift would be glad to stand by the paper."

"Andrew, you are a genius, although an evil genius," said the woman, with an approving smile.

"We have fooled with this affair long enough, Jane. I intend now to settle it forever, and away we go to Europe."

"And this woman meets you to-night?"

"Yes; and if she has that paper in her possession I will get her to consign it to me. Now, there is one thing, Jane, I want to speak to you about. During our meeting to-night I may be compelled to perform a little."

"What do you mean?"

"Make a little love to her—encourage her fascination. See?"

"That will not be pleasant to me, Andrew, and I do not see that it is necessary."

"Her infatuation is our power, Jane; and through it we are to win. I must certainly encourage it a little—just a little, you know—and it will be right under your own eyes, and you will fully understand it."

"I don't know about that, Andrew. She is a very beautiful woman. You may burn your fingers."

"Jane, there are but two things I love or can love: you and money. There is no danger. I simply play to win."

The woman looked dubious.

CHAPTER XXV.

ANDREW FOUNTAIN'S arguments were specious; but he had one fact in his favor: his wife loved him and desired to believe in him.

They talked for some time longer, and later he went out.

He had arranged certain signals with his wife; also the place where he was to meet her before he met the other woman. His wife was to be disguised. When all was complete he felt delighted, and when he reached the street he muttered:

"What a fool she is, after all! I will quiet her for the present. It may be that eternal quiet may serve her as well in the end. Great Scott! if I can only win the love of Agnes all will be mine! She will be a beautiful wife, and as rich as Croesus; and there will be no dispute about the title to the fortune if it once becomes to my interest to establish her rights. Jane was never suited to me. She is too designing. I love sweet-tempered women; and women don't amount to much anyhow only as they contribute to man's happiness. For that they were created."

It was after ten o'clock when Andrew Fountain appeared in the vicinity of Union Square Park. He was walking leisurely through the park when he met a veiled lady.

"I see you are on hand, Jane."

"I am here, Andrew. At what hour do you meet that woman?"

"I am expecting her every moment."

They turned away in different directions after these few words had passed between them. They had not even stopped in their walk, but had kept along side by side for a short distance only as though one pedestrian had overtaken another and had then slowly forged ahead.

Mrs. Fountain finally reached and stationed herself at a place that had been agreed upon. She waited, and almost an hour passed. She became nervous and distrustful, and she muttered:

"Have I been duped, after all?"

Presently she beheld a gentleman and lady coming toward her. They were engaged in earnest conversation, and she recognized her husband.

Andrew Fountain and the veiled woman advanced until they arrived at a bench adjoining the one on which Mrs. Fountain was seated, where they sat down, and he said:

"It is strange how we met; but I think it was very fortunate for you that we did meet."

"I hope so," the woman answered.

Mrs. Fountain could plainly overhear every word that was said.

"I think," said Fountain, "I can see through their scheme."

"I don't know. Since I wrote to you something has occurred that partially restores my confidence in them."

"Indeed! What has occurred?"

"I have reason to believe that the detective who arrested me is an honest man."

"I have positive knowledge to the contrary," said Fountain.

"One of us must be mistaken; but my source of information as to his character is trustworthy."

"Well, however that may be, you can trust me."

"I desire to trust you; but we met under such singular circumstances."

"There was more design in our meeting than you think."

"How so?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, I knew something about your affairs, and I learned the facts from the very man of whom you speak, the detective; and he betrayed to me his designs."

Mrs. Fountain applauded her husband's supposed cunning.

"It is hard to tell who is one's friend."

"And, let me tell you, that man made certain propositions to Mrs. Fountain."

"How did you make that discovery?"

"She revealed the fact to me herself. You must remember she thinks I am her friend. She tells me everything."

"But you are not her friend."

"Why, certainly not! I am on the side of right. But let me tell you one thing: you must guard well that certificate. Lose that, and the only chance you have for establishing your rights vanishes."

"I know that."

"You told me in your note that they wanted to get possession of that paper, on the plea that it was not safe in your custody?"

"Yes."

"Well, I will say that is true."

"I realize that myself; but the paper is safely hidden away."

"It is hard to hide such a valuable paper and feel that it is safe."

"I am aware of that. No one can know the anxiety that I have experienced in regard to that matter."

"Ah! If you could trust me all would be well."

"I do trust you."

"Then why not relieve your mind of all anxiety by placing that paper in my custody?"

Andrew Fountain spoke in quite loud tones, like one who was eager and earnest and had forgotten himself for the moment. His listening wife was reassured. Happiness had come to her again. Her Andy was a true and loving husband, after all, and was working in her interests. How mean she had been to doubt him! She really felt ashamed.

The woman did not make an immediate answer to Fountain's request. His wife listened with strained ears. She hoped the answer would be "I will;" then all would be well; but the woman hesitated, and Andrew Fountain urged:

"I speak for your good. Of course it makes little difference to me personally."

"The paper is in a safe place."

"That may be. But suppose you should die?"

"In that event it would be as well that the paper were forever lost."

"But your reputation?"

"I am a poor, lone body; no one knows me. I would soon drop out of memory, and it would make no difference."

"Then you refuse to intrust me with the paper?"

"No, I do not refuse; but I must have time to consider your proposition. I will meet you to-morrow and let you know my decision."

Mrs. Fountain began to feel uncomfortable again, and she muttered:

"The hussy! She is struck with my husband! She will arrange meeting after meeting. I know her game. She is a beautiful woman, and Andrew is only a man."

"What time to-morrow will you meet me?"

"I will send you a note stating time and place."

"You had better reconsider your determination to wait and make up your mind at once."

"Are you tired of meeting me?"

"Oh, no!"

Andrew Fountain thought the game had gone far enough and he determined to end it, so he said:

"All right; I will wait to hear from you. And now, as it is late, we better close this interview and go home."

The man turned to go away. Mrs. Fountain drew up closer and heard the woman say in a low tone:

"Good-bye! I will write you early in the morning."

