NYPL RESEARCH LIBRARIES
3 3433 07605461 2

UNSEEN HANDS

BY
ROBERT ORR CHEPPERFIELD

Digitized by Google
Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Digitized by Google
Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

UNSEEN HANDS

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

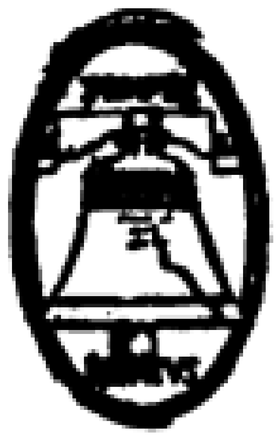
UNSEEN HANDS

BY

ROBERT ORR CHIPPERFIELD, pseud. of

Author of "The Second Bullet"

O Strander (Isabel ... n ...)



L.C.

NEW YORK

ROBERT M. McBRIDE & CO.

1920

40

Digitized by Google

Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Copyright, 1920, by
ROBERT M. MCBRIDE & CO.

THE NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY
790168

Printed in the
United States of America

Published, June, 1920

Digitized by Google
Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	TERROR	1
II.	THE UNSEEN HAND	13
III.	WHO KNEW?	23
IV.	BARRY ODELL TAKES HOLD	37
V.	"I WISH IT HAD BEEN YOU"	50
VI.	BLOODY HANDS	62
VII.	"WATCH THEIR EYES"	75
VIII.	THE NEEDLE	87
IX.	DOCTOR MCCUTCHEN'S THEORY	100
X.	IN THE PARROT'S CAGE	112
XI.	THE VOICE	128
XII.	THE ROOM WITH THE BROKEN WINDOW	141
XIII.	BEHIND LOCKED DOORS	153
XIV.	ESCAPE	166
XV.	WHAT RANNIE KNEW	181
XVI.	MISS RISBY SPEAKS	194
XVII.	FARLEY DREW'S GAME	208
XVIII.	"READY TO ANYONE'S HAND"	221
XIX.	AN UNDERWORLD PHOENIX	234
XX.	THE TRYST	248
XXI.	THE THIRD GENERATION	260
XXII.	THE FINAL CLUE	272
XXIII.	THE TRAP	284
XXIV.	FOLDED HANDS	293

Digitized by Google

Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

UNSEEN HANDS

CHAPTER I

TERROR

IT was a week since Julian Chalmers's tragic young death and the fourth day after the funeral, and yet the odor of dying flowers and the chill gloom which only so mournful a function can radiate seemed still to cling about the spacious room. It bore an air of unfamiliarity, too, which was due in part to the fact that the massive old furniture had not been replaced with the exactitude which its long-established position warranted.

The little faded woman who appeared noiselessly on the threshold and peered within much as a mouse might have done seemed at once to sense the general atmosphere and perceive its source. She entered, and as a light footfall sounded upon the stairs she laid her slender arms about a huge old arm chair and strove with all her frail strength to move it toward the table.

"Oh, Aunt Effie, what are you doing?" The words were more an awestruck exclamation than a question, and a young girl halted in the doorway as had the older woman at first. She was small and lithe; a dark, gypsy-like

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

creature who would have been pretty in other circumstances. Now her big soft eyes were deeply encircled, and her clear dark skin chalkily pallid.

"Peters and Gerda have been sadly careless in rearranging the room, dear. I suppose I must not scold them at—at such a time, but I should have seen to it myself." The little lady's voice was low and as colorless as her personality. "You know your stepfather always likes this chair nearer the light."

"Well, do let Peters attend to it later and come into the dining-room!" It was not impatience but entreaty which sounded in the seemingly impulsive cry. "It's—it's simply horrible in here! Haven't father and the boys come down yet? Rannie's always late!"

"You have no patience with his infirmity, Nan, child," her aunt responded in gentle reproof as she followed the girl into the brilliantly lighted dining-room, where at one end a round table had been laid for six. "Remember he cannot run up and down the stairs as quickly as you."

"Oh, I did not mean to be unkind!" Nan Chalmers spoke in quick remorse, and her eyes darkened as she added in a half whisper, "We should none of us be unkind to each other, should we? We can not tell which will be the next to be taken!"

"It is the Lord's will." Miss Effie's soft, resigned voice was lost in the clear, flippant tones of a young man and the deep rumble of that of an older one as Richard Lorne and his eldest living step-son entered the room together.

"Remember, Eugene, not to speak of this to your aunt—" Lorne broke off abruptly as he caught sight of Miss Effie standing beside the cold hearth.

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"Oh, Aunt Effie knows as well as we do that things always run in three's," Eugene responded nonchalantly enough as he moved toward the table; but his light eyes wavered and a slight flush mounted to his sleek golden hair and receded, leaving him more pale than before. He turned to the younger sister, who was so unlike him in type, and asked with a flippancy which the quivering of his rather weak chin belied: "Why so tragic, Nan? It'll be me, not you; and the infernal jinx that is over this house will have to work quick, for next month I'll be twenty-five—"

"Silence!" His stepfather's round reddened face puffed out in anger, and his close-clipped gray mustache fairly bristled. "If you have no heart, at least preserve a semblance of decency and do not jest about—about matters which have bowed all our heads in grief!"

His tone grew husky toward the last, and his slightly prominent blue eyes filled as he turned away.

Nan laid a cool little hand over his.

"Don't mind Gene, father. He's only trying to cover up his own feelings; I know him!" She spoke with infinite tenderness; and it was evident that between the girl and her stepfather a very real affection existed. "Come, shall we wait for the other two?"

"I'm here!" A thin, high, whining voice with an indescribably sarcastic undernote in it replied to the question; and a distorted, humpbacked figure came forward. Randall, the youngest of the Chalmers children, was a boy of about eighteen, and dark like Nan, who was two years his senior; but there the resemblance ceased. Her witching charm seemed in him to be changed to a malevolent humor, and his thin lips were twisted, by past pain perhaps, into

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

a perpetually sardonic leer. In his correct, somber mourning clothes, cleverly built to conceal as much as possible of his infirmity, he nevertheless made one think irresistibly of a jester in motley as he slid sinuously into his seat at the table and made an impish grimace at his sister's face.

Richard Lorne turned to the impassive butler.

"Dinner, Peters. We shall not wait for Miss Chalmers."

Soup was almost finished before the beauty of the family appeared. Christine was twenty-two and resembled Eugene in her coloring save that her blondness was of a colder, more brilliant type, and there was no hint of weakness in her exquisite, perfectly chiseled features. She carried herself with the assured air of one conscious of her beauty; and her elaborate crêpe gown made the more simple mourning of her sister and aunt appear dowdy by comparison.

"I've been frightfully busy," she announced as she seated herself. "It's a bore to try to separate the sheep from the goats; but one simply must know whom merely to send cards to, and who must be replied to personally. Why do people send condolences, anyway?"

"Usually to be on the safe side in case they might have been remembered in the will." The cripple looked up with a shrewd twinkle in his sunken eyes.

"I hope, my dear, that you have not touched the pile of correspondence on the desk in the library." Miss Effie Meade glanced at her butterfly niece in nervous deprecation. "I have it all nicely arranged for Gene; he says that he will attend to it this evening."

Christine tossed her head.

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"I meant my own personal mail, Aunt Effie. I assure you, it's quite enough for me to take on my shoulders."

Gene opened his lips as if to retort, but evidently thought better of it and with a shrug devoted himself to his fish. The dinner progressed in silence to its close; but when Peters at a nod from Richard Lorne had placed the coffee upon the table and departed little Miss Effie glanced about and said timidly:

"We—we mustn't go on like this, you know. The—the loss of our dear ones—". She put her handkerchief for a moment to her brimming eyes. "To have my poor sister and her dear son taken from us so suddenly and with so short a space of time between is heartrending, but it is the Lord's will and we must not complain. If we go on as we have been, we shall have Peters talking to the other servants about us. We are acting as if—as if—"

"As if we were afraid!" Randall, the cripple, thrust himself forward suddenly in his chair. "Must we be hypocrites eternally? We grieve, of course, each in our own way, and that concerns only our own souls if we have any, but there is something else back in the minds of all of us and that is fear! Even you, even Dad! Why, look around the table! Aren't we each asking ourselves: 'Will I be the next? Will I be the next?' Do we *believe* it was the Lord's will?"

"This is madness!" Richard Lorne put down his coffee-cup, which he had held suspended in a shaking hand while he listened as if hypnotized to his step-son's harangue. "Let us hear no more of this, this wild raving! I believe you are losing your mind! You know that the deaths of both your mother and brother were due to perfectly natural

Digitized by Google Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

causes: accidents. If you do not still that mad tongue of yours I will have you put away!"

He strode from the room, and Randall laughed shrilly.

"You see? Can't bear to have his innermost thoughts brought to the light of day!"

But the others were not listening. Instead they were glancing about as he had bade them; and each read in the eyes of the others the nameless thing which had been locked in their own breasts for an interminable week.

In all eyes save those of their mother's sister, Miss Effie; they shone through her tears with an almost fanatical light. After a moment of silence she rose and put her arm tenderly about the cripple's shoulders.

"Come, Rannie, you are all overwrought, and the fever mustn't rise again. You know what pain it always brings. Lie on the couch in my room and let me read to you for a while."

The boy flung her off impatiently.

"Let me alone, Aunt Effie! I'm not a child, I tell you! I'm wise; wiser than all of you!"

Nevertheless, he suffered her to lead him from the room and preceded her when, on the threshold, she turned.

"You'll find the light just right, I think, over the desk, Gene," she said. "Don't work too late, dear. There are so many letters, and I can find time to help you in the morning."

As the door closed Christine began to sob hysterically.

"I'm going to get out of this dreadful house to-morrow!" she cried. "I've felt ever since p-poor Julian was found as if s-something were hanging over my h-head! I'm

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

going to Dorothy Landis's and stay; I'd go to-night if I c-could!"

"Sure, run away," Gene sneered coldly. "If it is your turn next you'd probably slip on a banana-peel or get in a taxi accident before you reached the Landis place! Stick around like a sport, but watch your step and see what our jinx has in store for you!"

"Don't say such dreadful things, Gene dear; you're almost as bad as Rannie." Nan raised her white, serious face and looked straight into his. "You know you don't believe in evil spirits any more than I do. There is no use in denying that I've felt just as Cissie has all this last week; but it may be that we are all just nervous and apt to imagine things. Why, even poor father showed it to-night when Rannie burst out like that! If we could all be as stolid and calm as—as Peters, for instance."

Gene laughed.

"The impeccable Peters is carrying a newly acquired rabbit's foot! Fact. It fell out of his pocket when he stooped to pick up Dad's cane this morning. Nobody saw it but me, and I thought best not to make any inquiries just then. I've no doubt that Marcelle has one of those little Rintintin figures concealed somewhere about her person at this moment; and Jane and Gerda must be sporting whatever their particular fetishes are, too. I'm not trying to be funny!" he added. "I'm just showing you which way the wind is blowing."

"They are stupid, ignorant things," Nan commented. "But I've heard that fear is contagious; and although I don't believe in a jinx, I do believe that our thoughts can work on the people around us for good or bad. Now, sup-

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

pose that one of us got this fear—which would be ridiculous if it were not so horrible!—and communicated it to the rest?"

"Nothing doing," Gene replied. "If a whole lot of people think the same thing it's bound to be true; not come true because they believe it, but be true from the first. You wait and see what happens next!"

Christine moaned, and regardless of her coiffure burrowed her head still deeper into her folded arms upon the table.

"If we'd try to think sanely for a minute, we'd realize how impossible any connection between mother's death and Julian's could be." Nan spoke decidedly, but her voice trembled and lowered as she mentioned those who had gone. "Dear mother ran a needle in her hand and blood-poison followed; that might happen to anyone, there is nothing strange about it."

"No, but there *was* something strange about the infection that set in and spread in spite of what the best specialists in the country could do; you heard them say that, themselves!" Gene retorted. "And I suppose it wasn't queer that when Jule's razor slipped while he was shaving it should just nick the jugular vein? Well, I'm going in and start upon those beastly letters. Thank the Lord, Aunt Effie got them sorted for me!"

"I'm going to pack!" Cissie jumped up as he departed. "Of course you won't go while Tad lives right next door and can run in and out any hour of the day, but I—"

"But you!" Nan interrupted hotly. "You want to go because the sorrowful atmosphere of this house won't be conducive to the comfort and pleasure of Farley Drew!

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Because he knows that he isn't welcomed here by any one but you and Gene! He'll probably be welcomed as your guest by the Landises; they don't know him as I do!"

"You're only a child." Cissie smoothed her crêpe draperies complacently. "What could you know of a man of the world like Farley?"

"I know that he has led Gene into all the trouble he was ever in, and poor Julian, too! That's enough for me!" Nan poured herself a cup of the cold coffee. "How you can be so stupid, Cissie!—"

But Cissie had trailed from the room, and her younger sister was left to her own thoughts.

In the smoking-room back of the library Richard Lorne was closeted with Samuel Titheredge of Titheredge, Gore & Wells, attorneys and counselors-at-law.

Samuel was as long and lean and lantern-jawed as Lorne was short and stout and round-faced; and the two had been friends since their university days thirty years before. It was with the freedom, then, of absolute camaraderie that the lawyer advised his client.

"Dick, don't be an ass! Go to the authorities with what, I should like to know? Sad as the affair is, I can't see that there is anything strange about it. It isn't at all unusual for two members of one family to die of different causes within a month of each other. Buck up, and if there is anything left in your private cellar take a swig of it before you go to bed. Why, man, there isn't even a coincidence in the affair! If you take such a cock-and-bull story to Headquarters, do you know what will happen? You'll get a lot of derisive notoriety that you're not looking for; and

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

afterward when somebody proposes coming to you with a nice tidy investment, somebody else will tap his forehead significantly and suggest another broker!"

"But I say that there is a coincidence, Sam," Lorne retorted doggedly. "I may be an ass; but I've lived with this thing in my mind ever since the poor boy was discovered lying there dead in the bathroom, and I've had time to think it over. The deaths were both on the face of them the result of accidents; but they might have been deliberately designed to *appear* as accidents. Do you get me? That needle which pierced my poor wife's hand might have been doctored beforehand; and anyone knowing the state of Julian's mind might have made a sudden noise behind him at a critical moment when the razor was near the artery. It would have taken a devilish clever mind—"

"Or an insane one." The attorney uncrossed his long legs and added casually: "Your theory presupposes, then, that it was an inside job?"

For a long moment the two men stared at each other; and then Samuel with a shrug settled back in his chair once more.

"You see, Dick, you're going nutty about this thing. Just get the poor lad's estate in order and I'll have the necessary papers ready for you to sign. Then go away somewhere; try to amuse yourself and forget."

"You have the papers ready to-morrow morning, then. I have a complete statement and accounting for every penny that his mother left him already prepared; I was going to turn it over to him, in any event." Lorne paused and added: "I suppose if another coincidence of the same kind occurs in this family within a short time and doesn't involve

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

me as the central figure, I shall be able to convince you that there is something in my hallucination, after all."

"I should be sorry to hear of such an occurrence," the attorney responded slowly. "But if it should happen I—yes, I'm inclined to think that I might be able to take it a bit more seriously than I can at present. If you had a single clue, a single shred of evidence to support your crazy idea—"

He paused as Lorne held up a warning hand. Steps were approaching over the bare library-floor, and the inevitable knock upon the connecting door was followed by a cough of deprecation.

"Come in, Gene," Lorne called resignedly.