She turned and walked away. Mrs. Fountain stole after her. She made up her mind that it might be as well for her to learn just where the woman lodged.

Andrew Fountain had gone in an opposite direction from the woman after they had separated. He thought, as a matter of course, his wife would follow him. He was feeling pretty good. He had played, as he thought, a clever game; and after he had had a brief interview with his wife he intended going to see his captive. His wife, however, did not seem to be anywhere in the vicinity, and he came to a halt and waited. But she did not appear.

"Hang it!" he muttered. "Where can she be?"

He paced to and fro, expecting her to appear every moment; but she came not. He at length made up his mind that his wife was not going to join him, and he wandered off to his club in an uneasy frame of mind.

Mrs. Fountain, meantime, had got upon the track of the woman. She had no suspicions in her mind. She merely, as a matter of curiosity, wished to trace her to her quarters. As she followed, however, she observed certain actions of the woman's that struck her as rather strange. Mrs. Fountain knew Agnes Tift to be a modest

acting and timid woman. The party she was following assumed a swaggering air, and finally she met a man whom she struck on the shoulder in a bold and unlady-like manner, and the two stopped and engaged in a rather boisterous conversation.

"What does this mean?" Mrs. Fountain muttered in a puzzled tone; and her mind was filled with suspicion at once.

She was a quick-witted woman, and as the suspicion grew in her mind her soul became fired with the wildest surmises, and she again muttered:

"I will know what this means! Great Heaven! is my husband duping me, after all? Let him beware! If I learn he is a two-faced villain it will be a sorry day for him!"

After a short conversation with the man she had met, the woman walked on; and in the meantime Mrs. Fountain conceived a bold scheme. She crossed to the opposite side of the street, walked rapidly, and, recrossing, walked toward the woman, so as to meet her face to face. When she was about to pass her she ran against her, as though by accident, and as she did so she tore aside the woman's veil. This, also, was seemingly an accident. As the veil was removed Mrs. Fountain beheld a sight that caused her heart to stand still for an instant. She gazed at the woman in amazement, for the face that she beheld was not the face of Agnes Tift.

"You are very awkward!" the woman exclaimed.

"Excuse me!" said Mrs. Fountain, as she gazed into the painted face.

The woman started to walk away, when Mrs. Fountain caught hold of her and said:

"Oh, I am in such trouble!"

The woman halted and looked at Mrs. Fountain, who was also vexed.

"What trouble are you in?" asked the woman.

"Oh, I am in sore trouble! Will you not help me?"

"Well, how can I help you? Do you need money?"

"I do not need charity. No; I have plenty of money. But I need advice."

"Oh, you only need advice! Why don't you go to a lawyer?"

"A lawyer can not aid me."

"No more can I aid you, madame."

"You may be able to aid me. Only a woman can help me, and I will give you one hundred dollars if you will render me the assistance I need."

"You will pay me a hundred dollars to aid you, did you say?"

"Yes."

"Well, open up, madame, and tell me what aid you need, and I will try to earn that hundred."

"Come with me and I will tell you."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE woman looked suspiciously at Mrs. Fountain for a moment, and then asked:

"What game are you up to?"

"I am up to no game. If you will come and hear my story, I will show you how you can help me. I am a wealthy lady. I am a married woman. I am in trouble. My meeting with you was accidental; but the instant I met you an idea came to me that you might help me. I said I would give you a hundred dollars if you would aid me; but I will give you more than that; yes, I will give you a thousand dollars."

The woman still eyed Mrs. Fountain suspiciously, and finally said:

"This is a queer proceeding, madame; but I will go with you and listen to your tale of woe out of curiosity. Where do you propose to go?"

"We will go to some restaurant where we can sit down and talk quietly. You are just the person to aid me; I can see that."

"Very well, I will go with you; or, rather, you can come with me, as I know a place that will just suit us."

The woman led the way to a restaurant on Fourth Avenue. She selected a place where she was well known. The two ladies took a seat at a table in an alcove, and the woman said:

"Now, madame, I am ready to hear your story."

"And can I depend upon you to aid me?"

"I can not tell till I know what I am to do."

"I propose to tell you a singular story, and I shall disclose my name and other matters of a private nature, and thus I will place myself in your power. Will you promise me that you will not betray me, even if you conclude not to help me?"

"Yes, madame, I promise."

"I will trust you," said Mrs. Fountain, "and if you are true to me I will reward you well."

"All right; I have promised not to betray you; go ahead with your story."

My husband is jealous of me," commenced Mrs. Fountain.

"And, I reckon, without good cause," interrupted the woman, laughing.

"My husband suspects that I was in the company of another man," continued Mrs. Fountain, not heeding the interruption.

"Well, were you?"

"I was; but I meant no harm."

"Oh, no, we never mean any harm! But what can I do?"

"I want you to enter into a conspiracy with me, and together we will arrange a plan so as to make it appear that you were the woman who was with the man, and not me."

The woman laughed and said:

"That's a great scheme, I must say!"

"It can be carried out. Of course there may follow some publicity; but you do not mind that, do you?"

"I can not say just yet. But who are you?"

"My name is Haight."

"And who is the man?"

"If I name him and you do not conclude to aid me you will never betray me?"

"No."

"The man's name is Fountain."

"Andrew Fountain?" asked the woman, quickly.

"Yes; do you know him?"

"I've heard of him. Do you love him?"

"No, no! He loves me; and he is trying to persuade me to elope with him."

"Madame, let me warn you. Have nothing to do with this man Fountain."

"But he loves me—he loves me madly."

"He does?" exclaimed the woman with a laugh that sounded an awful suggestion in Mrs. Fountain's ears.

"Yes; I know he does."

"Now, madame, let me tell you something. I am a bad woman, and life holds very little for me, except to get what fun I can out of it; but I can tell you one thing: this man Fountain is a villain."

Mrs. Fountain turned deathly pale, and asked, in a husky voice:

"How do you know?"

The woman laughed in a sort of sardonic manner and said:

"If I do not know, no one does. And do you know he is a married man?"

"Yes, I know that. I met him first in company with his wife."

"Do you not suspect what I am?"

"Yes," came the answer in a gentle tone; and, after a pause, Mrs. Fountain added: "That is why I thought you might help me for money."

"What I am that man made me!" declared the woman.

Mrs. Fountain glared, and the woman continued:

"You asked me if I knew him. I should say I did know him; and I know that at this moment he is engaged in one of the darkest pieces of villainy a man was ever guilty of. He is a scoundrel, that man!"

Mrs. Fountain's blood ran cold to hear her husband thus spoken of by this woman. For a moment she felt as though she would faint; but by a great effort she sustained herself, and asked:

"Tell me about this piece of villainy you speak of."

"In order to save you, I will tell you. I hate that man, although I am compelled to tolerate him. He buys me my clothes, gives me my diamonds, pays all my bills, and yet I hate him, and when I have ruined him I will have my revenge. See! I am trusting you now!"

"Oh, you are very kind!"

"I lay no claim to being kind; but I do not want to see that man succeed in any more deviltry. I tell you, madame, that he is engaged at the present moment in a villainous scheme against his wife. Go home to your husband, and hereafter avoid this man Fountain. Have nothing to do with him. If you love him, learn to hate him. If you are wise you will heed my warning. I am one of his victims, and I know him to be without pity, honor or fidelity. He is the meanest wretch, the most treacherous villain in New York today!"

Mrs. Fountain was dumfounded at this diatribe against her husband; she almost wished she had never entered upon this hazardous quest. But she mastered her emotion, and made up her mind that as she had put her hand to the plow she would finish the furrow.

"Tell me about this game you say Mr. Fountain is playing against his wife," Mrs. Fountain said, after an interval of silence.

"Oh, it is not a matter that would interest you! I have told you enough. I advise you to go to your home, make up with your husband, and never meet that man Fountain again."

"You say he is a spendthrift?"

"A spendthrift! Why, he spends money like water! He throws it away, and soon he will be a ruined man, and then I will throw him over, and I look forward with eagerness to the time when I can do it. Yes, his name is treachery. There is no honor in him, and how he has managed to blindfold his wife all these years is a mystery to me, for I've heard that she is a very smart woman."

"She is; and a worthy woman."

"If she is an honest woman she is too worthy to live with a wretch like him. In a year or two he will beggar her, and then he will desert her. And that man has no gratitude! You would think, even if he did not love his wife, that at least he would feel grateful toward her for all the sacrifices she has made for him; but he hates her."

"What you are telling me is all very strange."

"Nothing strange about it when you know the man. He may be sweet to you, yes; he knows you are rich. But let him once get you in his power and he will rob and beggar you. I tell you to turn back while you can. When you meet him unmask him; or, rather, let him know that he has been unmasks, and make peace with your husband."

"I can never make peace with my husband," came the statement in a strange, meaning tone.

"Well, at any rate do not let this wretch ruin and rob you, for you can take my word for it that that is his purpose."

"But his poor wife—I know her—should she not be warned?"

"Oh, she will learn soon enough!"

"But you say he is wasting her fortune."

"She does not seem to care, so why should we? From all I hear she dotes on him, and will enjoy being beggared by him."

"How long have you known Andrew Fountain?"

"For seven years."

"Under what circumstances did you make his acquaintance?"

"Oh, we will not go into that! But I am sorry for you, madame, for I can see that this man has fascinated you. You do not wish to give him up. All right; go ahead; let him live on your fortune. I will share it with him; but I will only have to wait a little longer for him to become a beggar in order to wreak my revenge."

"You say you hate him, and yet you are engaged in helping him in a scheme against his wife!"
"How do you know I am?"
"Why, you said so."
"Well, I am."
"Have you no pity for her?"
"Yes."
"Then why do you go on?"

"For reasons which I shall not discuss. But I will warn her before his scheme is perfected, and then she will see what a villain he is, and shake him."

Mrs. Fountain's head was in a whirl. She had no reason to doubt one word the woman with the painted face had told her. She had seen the woman with her husband, and had overheard the put-up dialogue. Did she not possess the most positive evidence that her husband was a villain? The woman's story only confirmed what she suspected. She had feared the truth and had been hoping against hope; but she had been preparing for the death of her hopes, after all, just as friends are prepared for the death of a dear one who has long been mortally ill.

After the interval of silence that had succeeded her last remark, the woman with the painted face said:

"I must go now."
"Then you will not aid me?"

"You do not need my aid now. I think I have done you a service already that will render further aid unnecessary."

"How so?"
"In exposing this man."
"How do I know you have told me the truth?"
"Why should I lie to you?"
"You may love this man."
"I hate him. I told you."
"And you have been telling me the truth?"

"Madame, I have; but I am not going to verify what I say."

"Why not?"

"I can see you are determined to verify it yourself. Go on, and when too late you will know that I have told you the truth."

"It seems strange that you should confide in me."

"I am an unfortunate woman, but I am a woman. We met by chance. It is strange that we should have met. You told me your story, and I considered it my duty to save you if I could, but I see now I am too late in my warning."

"No, you are not."

"So much the better for you."

"Tell me about the scheme against his wife."

"Why should I?"

"Because *I am his wife!*" came the answer.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE woman with the painted face uttered a cry of astonishment, and actually leaped from her chair as though about to run away, and said in husky tones:

"You are his wife?"
"Yes, I am his wife."
"You are the wife of Andrew Fountain?"
"I am Mrs. Fountain."

There followed a moment of silence. The woman seemed dazed for an instant, and finally she asked:

"What is the meaning of all this?"

"It means that I believe all you have told me. At last that devil, Andrew Fountain, is unmasked!"

"There is something behind all this. You laid for me."

"I did."

"I see it all," said the woman, nonchalantly. "You suspected that man, and followed him to the place where he and I met tonight, and after we separated you followed and accosted me."

"You are right."

"And when you ran against me it was with a purpose: you wished to see who I was?"