"It's about one of these con—one of these letters of condolence, sir." Gene hastened to correct himself, and with a far greater respect than he exhibited toward his stepfather in private. He meant to appear always at his best before the attorney who held the family fortunes, if not in his grasp, at least under his supervision. "It's from a woman—er—the stationery is not quite like that used by any of our acquaintances, and I can't make out the signature—'Mabelle' something."

"Let me see it!" Lorne demanded with an almost unprecedented irascibility in his tones. Gene passed over the table a flamboyant lavender envelope, and did not betray by a flutter of his downcast yellow eyelashes that he had observed not only his stepfather's sudden agitation but the attorney's start of surprise.

"I'll reply to this one; I see it is addressed to me—" Lorne was beginning when a terrific crash in the library made him start from his chair.

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"Why, it's the portrait! The portrait of grandfather that hangs directly over the desk where I've been at work! It must weigh tons!" Gene had wheeled about, and his squeal of terror died in his throat as he turned again to face the other two, his own countenance convulsed with horror at the thought he could not utter.

For a moment they stood spellbound and then leaped past him and through the open door. The life-sized portrait with its massive gilt frame had crashed down over the desk and the space where Gene had been sitting but a minute before, splintering the heavy chair to matchwood.

"If Gene had not come to us with that letter just when he did—". Samuel paused.

"The third coincidence would be complete," Lorne finished for him. "He would have been crushed to atoms. Beginning to believe in my crazy idea a little bit, Sam? Beginning to see that there is some damnable reason for it all?"

"I'm willing now to admit the coincidence, Dick," the attorney said cautiously. "But the legal mind is not adapted to ghost-hunting; and I'd like to address your attention to the strands of wire cable which held the picture to the wall. They have been hacked almost through!"

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

CHAPTER II

RICHARD LORNE bent forward, his stout knees shaking beneath him, and examined the cable-ends where they protruded from just under the edge of the frame. The tips of the sundered steel strands glittered as if burnished, and some had been turned inward from the force of the blows which had parted them.

He glanced up at the inscrutable face of his companion. "What devil's work has been going on in this house!" He spoke in an awestruck whisper.

For answer the attorney merely touched his finger suggestively to his closed lips with a scarcely perceptible shake of his head as Gene hastened toward them.

"Dad!" The young man's face was working convulsively. "That didn't just happen! It couldn't! Why, it doesn't seem as though it fell at all, but as though something pulled it down over the place where I'd been working only a minute before. Look at the wall!"

The two older men raised their eyes and saw a number of small, deep, round holes spaced at regular intervals which roughly outlined the size and shape of the portrait, and then glancing down at the upturned back of the fallen picture beheld a row of stout iron stakes, equally spaced driven outward from the under part of the frame.

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"That's a mere detail," Samuel commented. "Evidently the person who hung the portrait did not put any too much faith in the strength of the stakes driven into the wall; and wisely, seeing what has occurred, he supplemented them by the steel cable which has just parted, as you see. You had a narrow escape, then, Eugene; but it was sheer accident—"

He was interrupted by a patter of little silken mules upon the stairs, and in another moment Cissie and Nan rushed into the room and paused, rooted to the spot at sight of the fallen picture. Both were clad in kimonos, and with the golden curls and straight, fine, black hair flowing about their shoulders and mingling as they clung instinctively to each other, they looked like little children. It was Nan who first drew away from her sister's tense embrace. She could see only her father and the attorney, for Gene stood behind them, and as she advanced the childish look left her face.

"Where is my brother?" Her tone rang with tragic grief through the room. "Is he there, beneath that—?"

"Nan!" All the good in the boy's weak face shone forth as he sprang forward and caught her in his arms. "I'm safe! I missed it by a fraction of a minute!"

"How did it happen?" Cissie's voice rose shrilly, but before anybody could reply a faint cry came from the doorway behind her.

"Gene! You are hurt! Something has happened!"

Looking more mouselike than ever with her gray hair lying in soft folds about her face and her slender figure encased in a drab dressing-gown, Miss Meade glided into the room.

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"No, I'm not hurt, Aunt Effie. I had just gone to ask Dad about one of the letters when the portrait fell," Gene explained as she stood swaying, her thin, delicate hand gripping his arm until the fingers almost disappeared in the folds of his coatsleeve. "Mr. Titheredge says it was a sheer accident, but after what Rannie said at dinner to-night; after we know how we've all felt since Jule—" He broke off and added: "Ouch! Aunt Effie, you hurt!"

She removed her hand from his arm and repeated mechanically in a dazed fashion:

"You had gone to ask your stepfather about one of the letters?"

"Yes. These condolence things, you know. But I'm sure it couldn't have been an accident! Why should that one picture in all this house have fallen just at the moment when I left the desk? I'd been sitting there for more than an hour."

"What a merciful blessing that you escaped!" Miss Effie spoke in a low tone, then added quickly with a sharper note: "But I—it was I who asked you to reply to the letters, and suggested that you use the library desk here! I even arranged the light for you! Had you been killed it would have been my fault!"

"Come, Miss Meade, that's all nonsense!" Samuel Titheredge stepped forward. "No one can foresee accidents; and that portrait has hung there more than twenty years without falling. In any event it is all right; Gene wasn't hurt, and you and the girls had better go back to bed and try to forget all about it."

As if conscious for the first time of their appearance she

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

glanced down shrinkingly at her own attire and then turned to where Nan and Cissie stood.

"Mr. Titheredge is right; let us go back to our rooms. I—I should never have forgiven myself if anything had happened to Gene!"

When she and the girls had taken their departure the attorney turned to the white-faced young man.

"You, too, Gene. No use trying to clear up this mess to-night, and your Dad and I have some business matters still to talk over. You've had a bad shock and you must try to get a sound night's rest."

"Do you suppose I could sleep?" Gene turned on him hotly. "You and Dad may be blind, but I tell you I know there is something horribly wrong! We are dying one by one, and I was scheduled to be the third! There was no coincidence about any of it. Someone is trying deliberately to do us all to death, someone who knows what we are doing from hour to hour!" His voice had risen to a shrill scream. "How can you shut your eyes?"

Titheredge compressed his lips and nudged Lorne, who glanced at him and then spoke with sudden sternness:

"Eugene, you are hysterical! You are behaving like a child! This matter of the fall of the portrait will be thoroughly investigated to-morrow, but meanwhile you must try to pull yourself together. Things will look different to you in the morning. Go on up to bed like a good chap, and let Mr. Titheredge and me finish our conference."

Gene went shakily from the room and they heard him ascending the steep, old-fashioned staircase. Waiting until his footsteps had ceased with the thud of a closing door, Lorne turned to his companion.

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"Nevertheless, Sam, the boy is dead right! There is something horribly sinister back of the whole thing, and it is an insult to even his intelligence to try to convince him of the fallacy of mere coincidence. I'm not going to wait until morning and perhaps find some other member of the family dead in bed! At the risk of the derisive notoriety you were talking about a little while ago I'm going to have the authorities in here now!"

"I agree with you that it looks very much as if some human agency has been at work. We can at least be certain of it in this last case, with the evidence of the cut cable; but it is after midnight, and I don't believe another attempt will be made to-night." The attorney's calm, sane voice fell upon the other's ears like a dash of cold water. "Besides, if you call up now you'll have a mob of heavy-footed, matter-of-fact plainclothesmen in here who wouldn't be able to comprehend your almost superstitious apprehension and who would obliterate any clue which may remain. There is just one lad in the Homicide Bureau at Headquarters who could understand your point of view and carry out the investigation with the necessary tact and discretion if we are to avoid undue notoriety, and that is Barry Odell. I'll stay here to-night with you and keep guard if you think it necessary, turn and turn about; and in the morning we'll go down to Headquarters. I'll have a word with the Commissioner, and we'll bring young Odell back with us."