"You are correct."

"You are a clever woman, and I am glad you succeeded."

"And now, tell me: what is his scheme?"

"I do not know what he is trying to accomplish; but he has been coaching me to represent myself as some other woman."

"You played your part well."

"It was all rehearsed. That man wrote out the questions and replies, and I had to commit them to memory. I was once an actress, and it was an easy matter for me to play the part."

"And do you know whom you personated?"

"I do not; but I suppose it is some poor creature he means to destroy."

"He never will succeed."

"Why not?"

"I will beat his game."

The whole manner of the woman had changed. She acted as though fearful, and she exclaimed:

"I am doomed!"

"You are doomed?" repeated Mrs. Fountain. "How so?"

"That man will learn the truth, and he will murder me. He is a murderer already, and he would not hesitate to murder me if his interests required that I should be put out of the way."

"You fear I will betray you?"

"Certainly. And you would be right in doing so."

"I never will. You and I will become friends, and I will give you money."

"I think I have had a great deal of your money already, madame. You need give me no more."

"Have you decided to help me?" asked Mrs. Fountain, abruptly.

"I can not see how I can help you."

"You can, and at the same time you can save yourself."

"How?"

"We will not let him know that he has been betrayed."

"It will come out sooner or later."

"But you need never be known as his betrayer."

"Can that be arranged?"

"Certainly. I do not propose to let him know anything about what I have discovered. I shall not unmask him; he shall unmask himself. Yes, I will get the evidence from him. You are to meet him to-morrow?"

"No."

"It was arranged for you to do so, was it not?"

"Oh, that was only a blind!"

"You are not blinding me now, are you?"

"No, madame; I have told you nothing but the truth."

"You were to write to him?"

"Yes; and you are to see the letter."

"I will insist upon his keeping the appointment."

"Ah, I see through your scheme!"

"Well, what is it?"

"You will rush in and unmask me."

"Is it not a good scheme? It will exonerate you."

"That is true."

"I think we had better do it that way."

"And I am to write to him, making an appointment to meet him?"

"Yes."

"But he may see me in the meantime."

"And I will see him in the meantime also. I overheard all that passed between you at your meeting to-night. I will insist upon his meeting you again, and I will also insist upon being a witness to the interview, and then he will have to arrange with you to meet him."

"He may suspect me."

"No, no; I will protect you, and in the meantime I will arrange to catch him at his devilish game, the scoundrel!"

"Madame, you must be very unhappy."

"I am. But I am happy in the thought that I shall soon cease to be the dupe of that man. I will resolutely tear from my heart the love I once felt for him. I can never more love a villain who is false to me."

"I am with you, madame. You will get a divorce, I suppose?"

"I will."

The woman with the painted face was thoughtful a moment, and then said:

"When and where shall we meet, and at what time?"

"Here, to-morrow afternoon at four o'clock. He will have seen you before that?"

"Yes; he will see me in the morning."

"All right. Now can I depend on you?"

"You can."

"He may suspect something and question you."

"You need not fear, madame; he will learn nothing from me."

"I must go home now," said Mrs. Fountain. "And remember, I shall trust you implicitly, so do not fail me."

"I will be as true as steel."

The women parted, and Mrs. Fountain hurried home. Her husband had not yet got home, and although it was very late she waited up to receive him. At length he arrived, and she said:

"I am waiting for you."

"Well, my dear, are you satisfied now?"

"Yes; but you did not get the certificate."

"We will get it all right."

"I doubt it. That woman is playing you."

"Oh, no!" said the husband, with a laugh.

"Well, I want that paper without delay."

"And you shall have it, my dear."

"I want you to meet that woman again and get that paper from her, if, as you say, she is not playing you."

"And we will," was the husband's answer.

There are some people who are susceptible to the change from intense love to intense hatred. Such persons are generally possessed of dispositions distinguished by extreme selfishness. Mrs. Fountain was such a person. She was very selfish, and when an object of her affections went contrary to her selfish views she could quickly turn from love to hate. And she did.

Mrs. Fountain had loved her husband, but her love was not founded on the better qualities of the man. She loved him because he was handsome and gay, and because she believed he loved her. These are very slender threads whereon to anchor a woman's love; and, as a rule, only selfish natures can base an affection on such love.

When she discovered that her husband did not love her, that he was deceiving her, and that his beauty was not for her, a change came over her, and, as intimated, her intense love turned to an unrelenting hate.

She had absolute proof of her husband's infidelity, of his faithlessness to her. She would not have cared had it been proved that he was a villain so long as he loved her; but when it was proved that he had merely been making a fool of her, the change came, and having once changed, there was no chance for a return of her love. It had not been founded on a basis that would encourage forgiveness, nor was the provocation one that could be wiped out. She had not been satisfied with her husband's story as to her condition on the night he ran off with Agnes. She had doubted his sincerity then, and when the maid confessed, her doubts increased, and finally she had met with positive proof. She had sinned to get money for him, and this money he had been squandering upon another, one who did not even claim to love him, but who was really playing him, as the phrase goes.

Mrs. Fountain, however, now determined to play a part. She

determined to become in appearance more confidential and loving than ever before. She determined to lead him on, and she also resolved to beat him at his own game, and in order to beat him she resolved to defeat herself.

"It was for him that I robbed my brother," she muttered. "I will now undo what I have done; and it will be a profitable job for me, for I begin to feel assured that as it stands I am playing a losing game."

Mrs. Fountain had reached the conclusion that her husband had also decided that it was a losing game, and she felt that he had already commenced to hedge, as the betting men say, and she again muttered:

"Well, we'll see who will win. The scoundrel, I'll teach him a lesson! He shall become a beggar! It was he who led me into this, and now he deserts me, and, what is more, he has been making a fool of me for years."

"I fear you will not succeed, Andrew; you are too confident," said Mrs. Fountain, resuming the conversation, in answer to her husband's confident declaration that he would get the certificate.

"Have no fear about that, Jane."

"Andrew," said the wife, "tell me frankly: what is your idea of the whole matter as it now stands?"

"Well, Jane, there were moments when I felt very doubtful of the outcome, but now everything seems to be coming out all right."

"What makes you think so?"

"You have seen what progress I am making: we are about to achieve complete success, I believe."

"But I tell you that girl is playing you."

"Oh, no! We will get the paper."

"Suppose you fail, Andrew?"

"I will not fail."

"You are altogether too confident."

"I have every reason to be confident."

"Then you place more reliance in that woman than I do. She is not the soft, confiding, innocent girl we thought her."

"Oh, yes, she is! Why do you think differently?"

Mrs. Fountain fixed her eyes on her husband and said:

"She talked like an old stager."

"Well, you wait and see."

"You are to meet her again?"

"Yes."

"I wish to be present at the interview."

"There is no necessity for your presence again, Jane. Why do you want to put yourself to all that trouble a second time?"

"Well, I want to be there."

"That is a woman's reason every time. My dear, I fear you are getting jealous of me; but I assure you there is no reason for it. No, no, Jane; you are dearer to me than all the world beside."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Why, Jane, what has come over you now?"

"Look me in the face, Andrew, and answer me: Have you always been faithful to me?"

"Jane, I will not answer that question. My feelings are hurt."

"Well, Andrew, secure that paper, and I will forgive you."

On the following day Andrew Fountain left his residence at an early hour, and a little later his wife also went out. She proceeded to the office of Mr. Haas. He had not arrived at his office; but a few moments later he came in.

"Good-morning, Mrs. Fountain," the lawyer said; "what brings you here so early in the morning?"

"Do you know where the woman who came to sell me the portrait can be found?"

"Why, I am expecting her here this very morning!"

"You are?"

"Yes; she is coming at my request. I managed to communicate with her."

"Why did you send for her?"

"I wished to try a little scheme."

"I hope she will be sure to come, as I wish to see her."

"I would advise you not to meet her."

"Why not?"

"She is a very smart woman," said the lawyer, significantly.

"I may prove myself a match for her."

"Well, then, you had better see her before I do."

"That will suit me."

"Ah, here she is now, I guess!" said the lawyer, as there came a sharp tap at the door.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Our readers will remember that Jerry Mack had held a long interview with Mrs. Fountain, and he had obtained clews that led him to certain conclusions. He then met Mademoiselle Lucie, and they held a long consultation. He said:

"They certainly did capture the girl."

"I know it."

"She was taken to the house of Mrs. Fountain originally, but was subsequently removed to another place. I have been unable as yet to locate her; but we must find her."

"There is no doubt but what we will find Agnes. What we want is to force them to an acknowledgment."

"They will fight to the last."

"Certainly; but so will we. Now, I propose to work a flank movement."

"How?"

"On the lawyer. He is not a party in direct interest, and he will realize, when we let him into certain facts, that it is a losing game for him, and that he will have to get from under, or he goes to jail with a blasted reputation."

"There is something in that."

"With your approval, we will see the lawyer."

"All right," said the detective, approvingly.

"I have seen the clerk of the hotel," said the mademoiselle, after a moment's pause, "and he denies that he signed the affidavit as to the marriage. But I learned that the marriage had taken place, and that they secured some one to personate the clerk."

"By jinger, this is great news! Are you sure that your information is correct?"

"Positively certain of it. And if they secured some one to personate the clerk, they also, in all probability, secured some one to personate the clergyman."

"You are right! You are on the right track now, that is certain."

"I have found out the name of the clergyman who was supposed to have officiated at the ceremony, and I have written to him."

"We will soon bring this matter to a crisis."

"In the meantime I think I can force the lawyer to a full confession. When he learns I am onto his game, he will yield, I am sure."

"It is a good scheme!" exclaimed the detective. "See him, by all means."

"And in the meantime you can follow up the search for the girl, and I think I can give you a sure tip as to the method to be pursued to locate her."

"What is your theory?"

"Get onto the track of Andrew Fountain, and follow him up."

"I was thinking of that."

"There lies your course."

Mademoiselle Lucie did communicate with the lawyer and made an appointment with him; and, singularly enough, Mrs. Fountain appeared at the lawyer's office at the same time the mademoiselle had named for her interview.

When the tap came at his door, as recorded, and the lawyer said "There she is," Mrs. Fountain suddenly changed her mind, and she said:

"One moment, Mr. Haas. I have decided, upon reflection, that you had better see her first. I will listen, and at the proper moment come in, if I think it best."

Mrs. Fountain went into an adjoining room, and the lawyer admitted his visitor. It was the mademoiselle. Mr. Haas escorted her to his private office. He bade her be seated, and, as she removed her veil, gazed at her with interest. She was perfectly cool and self-possessed under his scrutiny.

"Well, sir, do you know me?"

"No, madame; I can't say that do."

Mademoiselle Lucie smiled and said:

"You will know me before we separate."

"What is your business with me, madame?"

"I have very important business with you, sir; but, after having had me shadowed so persistently, it is very cheeky for you to pretend that you do not know me."

"You talk in a very strange manner, madame."

"I shall probably talk in a stranger manner before I get through." The lawyer made no answer, and the mademoiselle asked, abruptly:

"Have you been paid in full for your services in the Tift affair?"

"I do not understand what you mean, madame."

"I will aid you to do so. You are the working devil in this Tift robbery and forgery case, and, of course, you do not work for fun—you do not rob and forge for amusement. You must have been paid. Do you understand my question now?"

"I do not, madame; and I will say that it is only amusement that causes me to listen to you."

"I think I can change your attitude."

"Then you must be quick about it, for my time is engaged."

"Oh, you will have plenty of time when I open up! But let me tell you now that your game is lost."

"Go on, madame. Possibly, in time, I may comprehend what you are driving at."

"Well, I will come right to the point. Mr. Haas, I propose to let you out of this Tift affair."

"You are very kind," said the lawyer, in a suave manner, although he shifted uneasily in his chair.