Agitated as he was, Lorne saw the wisdom of the attorney's advice and accepted it. After a further examination of the fallen portrait they turned out the lights and went upstairs. Samuel elected to share his friend's room;

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

but sleep did not come and they were still discussing the extraordinary chain of tragic events when Lorne stopped in the middle of a sentence and held up a warning hand.

"Did you hear that?" he whispered after a moment.

"What? Don't let your nerves run away with you, old man."

"Nerves nothing! Don't speak aloud! I'm sure I heard a step out in the hall."

"Well, I didn't, and I've keener ears than you," retorted Titheredge.

Lorne padded softly to the door and listened for a space of several minutes, then turned away with a sigh of relief.

"I guess I must have been mistaken. I'll go to pieces myself, like Gene, if I'm not careful. God! I wish this night would end, and we could get hold of that young fellow you spoke of! Perhaps it would be better, though, to go to some private detective agency and avoid the police."

"And have your home overrun with operatives, every member of your household shadowed and their affairs investigated; and nothing to show for it but a bill as long as a Japanese letter?" Titheredge demanded contemptuously. "Use your head, Dick! I wouldn't recommend this young—"

He paused, silenced by a swift gesture from his companion.

"Listen! Do you hear it—that grating, gnawing sound?" It was a cool September night and the windows were open, but the sweat was pouring down Lorne's chubby countenance. He padded to the door as before, then beckoned insistently. "Come over here! Don't you dare pretend—"

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

With an expression of boredom the attorney rose and tiptoed across the room. He placed his ear to the keyhole for a minute and then straightened with a shrug.

"Of course I hear it. Mice or even rats in the walls; you can't drive them out of an old house like this. That's probably what you heard before." He resumed his seat. "You can hear all sorts of noises at night if you only listen for them."

"I suppose so," Lorne muttered somewhat doubtfully as he went back to his chair. "I could have sworn, though, that it sounded louder than any rat."

"As I was saying when you interrupted"—Titheredge ignored the last remark—"I would not have recommended Barry Odell to you if I didn't know all about him and his capabilities. He's young still, about twenty-eight or thirty; but I've watched his work on a couple of murder cases, and I tell you he will go far."

Lorne stirred uneasily in his chair.

"Murder! That's rather a strong word, isn't it? We don't actually know yet that those wires were severed; and we don't want the affair treated as an ordinary murder, or series of them. It's the devilish ingenuity of the whole thing that staggers me, Sam." He drummed on the arms of his chair. "If they hadn't come so rapidly, one after the other within the month, any sane person would have sworn they were each the result of pure accident! How could my poor wife have been poisoned before my very eyes? And Julian; what terrible influence could have made him slash his throat in just that vital spot? It would have been unbelievable except for the damning evidence of those cut wires!"

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"I thought you just said that we did not know they were actually cut," the attorney put in quietly.

"D—n it, I don't know what to think!" exploded the harassed little man. "When we discuss it the whole thing seems wildly impossible; and yet I feel it, the entire family does! Can you ask a police detective to go on that?"

"You can ask Barry Odell to start at the ends of those severed picture-wires and be certain that he will finish the job, no matter where the trail leads him—now, what's the matter? Got a listening-spell on again?"

For Richard Lorne's rotund form had tensed, and his ear was turned to the door. After a moment he relaxed with a grunt.

"Thought I heard footsteps again." He rose. "Let's go to bed and try to get a wink of sleep. If I keep on hearing things I'll be a wreck to-morrow; and I want to have all my wits about me, if I ever had in my life!"

Morning dawned with a hint of autumnal frost in the air, and Lorne shook his peacefully slumbering companion.

"It's seven o'clock, Sam. I just rang and told Peters to have breakfast on the table in ten minutes, and to order a taxi. For heaven's sake, let's get on downtown and interview your man!"

"Eh?" Titheredge stretched his long, lanky frame. "With you in a minute, Dick."

His host was dressed first and nervously consulted the clock on the bed-stand.

"Eight minutes past," he announced. "I'll go on down ahead, old man, and see if breakfast is ready."

He closed the door after him, and the attorney heard his footsteps die away down the hall. Then all at once there

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

came a hideous, sickening crash, and the sound of a heavy body hurtling down the stairs.

Collarless, Samuel Titheredge tore open the door and rushed to the head of the stairs. Other doors were opening, and voices in which Gene's nervous tones mingled with higher feminine ones in a chorus of startled cries; but the attorney was oblivious to them. His gaze traveled from the top step of the stairs, which had collapsed like cardboard, to the bottom, where a huddled figure lay.

Leaping down, he raised the head of his friend and called sharply:

"Peters!"

"Sir?" The white, frightened face of the butler peered from the dining-room door.

"Bring some water, quickly! Mr. Lorne has fallen down the stairs."

The ice in the glass tinkled violently as Peters obeyed, and the attorney watched his face closely as he bent over his unconscious master.

"Is—is he hurt bad, sir?" The butler clutched the newel post as he straightened his shaking knees.

"I don't know yet. How is it that you did not hear the sound of his fall and come to his assistance?" He fairly shot the question at Peters, and the latter responded haltingly:

"I didn't hear anything, sir; I was in the back pantry." A slight flush came into his pale cheeks. "I didn't know anything was wrong until you called me."

"Well, go and telephone for the doctor at once." Titheredge passed over the palpable lie. "Then come back here and help me lift him to the couch in the library."

Digitized by Google Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

The family, in various stages of disarray, had appeared at the top of the staircase and were demanding in frightened accents what had happened, but Titheredge had ears for none of them as they rushed down and crowded about. Lorne was breathing stertorously, and under the shock of icy water dashed into his face he opened his eyes at last.

"I say, what—". The sentence ended in a groan as he strove to sit up and fell back again. "My arm!"

Titheredge noticed then that his left arm was crumpled and twisted under him, and when they lifted him and bore him to the couch it swung limp and useless at his side.

He opened his eyes once more as the attorney bent over him and the others gathered about.

"The stairs," he whispered faintly. "The top one collapsed as I pressed my weight on it. You remember the noise I heard last night?"

Titheredge nodded briefly, then turned to the others.

"Move back, please, all of you, and give him air." As they obeyed he asked: "Feel better now, Dick?"

"Yes. My side hurts a little when I breathe, and that arm's broken, I think; but I'm lucky not to have been killed." In a whisper once more he added: "I'm all right. Don't wait here a minute longer. Go and get your Barry Odell."

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

CHAPTER III

"WHERE'S that taxi?" Titheredge demanded of Peters in the hall. The latter stood near the vestibule talking with two workmen, who, in overalls and with their tool-kits slung over their arms, turned lowering faces toward him.

"Taxi, sir?" Peters started in surprise and then opening the door he peered out. "Just drawing up at the curb, sir. Now then, you two, move one side there and let the gentleman pass."

"Who are these men?" Titheredge paused.

Peters hesitated for a moment and seemed to turn a shade more pale.

"They say they were sent for to do a bit of carpentering, sir, but I tell them there must have been some mistake; they've got the wrong address I imagine, sir."

"Nothin' doin'!" The burlier of the two men stepped forward determinedly. "Someone telephoned to the boss yesterday to send a couple of us up here at half-past seven sharp this morning to hang a big picture; said it would have to be spiked to the wall. We're paid for our time."

The attorney turned and looked searchingly at the cowering butler before addressing the truculent workman.

"There's no mistake; but the work can't be done now.

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

What's it worth to you to go away and come back just after the noon hour to do the job?"

The two consulted together and sulkily named their price. As the attorney paid them, he asked:

"Who is your boss? Where is his shop?"

"Bill Kenny, sir." The generous tip which Titheredge had added to the sum demanded had evidently had a mollifying effect. "His place is over on Eighth Avenue, near Fiftieth. Thank you, sir. We'll be back right after noon."