"Not through kindness; only to save trouble. I am going to give you an opportunity to confess."

"Madame, my time is up."

"Very well, sir; if you refuse the chance that I offer you to get out of this affair before it is too late, I shall be compelled to call in an officer, and one is within hearing of my voice at this moment."

The lawyer betrayed a little uneasiness and asked:

"Dare you charge that I have been guilty of anything requiring the services of an officer?"

"Certainly I do! I charge that you have been guilty of things that will send you to prison for a long term of years, and I can prove my charges. And I will tell you, furthermore, that you will have for company Mrs. Fountain and her husband."

"Madame," said the lawyer, placatingly, "your conduct is so remarkable that I will postpone all other engagements and listen to your ridiculous declarations."

"I thought you would," came the quiet answer. "And now we will get right down to business."

"Well, go ahead."

"You drew up a will for Raymond Tift?"

"I did nothing of the sort."

"This is denial number one. It will be an admission before we part."

"Never!"

"Oh, wait and see! You know Mr. Tift married Agnes Pratt?"

"He did nothing of the kind."

"Denial number two. You have the proof that he did not?"

"I have."

"The proof that can be produced in court."

"Certainly. The whole marriage scheme was a forgery."

"Ah, I see! You have an affidavit from the clerk of the hotel?"

"I have."

"He never signed the marriage certificate?"

"No."

"He never saw such a marriage?"

"Never!"

"And he has made an affidavit to that effect?"

"He has."

The woman smiled and said:

"Your game was well played; but you did not complete it. You did not cover your tracks."

"What do you mean, madame?"

"I mean that the clerk who witnessed the marriage never signed the affidavit. You say you can produce it; but the wretch who personated the clerk dare not show up in court. That is just what I mean, sir."

The lawyer's whole manner changed. He fell out, as the saying goes. He became weak at once; but he said:

"What nonsense!"

"Oh, it's not nonsense, and you know it! You would never dare to produce your witness in court, and you would not dare to produce the man who personated the clergyman."

The lawyer's face was a study at that moment; it told a tale, and he at once began to hedge. He said:

"Madame, do I understand you to insinuate that I hold affidavits made by people who personated the parties who are supposed to have signed the papers?"

"Yes; I not only insinuate it, but I now make a direct charge to that effect."

"This is a serious charge, madame."

"I know it; but I can prove my charges by producing the original people—the people who should have signed to make those papers valid. I can prove the marriage did take place by the clergyman who performed the ceremony and the clerk who witnessed it."

There followed a moment's silence, and then the lawyer said:

"If you can do this it changes the whole aspect of affairs."

"Then how about your agency in the affair?"

"I do not admit, madame, that your charges are true. I do not admit that the signatures to the affidavits are forgeries; but even if they are I have nothing to fear."

"Why haven't you?"

"When parties come here to sign affidavits, and they swear to be the persons indicated and are identified, I am compelled to take their signatures. So, you see, I have nothing whatever to fear."

"Oh, you are very innocent! But I can prove other facts. I can prove that you procured the men who did the personating; I can prove that you put up the whole job."

"Madame, if you make these charges seriously you are crazy."

"I do make them seriously, and you will confess their truth to me, or you will go to jail and disprove them before a jury. But I know you can not disprove them, and consequently you will confess."

The lawyer squirmed in his chair, and at that moment he wished Mrs. Fountain was not present.

"Well, madame, I would like to postpone this interview for an hour or two, if you will kindly consent."

"No need to postpone matters. You can not get away. Detectives are on your track: you are constantly watched."

"I do not wish to get away. I desire to consult with the parties who brought the men here whom you say personated others."

"Very well," said Mademoiselle Lucie, rising from her chair; "I will return here in an hour, and if you are not here when I return detectives will be on your track to seize you."

The mademoiselle left the office, and Mrs. Fountain, who had heard every word of the conversation, entered the room.

"Well, Mrs. Fountain," said the lawyer, "I suppose you overheard our little talk?"

"I did."

"What do you think about it?"

"That woman is a devil!"

"She has run us down, that is sure. Yes, madame, as a lawyer I tell you the jig is up. What will you do?"

"The woman is to return in an hour?"

"Yes."

"I will meet her," said Mrs. Fountain.

CHAPTER XXIX.

AN hour later Mademoiselle Lucie appeared at the lawyer's office. Haas was not in. A woman, closely veiled, occupied the chair the lawyer had sat in during their interview.

"Is Mr. Haas in?" asked the mademoiselle.

"No," came the answer; and Mrs. Fountain raised her veil and added: "I am here to meet you, madame. Do you recognize me?"

"Yes; you are Mrs. Fountain."

"I am Mrs. Fountain. I came here to see Mr. Haas. I have just made certain discoveries that caused me to desire an interview with you. I was fortunate in coming here at this time, as the lawyer told me you had been here and that you were to return; so I am here to meet you."

The mademoiselle was somewhat puzzled. She did not understand this move, and made no answer.

"I am glad to meet you," said Mrs. Fountain, pleasantly. "I desire to ask you where Agnes Tift is?"

The mademoiselle was still more puzzled. She did not answer for a moment, and then she said, slowly:

"That's a strange question to come from you, madame."

"How so?"

"It is a question that I should put to you."

"It is a question I can not answer. I am anxious to meet my sister-in-law."

"Your sister-in-law?" repeated the mademoiselle in a tone of surprise.

"Yes, my sister-in-law. Are you not her friend?"

"I am."

"Can I talk freely to you?"

"As freely as you would to your sister-in-law, madame."

"You think I am a wicked woman, I suppose?"

"I did think so, madame."

"Have you changed your mind?"

"There has come to me a suggestion that I may have been mistaken."

"To what do you owe the suggestion?"

"To the fact that you asked for Mrs. Tift, your sister-in-law."

"Well, I now have a confession to make."

"Indeed?"

"Yes; and I will now tell you why I wished to see my sister-in-law. I am satisfied she is really Mrs. Tift, and the moment I reached that conclusion I was prepared to recognize her."

"This is indeed a surprise!" exclaimed the mademoiselle.

"I presume it is. But I have a full explanation to offer. I did believe the woman to be an impostor; but I am now convinced she is an honest woman."

The mademoiselle was not prepared for the startling explanation that followed. Mrs. Fountain went on and said:

"The man who is my husband is alone responsible for all the wickedness that has been perpetrated. That man really deceived me; and what is more—I confess it with a broken heart—I have made another terrible discovery; yes, I have absolute proof that my husband is a villain of the deepest dye. Oh, how I loved that man! But now I loathe him!"

Mrs. Fountain spoke in tones of energetic sincerity. The mademoiselle said nothing. She only listened in bewilderment. She believed that Mrs. Fountain was honest in her avowal of contrition for the part she had taken in the affair and was anxious to make amends; yet a suspicion entered the mademoiselle's mind that a terrible crime had been committed, and she said:

"Mrs. Fountain, if any harm has come to Agnes Tift, your confession will not aid you."

"As far as I know, no harm has come to Agnes. I discern what you suspect; but you can dismiss your suspicion. I am not up to any scheme, and I will tell you something that will satisfy you: Raymond Tift lives, loves his wife, and he will come forth and vindicate her."

"I know that, madame."

"I tell you my husband is a scoundrel. He is at the bottom of this whole affair; but he shall be unmasked."

"Where is Agnes, madame?"

"On my honor, I don't know; but I suspect that she is in the custody of my husband."

"Please explain more fully."

"I will."

Mrs. Fountain told a story in which she managed to make herself figure as a deceived and honest woman; and then she told how she had discovered that her husband had brought the girl to his own house, ostensibly to force her to a confession, or, in the way of a compromise, to own up the truth. She then told how she had come to the conclusion that the girl was really her brother's wife; how her husband stormed and raged when she dared make the admission, and how, subsequently, he had stolen the girl from the house, and how she had followed him up and made the discoveries which convinced her that Andrew Fountain was a villain. She closed with this statement:

"The moment I learned that he was false to me I ceased to love him and determined to save Agnes Tift, and I am here to proffer you my aid in recovering her from his hands. That accomplished, I will bring forth proof of her being the wife of Raymond Tift."

"How will you do that, Mrs. Fountain?"

"I will bring forth the proof from the lips of her husband," was the answer.

The mademoiselle was thoughtful for a moment, and finally she said:

"You say you can bring proof from the lips of Raymond Tift?"

"I can."

"Then how is it you believed the girl to be an impostor?"

"Have I not told you that my husband was at the bottom of the whole affair? He deceived me as he deceived others."

The mademoiselle was desirous of closing the interview at this point, as she wanted to think over this new development in the situation; so, after arranging to meet Mrs. Fountain toward evening, she took her departure. Her head was in a whirl as she descended to the street, and she muttered:

"Well, well! This is a remarkable *dénouement* indeed, and I have certainly brought these wicked people to terms."

The mademoiselle was walking along slowly, engrossed in thought, when suddenly Jerry Mack appeared at her side.

"I was wishing I could meet you," he said.

"Why, has anything of importance occurred?"

"I have tracked that man Fountain."

"Indeed?"

"Yes; and if the woman is in his custody we must lose no time in rescuing her, for the place of her captivity is loathsome to any respectable person."

The mademoiselle then told of her meeting with Mrs. Fountain, and all that had occurred. The detective listened with eager interest, and when she had concluded, he said:

"We must move at once: that man is in that house at this moment."

"What warrant have we to enter that house?"

"I have arranged for that."

"Then let us go at once."

Jerry and the mademoiselle proceeded to a house on a well-known

street, once famous as a street lined with residences occupied by questionable characters, and when they arrived in front of the place the mademoiselle asked:

"What shall we do now?"

A moment the detective meditated, and then said:

"We are moving against people who are under the shadow of a crime, and they will not dare protest if we violate the law in the interest of justice. We will have them at our mercy."

"That is true."

"We will take decided steps."

"I think we are safe in doing so."

The detective opened up a plan to the mademoiselle, and they settled upon very decided arrangements; and then the mademoiselle walked away up street, and the detective descended to the basement door of the house. He opened the door and entered, and walking back to the kitchen, beheld a colored cook. The woman was startled at the detective's sudden intrusion; but he did not give her time to scream. He leaped forward, seized her, and held her so she could not move. He then showed his badge, and the colored woman moaned:

"I feared it."

"No harm will come to you if you behave yourself."

"What am yer game, sah?"

"No harm to the inmates of this house."

"Dat's good, sah."

"How many people are there in the house now?"

"Only the lady herself and dat yere man."

"What man?"

"Dunno; only he am some fren ob der missus."

"And he is here now?"

"Yes; he am in der room wid der lady."

"What lady?"

"De lady what he bring here de odder night."

Jerry had his points. He knew that he had struck the right place.

"Where is the mistress?" he asked.

"In der back parlor."

"And she is alone?"

"Yes, sah."

"All right. It's the man I'm after. You nor any one else in the house need fear unless you make a disturbance or attempt to give an alarm, in which case I will put every one in the house under arrest."

"Ise gwine ter be quiet, yer can bet. I don't like dat yer man. Ise glad yer onto him. Yes, I is!"

The detective ascended to the parlor floor. He entered the back parlor and stood face to face with the mistress. Jerry displayed his badge, and the woman turned deathly pale.

"What is your business here?" she asked.

"I am here to remove your prisoner."

"I am glad of it."

"So much the better for you. And now mind, if you keep quiet you are all right; but if you attempt to give any signals you will get into trouble. Is Andrew Fountain upstairs?"

"Yes."

"You stay in this room, and remain perfectly quiet."

"I will do as you say, sir."

The detective went to the front door and signaled, and the mademoiselle appeared.

"It's all right," he said, as he ushered her into the hall; and he quickly explained the situation, and added: "The girl is in the third floor rear room and Fountain is with her. You go up and confront them. I will be at hand when you want me."