They touched their caps and started down the hall toward the servants' staircase which led to the tradesman's entrance, and the attorney turned to speak to Peters; but that wily individual had disappeared, and after a moment Titheredge opened the door and started thoughtfully down the steps. He had caught the butler in two deliberate lies within the space of an hour, but he gave the matter little thought. All the way downtown to Police Headquarters his mind was busied with one problem. Who had telephoned from that house to the shop on the previous day? Who had known that the picture was going to fall?

The Police Commissioner had not yet reached his office, but a brief interview with his secretary put one of the smaller examination rooms at his disposal, where the attorney was joined shortly by a brisk, smiling young man whose clean-cut features and almost boyishness of manner gave no hint of the police department. His forehead was broad, with just the hint of a scar above one eyebrow; and the merry blue eyes themselves as well as the high cheekbones beneath betokened his ancestry as much as his name proclaimed it.

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"Good morning, Mr. Titheredge. Did you want to see me?"

"I do, Sergeant; you are the only man who can help me out. Moreover, I know that the case I've got for you—if it is a case at all—will be one after your own heart."

They shook hands; and as the attorney seated himself Sergeant Barry Odell asked with a canny twinkle in his eye:

"A matter for the Homicide Bureau and you're not sure whether it is a case or not? No trace of the body, then?"

"The bodies were there all right," Titheredge responded grimly. "But there was no thought of foul play until last night. You see, I have a client in whose family two deaths have occurred within the past month, but they were thought to have been the result of accident; separate accidents of a widely different nature. Now we have reason to believe that they were brought about in some mysterious manner by an unknown person who seems determined to kill off the entire family. These people have been friends of mine for years as well as clients, and as far as I know they haven't an enemy in the world. We haven't a sign of proof and no clue except some pieces of clipped wire. Could I go to any other man in the department but you with such a story and not be a laughing-stock?"

Odell smiled, but his face grew serious as he replied:

"I don't know, sir, but I've been wondering myself why we hadn't seen Mr. Lorne down here before this."

"You!" Titheredge's imperturbability deserted him, and he stared. "What on earth do you know about it?"

"Only what I've read in the papers, but when I saw about that young fellow cutting his throat by accident and just in the place where it would do the most good—or harm

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

—and that he was a son of the lady who'd died not a month before from a needle-thrust in her hand I thought there was something mighty queer about it all." Odell shrugged. "However, nothing came to the Bureau about it, and it's not up to us to go out looking for trouble. Tell me about it from the beginning, Mr. Titheredge."

"There's little to tell about the two cases if you remember the newspaper accounts, and I would rather have you get the details from the members of the family themselves; but I'll tell you a little about them before we start." The attorney settled forward in his chair. "Mrs. Lorne was the widow of Halsey Chalmers, the rich broker, when she married Richard Lorne five years ago. She had five children all practically grown up except the youngest boy, a hunchback. Her spinster sister, Miss Effie Meade, two or three years her senior, had always lived with her since her first marriage, and that composed the family up to a month ago. Then Mrs. Lorne died; and last week her oldest son Julian was taken off, as you know.

"I don't mind telling you, Sergeant, that I had some quick work then to keep a suspicion of suicide out of the press; for Julian had been pretty wild and had caused his stepfather and me a lot of trouble about money matters —squaring up for scrapes he had got into, and that sort of thing. His own father, Halsey Chalmers, had left an independent fortune to each of the children; but he had tied it up until the boys became twenty-five and the girls twenty-three. I was one of the executors of his estate and co-guardian with their mother. When she married Richard Lorne we put the inheritances into his hands for reinvestment, and he has almost doubled them. I know because we

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

always had an accounting every few months. When Julian became twenty-five, three years ago, he was glad enough to leave the principal in his stepfather's hands, for the interest was enough to content him; but lately he had gone far beyond it and—er—requested that the principal be turned over to him. This request was made just after his mother's death."

"Usual reason?" asked Odell.

Titheredge nodded.

"A woman. Naturally, neither his stepfather nor I wished to see his fortune dissipated, and we reasoned with him. We even went to the length of hinting that we would take legal steps to keep the control of the money out of his hands. Sheer bluff, of course, for he was perfectly normal mentally, with no settled vices, and we shouldn't have had a leg to stand on. But he took it seriously and threatened in an outburst of temper to kill himself rather than be kept in leading-strings. There was nothing to it, of course; but you know when the papers get hold of a thing—"

He paused, and the detective asked:

"Did any of the family suggest that it might have been suicide?"

"No. None of them knew of that absurd threat except Lorne, and the idea has never entered his mind. He and I have been busy settling Julian's estate; the terms of his own father's will decree that it be divided equally between the living children, since he died unmarried.

"That is how I happened to be there last night, when I learned from Lorne that not only he but all four of the children have felt a sort of superstitious fear ever since Julian's death that there was something more than coin-

Digitized by Google Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

cidence in the two tragedies, or accidents, or whatever you choose to call them.

"No one had mentioned it; but I gather that the cripple, Randall, made some sort of outburst about it at the dinner-table last evening, and that sort of brought the matter to a head in Lorne's mind. Anyway, when I arrived a little later for a conference with him he told me of his suspicion that those so-called accidents might have been devilishly planned.

"He couldn't suggest anyone who might be guilty, nor a motive, and I laughed at him; but while we were talking something occurred that seems to put solid fact behind his wild theory."

He told of the fall of the picture and Gene's escape, and the young sergeant listened with the keenest attention.

"You are sure about those wires being hacked apart?" he inquired when the attorney had finished. "The portrait has been hanging there for years, you say? Couldn't they have worn through?"

"Impossible. The strands hadn't parted from age; their tips were bright where they had been severed. I want you to come up and have a look at them for yourself; but first let me tell you of a further affair this morning, which to my mind leaves no doubt that someone, either inside the house or with a confederate there, is trying deliberately to exterminate the whole family! That sounds ridiculous, I know, in these days and right here in the heart of the city; but I have seen what I believe to be the evidence of it with my own eyes."

He proceeded to describe the events of the night and

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

early morning; and the detective's merry twinkle vanished in a vacant, narrow-lidded stare of concentration.

"You did not hear the footsteps?"

"No. I was so stubbornly confident that no further attempt would be made on any of the family for a few days at least that I thought poor Lorne was the victim of his own nervous apprehension." Titheredge's usually dry tones were filled with contrition. "I only wish then that we had gone out and investigated, but I was afraid that we would awaken the rest of the family and there would be another scene.

"I did hear the gnawing, grating sound very distinctly, and I was perfectly sincere when I told Lorne that I thought it must be caused by rats or mice in the walls. Lorne said that he could have sworn it sounded louder than any rat, but I paid no attention. Now, looking back, I realize that it might well have been a saw cutting through the solid oak of the top step of the stairs."

"You haven't had a chance to examine it yet yourself, Mr. Titheredge?"

"No, but it won't be touched until we get back there—". The attorney halted as a sudden memory gripped him. "By George, I'm not so sure of that, after all! We had better hurry."

Sergeant Odell rose. As they made their way from the building he gave more than one keen side-long glance at his companion.

It was not until they were speeding uptown in the taxi, however, that Titheredge mentioned the thought which had come to him.

"Sergeant, as I was leaving the house this morning to

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

run down here I came upon two workmen arguing with the butler in the hall. They said that someone had telephoned to the shop *yesterday* to have them come and rehang a large picture. Yesterday, mind you, and the portrait only fell last night! If you can find out who telephoned from the house—"

"Did they say that the call had come from the house itself, Mr. Titheredge?" the detective interposed quietly.

"Well, no; now that I think of it they didn't say from where it was sent, but I inferred—"

"I think we'll go to the shop first." Again the detective interrupted him. "That is, if you know what shop sent them out?"

"Yes. It is Kenny's, on Eighth Avenue." The attorney gave the address to the chauffeur. "If a similar order has been given concerning the broken stair and carried out before we get there, we'll just rip it apart again."