The mademoiselle, with a smile of triumph upon her face, ascended the stairs. She took up a position opposite the door of the room the detective had indicated. She heard voices inside and put her eye to the key-hole. She beheld Agnes seated on a sofa, and on a chair opposite her was Andrew Fountain. They were talking in calm tones, and the mademoiselle heard Fountain say:

"I can not help it; I love you."

"I am very sorry," was Agnes's reply.

"You are so beautiful, Agnes!"

"You forget, sir, that I am a married woman."

"I have heard differently. I understand you are a widow. You must listen to me. I am madly in love. We will marry at once, and that will give me a legal right to appear before these Fountains and force them to do what is right."

"I can not listen to you, sir. I do not need your aid. I demand to be permitted to leave this house. To tell the truth, I distrust you."

The man's demeanor changed at once; his face became clouded, and he said, in loud tones:

"Agnes, you shall become my wife!"

"Never!" Agnes exclaimed.

"You shall, or—"

The man did not complete the sentence, for at this instant the mademoiselle entered the room.

CHAPTER XXX.

ANDREW FOUNTAIN gazed at the mademoiselle in blank astonishment, and Agnes uttered a cry of delight, and then exclaimed:

"I am saved at last!"

"Who are you?" demanded Fountain; "and how dare you enter this room?"

"It matters not, you scoundrel, who I am, and I am in this room by authority. Your game is up. This girl's husband lives,

and you know it. They are both victims of your nefarious schemes, and this statement I can prove by your own wife."

Agnes uttered a faint cry, and a curse fell from Andrew Fountain's lips. He made a movement as though to spring toward the mademoiselle, when she said, in a calm tone:

"Halt where you are! Do not advance toward me, or you will regret it."

"Who are you?"

"I am this lady's friend, and I am here to tell you that you are at the end of your rope. Haas has confessed; your wife has confessed."

"My wife? I have no wife!"

"It will avail you nothing to attempt to repudiate your wife, Andrew Fountain. I have been on your track long enough to know you, you villain. I command you to leave this house and go to your wife: she has something important to tell you. Yes, you have been completely unmasked. Your wife knows you now and despises you."

The man was beside himself with rage, and he advanced toward the mademoiselle menacingly; but at that instant Jerry Mack entered the room and confronted him, saying:

"Hold on, mister; go slow!"

"What does this mean? It is a base conspiracy, and I will summon the police!" roared Fountain.

"You will summon no one," said the detective, showing his badge.

"Well, what does this mean?"

"It means that if you are smart you will flit—you will get out of New York while you have the chance, for if Raymond Tift once sets eyes on you it will go hard with you."

"I will find out what all this means," said Fountain.

He seized his hat and hurried from the house. He proceeded direct to his own house; but his wife was not there to receive him.

Explanations between Agnes and the mademoiselle followed; and later Mrs. Tift, happy and hopeful, was taken to the mademoiselle's apartment. The detective and Mademoiselle Lucie went to the lawyer's office. As they entered the room they were met by Mrs. Fountain, and the mademoiselle said:

"She is safe! We have got her!"

Mrs. Fountain, without saying a word, opened the door of an adjoining room, and a young man, pale but handsome, stepped forth.

"Permit me to introduce to you my brother, Raymond Tift," she said.

It was not necessary that Mrs. Fountain should have named the identity of the young man. The mademoiselle recognized him at a glance from his photograph.

"To this lady, Raymond, you owe all," said Mrs. Fountain.

Raymond would have spoken, but his emotions overcame him. Explanations followed.

Mrs. Fountain had gone to the private house in the country where her brother had been confined a prisoner—a prisoner in one of his own houses. She made it appear that her husband was responsible for his confinement, and further explained that she was, to a limited extent only, guilty, insomuch as she was influenced by her husband. Those who heard her story had their own opinions, however, about her responsibility in the conspiracy. She made a further confession to her brother, who, while possibly not absolving her from all blame in the matter, had determined to seem to accept her statements as true.

To our readers we will say that Raymond Tift had been inveigled and incarcerated by Andrew Fountain, who had worked a skillful game; and what his ultimate intentions were as concerned his victim will never be known.

After the explanations, the mademoiselle said to Raymond Tift:

"Your wife awaits you at my house."

The two proceeded to the mademoiselle's rooms, and on the way she fully related to Raymond all that had occurred, and he said:

"I will not attempt to express my gratitude now, but soon I shall do so, and in a substantial manner."

On arriving at her home the mademoiselle entered in advance of Raymond. She found Agnes waiting in eager expectancy.

"Brace up now and be strong!" the mademoiselle whispered.

"He is here!" cried the wife, as she rushed past the mademoiselle, and the next instant was clasped in the arms of her husband. The mademoiselle left them to themselves, and what passed we will not attempt to narrate.

After the departure of Mademoiselle Lucie and Raymond Tift from the lawyer's office, Mrs. Fountain proceeded to her home. She was accompanied by Jerry Mack. She did not dare face her husband alone. She found him awaiting her.

"You here at last?" he cried.

Explanations followed, and indeed it was a stormy scene that ensued. Finally Fountain became so enraged that he rushed at his wife as though he meant to do her bodily harm, and at that instant the detective sprang into the room and with a well-directed blow felled the desperate man to the floor.

Later Mrs. Fountain secured a divorce, and her husband put in no answer to her complaint. He was given a sum of money, with the stipulation that he go abroad and never return again to New York. Family reasons alone permitted his escape.

A week following the incidents we have narrated, Jerry Mack appeared at the elegant mansion of the Tifts—which had formerly been the home of the Fountains. Husband and wife were making preparations to go abroad. The detective met Mademoiselle Lucie in the parlor, and his words filled her heart with delight, for he said:

"I have found our man."

When Mr. and Mrs. Tift sailed for Europe, Mademoiselle Lucie accompanied them, having in her possession the papers to establish her own rights; and we will add, in conclusion, that she succeeded.