"Mr. Titheredge." The detective had evidently been following a train of thought of his own. "You said that Mr. Lorne wanted to 'phone to Headquarters last night but you dissuaded him?"

"Yes. Even before the portrait fell he said that he felt like going to the authorities. He had nothing but his vague, superstitious fears to back up his story, which then seemed fantastic to me beyond belief. But after that attempt on Gene's life I had all I could do to compel him to wait until I could get in touch with you."

"And where did this discussion take place?"

"Right there in the library in front of the fallen picture."

"With the door open, so that anyone who chose to listen could hear all that was said?"

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"Why, yes." The attorney looked somewhat taken aback. "What are you driving at, Sergeant?"

"The necessity for the stairs being rendered almost fatally dangerous in the night. It was a risk, you know, with you two talking in that room right at hand."

"But I don't see"—Titheredge stammered. "I thought it was done to cause the death of the first member of the family who attempted to descend, regardless of which one it might be."

Odell shook his head, and his tone was very grave.

"Had anyone been listening in the hall outside the library last night and heard your decision to take your story to the police this morning, they would naturally suppose that you would rise earlier than the rest of the family, and that you and Mr. Lorne would descend the stairs together; wouldn't they?"

"Good heavens!" the attorney exclaimed. "That never occurred to me. It was a mad, desperate attempt, then, to kill us in order to prevent our notifying you!"

"Not necessarily to kill you, but to injure you and delay our receipt of your message at least until the portrait had been rehung and the only bit of real evidence which you seem to possess—the cut wires—removed." Odell laughed. "Of course, I may be dead wrong, and it isn't my usual method to form conclusions before I've even gone over the ground, and then expatiate on them; but that's the way it looks to me now. Is this your shop?"

The taxi had stopped before a store the signboard of which read: "William Kenny, Carpentering, Plastering and Interior Decorating." It appeared to be a small place of an inferior sort.

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"Odd that anyone interested in the rehanging of that portrait should not have called on some picture dealer for the service," Odell remarked to the attorney as they left the cab and crossed the sidewalk. "It doesn't seem as though a place of this kind could supply men fitted for the job."

"Not if the one who telephoned was ignorant of such things," Titheredge responded.

Again the detective favored him with a swift side glance, but vouchsafed no further comment.

William Kenny proved to be a tall, gaunt man who gesticulated loose-jointedly as he talked; and he appeared quite willing to talk at any length.

"About that picter-hangin' business." He rubbed one outstanding ear reflectively. "I did think it was funny when my men come back awhile ago an' told me as how the butler over there had tried to tell them there was a mistake; there wasn't, because I got the call myself over the 'phone yesterday."

"At what time?" asked Odell.

"Oh, 'long about three, some'eres. I didn't take partic'ler notice." Kenny rested one long arm upon the counter and regarded his inquisitors shrewdly. "Say, nothin' wrong about that business, was they?"

"Not a thing in the world, except that conflicting orders were given, and we cannot understand it," Odell replied in hasty reassurance. "Just what was the order that was placed with you?"

"To have two men sent over to the Meade house on Madison Avenue at seven-thirty sharp this morning to hang a heavy picture; they was to bring along iron staples and the strongest grade of steel wire. Now, we don't handle

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

much of that kind of work, but I wasn't goin' to lose a chance at that swell trade, so I said 'all right'; an' that's all there is to it."

"So you'd never done any work for them before?"

"Nope. Dunno how they come to call me in the first place, but I ain't kickin' at that."

"Was the voice that talked to you over the telephone a man's or a woman's?" Odell inquired casually with a glance toward the door as if preparing to depart.

"Couldn't tell; it might have been either." Kenny straightened himself. "It was gruff-like, and rasping, but not real deep. Say," he added with a touch of anxiety, "that order ain't canceled, is it? The boys was to go back just after the noon hour and do the job."

"Oh, no. Send them along and it will be all right." The detective turned toward the door; and Titheredge, who had taken no part in the questioning, followed, marveling that the other had left the most important point untouched upon.

With his hand on the doorknob, however, Odell turned once more.

"Oh, by the way, that call came directly from the Meade house, didn't it?"

"Dunno!" Kenny looked his surprise. "It was a city call, all right, you could tell that from the way the voice come over the wire, but it might have been from anywhere's around town."

"Well, it sure is funny about those conflicting orders." The detective shook his head in a puzzled manner. "Too bad you can't fix the time the call came in to you any closer, Mr. Kenny."

"Hold on! Maybe I can." The head of the establish-

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

ment paused in what was evidently for him a vast mental effort. "It was about three—no, it was after; it was just twenty-five minutes past! I remember because I'd sent Dooley over to kalsomine some ceilings on Forty-fourth Street, an' he'd ought to've been back here by two-thirty at most. I'm payin' the boys by the time; an' he must have loafed on his job, for he never got back until twenty-five past three. I'd just started in to bawl him out when the 'phone rang."

"Well, thank you, Mr. Kenny. We've told the other people who claim to have been sent for that there was nothing doing; you had the job. Good morning."

In the taxi once more cutting across town Barry Odell remarked:

"The residence of Mr. Lorne and his stepchildren is known as the Meade house, then. It must have belonged to his wife's people."

"Yes, for generations. She and this spinster sister who has survived her each owned a half interest in it. When she married Halsey Chalmers he built a house for her up on Fifth Avenue; but after his death she sold it, and she and her family, including Miss Meade of course, came back to live in the old home. Richard Lorne could never persuade her to leave it." Titheredge paused and added: "It isn't one of these ornate, miniature palaces they are building nowadays, you know; just a solid, substantial old brownstone mansion, and rather a landmark in its way."

"You spoke of this Eugene who had the narrow escape last night, and of the youngest son who was a hunchback, and the girls," Odell observed. "The daughters are both grown up?"

Digitized by Google Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"Christine, who was named after her mother, is twenty-two, and Nan is just twenty."

"Any love affairs?"

The attorney hesitated.

"I believe there is a sort of bread-and-butter flirtation going on between Nan and a good-looking boy whose people have the house on the avenue next door. The Meade house is on the corner. Tad Traymore—his father is old Thaddeus Traymore of the Palladium Trust Company—is just out of the university and starting to read law, so there isn't much chance of the affair assuming the status of an engagement now."

"And the other daughter?"

A full minute passed before Titheredge replied.

"That is another source of worry to Lorne. She has recently become quite infatuated with a man much older than herself named Drew. His antecedents are irreproachable and he is still received in the best society, but his past—well, it hasn't been one that would render him suitable as a husband for a girl like Christine."

"Not Farley Drew who was named in the Gael divorce case?" The detective's tone had sharpened slightly.

Titheredge nodded.

"That's the chap. His people left him fairly well off; but he squandered all he had long ago, and it is Christine's money that he is after, of course, although she is a beautiful girl. Drew is not the sort of man to be attracted by unsophistication."

"I'll tell the world that!" Odell commented with emphasis. "He may be received by the best society, but he'll be received by us, too, down at Headquarters if he doesn't watch

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

his step. We haven't got anything on him yet, you understand, Mr. Titheredge, but he's been under suspicion in more than one shady transaction. Always travels around with men much younger than himself, doesn't he?"

The attorney's lips set in a stiff line.

"Mere boys with wealth, gilded youth, who want to see life, and he shows them a certain side of it while their money lasts."

The detective whistled softly.

"I thought as much," he said. "So that's how he gained an introduction into Mr. Lorne's household?"

"Yes. I'm giving you a lot of inside information, Sergeant, which perhaps in justice to my clients I should not disclose; but in a case like this where I cannot tell what may be of use to you I think it best to put you in possession of whatever facts I know concerning every member of the family."

"It is just saving time and trouble for me, Mr. Titheredge, for I would find out for myself anyway," Odell assured him. "Which of the boys was it who brought Drew to the house; Julian or Eugene?"

There was another pause longer than before and then the attorney replied slowly:

"It was Eugene."

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

CHAPTER IV

BARRY ODELL TAKES HOLD

THERE was time for no further talk, for the taxi drew up at that moment before the house. The doctor's sedan was just rolling away; and in answer to Titheredge's ring the housemaid, a plump young woman with cap askew, admitted them.

"Is Peters busy, Jane?" asked the attorney as he handed her his hat and stick.

"No, sir. We can't find Peters anywhere, though we've been looking this half hour. Miss Meade didn't send him on no errand, and we don't know what to think of it."

"He'll probably turn up shortly," Titheredge observed with a significant glance at the detective. "Has Mr. Lorne been taken upstairs yet?"

"No, sir. He refuses to go; and Miss Meade, she don't know what to do! There, he's calling now, sir!"

And indeed an irascible but reassuringly strong voice was reverberating through the hall from the direction of the library.

"Sam! Is that you? Did you get him? Sa-am!"

"Come this way, Sergeant." The attorney led the way to the library, where Richard Lorne still lay upon the couch. His clothing had been changed for a dressing-gown with one sleeve cut out, and the arm was neatly bandaged in a

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

sling; and although he was pale, his mouth was set in determined lines beneath the stubby gray mustache.

Nan was seated beside him, and Gene stood over by the window nervously fingering the shade-cord; but the other members of the family were not present.

As Titheredge performed the introductions Nan rose, her eyes darkening.

"A detective?" she asked quietly, but her breast rose and fell with spasmodic rapidity. "Father, what does this mean?"

"It means, my dear," Titheredge answered suavely before Lorne could speak, "that your father and I have talked things over, and he has told me the possibly imaginary but nevertheless torturing strain you have all been under since your brother's death. He shared with you the feeling that perhaps there was something more than coincidence in the two sorrows which have come into your life so closely upon the heels of each other. You know how that portrait fell last night, almost killing Gene, and what a narrow escape your father himself had this morning when the top step of the stairs collapsed and precipitated him to the bottom.

"Of course, these may all be mere coincidences; but we want to be sure of it to allay all your fears, and so we have called in this young man to make the fullest investigation. He will question everyone, and—you listen to this, too, Gene—you must be absolutely frank with him. Remember, there must be no lying, no subterfuge."

"My God!" Gene came forward. "I knew I was right! I knew that picture was meant to fall upon me and crush me! And the others—my mother and Julian—"

"Steady there, Gene," the attorney warned. "We don't

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

know but that all that has occurred so far has been sheer accident."

"Well, I'm glad you are going to find out!" Gene held out his hand frankly to the detective. "You can count on me, Mr. Odell."

"Thank you, Mr. Chalmers. I shall want to have a little conference with your father and Mr. Titheredge here, but I'll look you up later."

Gene took the hint and sauntered out of the library; and Nan prepared to follow him, but Odell stopped her.

"May I ask, Miss Chalmers, whether or not the broken stair has been mended yet?"

"No, Mr. Odell. Aunt Effie wanted to have it attended to, but she was afraid the hammering would disturb father. She hates to have anything upset around the house."

"Then if you will sit here with your father for a few minutes Mr. Titheredge and I will go and inspect it."

Gene was nowhere to be seen when the attorney and Odell reëntered the hall, and they mounted the stairs to the topmost step, covered with a crimson-velvet runner. The detective knelt on the step just below and felt over the smooth pile of the carpet's surface.

"You see," he said rapidly in a lowered tone to his companion, "the tread of the step neither collapsed in the middle, nor split, nor caved in at either end; it simply turned forward over the face as if on a pivot as soon as Mr. Lorne's weight was placed upon it, pitching him headlong down."

"The carpet appears to be loose, doesn't it?" Titheredge himself bent and gave it a tug; and the strip of crimson velvet came away in his hands from beneath the edge of

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

the rug which covered the upper hall, while tiny tacks with flat brass heads flew in every direction.

"Thumbtacks," Odell vouchsafed. "When the person who executed this little maneuver replaced the carpet he didn't dare hammer, with you and Mr. Lorne in that room so near by; so he pressed the thumbtacks in as a temporary hold, and left a good margin of the extra carpet that had been turned under loose, too, so as to give extra room for the tread to turn over without pulling out the tacks."

He folded the runner back across his knees; and the attorney uttered a sharp exclamation, as instantly silenced. A good four inches of the riser or faceboard had been sawed away at the top where it had formerly supported the tread; and the tread itself was cut through from wainscoting and balustrade at either end.

"When Mr. Lorne put his weight upon the step it cracked across at the line where it is level with the hall-flooring, and its outer edge crashed down until it rested on the lowered top of the face," the detective explained. "It had much the same effect as if one stepped from the center to the uptilted end of a see-saw. Do you observe something else, Mr. Titheredge?"

"Can't say that I do," the other replied, regarding thoughtfully the scraps of sawdust which the turned-back carpet revealed. "Whoever the fellow was—"

He halted abruptly as Miss Meade appeared from her room down the hall and came quickly toward them. Light as her footfalls were, the keen ears of the detective caught them; and in an instant he had turned up the strip of carpet once more and thrust its end hastily beneath the edge of the rug.

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"Oh, Mr. Titheredge, I am so glad you have returned." She spoke with evident anxiety as she approached. "I hope you will be able to persuade Richard to let us get him into bed and nurse him. Did they tell you that besides his arm two ribs are fractured? He refuses absolutely—"

She, too, paused at sight of the strange young man kneeling upon the stairs, and her eyes turned inquiringly toward the attorney.

"Miss Meade," Titheredge's tone was very grave. "Will you permit me to present Sergeant Odell of the police department?"

She bowed with old-fashioned courtesy as the young man rose, but her face quivered slightly.

"I—I do not understand!" she said. "A policeman in this house! But why, Mr. Titheredge, why?"

"Because there have been things going on in this house that both Richard and the children desire to have investigated." The attorney spoke very gently. "We did not consult you at first because we did not want to distress you, but no time could be lost this morning. When the portrait—"

"Mr. Titheredge means," Odell interrupted hastily, "that the deaths of Mrs. Lorne and her son, taken in conjunction with the fall of the picture last night when your nephew was only saved by a miracle, and the broken stair this morning, which almost cost Mr. Lorne his life, may not have been accidents after all; and I have been engaged to investigate the latter two occurrences."

"But this is terrible!" Miss Meade cried in a low tone as if at a sacrilege. "My poor sister's death and Julian's were by the will of God! The—the others have been

Digitized by Google Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

troubled by foolish, nervous fears but my faith is strong. The fall of that picture was an unfortunate accident; and I blame myself for Eugene's danger, because he sat there at my suggestion to reply to some correspondence. As to the stairs giving way this morning, that must have been an accident too; the house is old, our home for generations back—"

Her voice died away as the detective in answer turned back the carpet once more and silently exposed the damage which had been deliberately wrought.

Miss Meade caught her breath sharply, and her thin, delicate hands came together in a convulsive clasp.

"Oh, what does it mean? Surely none of the boys would attempt to play a wicked practical joke at such a time as this!"

"This was not intended for a joke, Miss Meade." Odell's matter-of-fact tone seemed to make her shrink within herself. "It was done with the deliberate purpose of injury to some member of this household. The portrait fell last night because the heavy steel wires which helped to hold it in its place had been hacked apart. I am sorry to add to your distress, but the truth must be faced; someone is trying to murder you all!"

"Murder!" Her pale lips barely formed the word. "I —I cannot believe it! There must be some hideous mistake. Why, we haven't an enemy in the world!"

She swayed and would have fallen but that Titheredge sprang forward and caught her.

"You had better go back to your own room and rest, Miss Meade. I'll see that Dick is made comfortable, and you will need all your strength for what I am afraid lies

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

before you," he said. "Sergeant Odell may want to see you later on to ask you for some information, but he will not disturb you if it is not absolutely necessary."

He led her down the hall to her own room, closed the door, and came back to the stair's head to find the detective carefully replacing the thumbtacks.

"That will do, I think," the latter observed. "Now, let us go down and have a look at that picture."

They descended again to the library. As they entered Nan rose, kissed her father on the forehead softly, and went from the room.

"You've been examining the stairs?" Richard Lorne asked, panting from the knife-thrusts of pain which darted through his hurt ribs at each breath.

"Yes, Dick. They were sawed through, just as we imagined," Titheredge replied. "If you won't be taken to bed just yet, lie still and don't try to talk; I'll keep you informed of everything that goes on. I suppose you know that Peters has disappeared?"

Lorne nodded.

"We'll make short work of him if he has had a hand in what has been going on," the attorney promised grimly. "I caught him in two direct lies this morning before I left the house, but I attributed them to the fact that the man was addled from fright. Let me see; you've had him three years, haven't you?"

"Four," came raspingly from the couch.

"Ah, yes, I remember. Ever have any reason to distrust him?"

"Never. What's that chap doing?"

Lorne had craned his neck as far as his painful position

Digitized by Google Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

would allow, and Titheredge followed his gaze. Sergeant Odell, with a pair of powerful wire-clippers in his hands, was bending over the portrait as it lay face down over the desk.

"Just removing these severed strands of the cable, so that they may be examined under a glass, Mr. Lorne," the detective replied for himself. "There isn't the least doubt that they were deliberately cut; but I want to find out if I can what sort of instrument was used. One thing is certain; whoever did this trick and the one upstairs was of tremendous strength. The tread and face of that step were cut with long, slow sweeps of a heavy saw, not haggled with a small, light one; and the portrait here must have been pried loose from the wall with some powerful lever before the supporting wires could be cut, for no clipper such as this could have reached them. If you will take my advice, Mr. Lorne, you will permit us to assist you to bed now; the shock which you have received, together with your injuries, will make it impossible for me to question you now."

"To-morrow?" Lorne asked eagerly. "Want to get at the bottom—"

"Yes, I know," Odell nodded encouragingly. "You can leave everything in our hands. We'll get you upstairs now with as little pain to you as possible."

"Hadn't we better have young Mr. Chalmers's help?" asked Titheredge. "We will have to carry him around to the servants' staircase, you know, and we must not jar him any more than is necessary."

The detective assented and Titheredge rang the bell, but no one appeared.

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"I'll go and look for him myself," the latter remarked, but Odell stopped him.

"I should prefer to do that, Mr. Titheredge. Will you instead go to the servants' quarters and see if any more of them have decamped?" He turned again to the couch. "Mr. Lorne, which is Mr. Chalmers's room?"

"The one on the left, third floor, rear," panted the sick man. "Julian's was the room just in front of it."

"Do they connect?" The attorney had already gone on his errand, and Odell paused in the doorway.

"Yes, by the bath and dressing-rooms between."

The detective glanced into the drawing- and dining-rooms and then mounted the main staircase, avoiding the broken top step. He was proceeding along the hall to the second flight leading to the third floor when from one of the rooms behind him a burst of laughter came; impish, sarcastic laughter utterly lacking in mirth.

It seemed such a strange, incongruous thing in the silence of that house that Odell paused; and then in a thin, high, whining voice came the words:

"The police? That would be like old Sam, wouldn't it? As well send a village fire-company to put out Vesuvius. We'll go, one after the other; you'll see!"

From whose lips could that voice have issued? Odell recalled the two members of the family whom he had not as yet encountered; the oldest daughter and the youngest son. The hunchback. It must be he. Odell waited.

There came a low murmur in an unmistakable feminine tone, and then the high querulous one again.

"My dear aunt, where is the disgrace to the family in

Digitized by Google Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

having a policeman cross our sacred portals? They are quite as respectable as murderers, though scarcely as efficient. Now, if I were the next on the list of our domestic Dionysius and the sword were suspended over my head, I should reach up and snap the hair. I can afford to laugh."

"Not you! Rannie, my darling, never you!"

The sharp cry was almost a wail, but it held such a wealth of infinite love and devotion that the listening detective could hardly credit the fact that it was the quiet, self-contained, little Miss Meade who uttered it. That it was ungratefully received was evident from the indistinct but churlish grumble which followed; and then there was silence.

Odell continued on his way upstairs with a new fact to add to the family data with which the attorney had supplied him. The cripple was evidently his aunt's favorite; the spinster had taken to her heart the one maimed member of the family in preference to all the rest.

When he reached the third floor Odell was conscious of an acrid odor on the air, which seemed to come from the rear on the left, the room which Lorne had told him was occupied by Gene. He bent and looked quickly through the keyhole, but the turned key obstructed his view. The smoky, acrid odor was stronger now. Gene had lost no time after encountering the detective in locking himself in his room and burning certain papers.

It was natural, perhaps, that the young man should have private letters which he would not care to have seen by the prying eyes of a stranger; yet coupling his discovery with Titheredge's statement of the previous association with the

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

notorious Farley Drew, Odell decided to look into the matter without delay.

He rapped smartly on the door, to hear an astonished and perturbed "Hello?" from within, followed by:

"Be with you in a second."

Then came the subdued clatter of heavy glassware, a pause, the scratching of a match, and finally footsteps. Gene, puffing furiously at a pipe, opened the door.

"Oh, I say, I didn't know it was you, Sergeant. Come in; hope you don't mind my pipe. Anything I can do for you?" He was plainly flustered.

Odell took in the room in one swift, comprehensive glance: the bed had not yet been made, and the chifferobe was open, its trays and drawers in disorder, but the desk was closed. The top of the cut-glass tobacco-jar upon it was open, and the tobacco strewn all about it bore evidence of the haste with which the pipe had been filled. In the open grate was a little heap of gray, flaky ashes from which a thin spiral of smoke still wound its way; and the detective saw to his satisfaction that a few pieces of hastily torn paper were scattered unburned upon the hearth.

"I came to ask you if you would help Mr. Titheredge and myself carry your father to his room." His eyes came casually back to the young man's flushed face. "There is no hurry, however. I believe this room was occupied by your late brother? I should like to see just where his death took place. Can you show me, Mr. Chalmers?" He had indicated the front room by a gesture.

Gene hesitated.

"Both doors are locked and my father has the keys," he said at last; and there was an undercurrent of sullen

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

defiance in his changed tone as though he anticipated the next question.

"Will you go and ask him for them, please?"

"But—but no one has entered that room since the funeral," Gene stammered. "I don't think father would like it, Sergeant; and nothing in there could have any possible bearing on your investigation."

"Mr. Chalmers, may I remind you that that is not for you to decide? Will you get those keys at once!" The last sentence was not a query but a command, and each word increased in emphatic dominance. Gene gave one fleeting, desperate glance toward his desk—in the lock of which the key still remained—and fled downstairs.

Unless the young man had temporarily lost his head and burned his papers without discrimination as they came to his hand, those already destroyed must have been the most important; and locking the door in his turn, Odell went quickly to the grate and pocketed every unburned scrap that remained.

Then he moved as swiftly to the desk and opened it. A disordered heap of letters met his eye; most of them evidently bills, from the tradesmen's names in the upper right hand corner. Odell had seized a handful at random and was about to shut the desk when he noticed that the small center drawer was not quite closed. Pulling it open hastily he discovered a small notebook and a few letters in an odd but unmistakably masculine hand.

He cleared the drawer at one sweep, closed the desk, and dropping his findings from it into the coat-pocket on his left side, he drew from the other two or three fragments of the paper which he had salvaged from the grate.

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

One of them bore in a temperamental, feminine hand only three letters of a word, but they were illuminating: "lov." Odell smiled as he replaced it in his pocket; but his expression changed when he glanced at the others. The writing upon them was all in a bold, dashing, masculine hand, and two of the scraps fitted together read: "whole family in hell before."

Odell frowned thoughtfully and drew from his left coat-pocket one of the letters which he had taken from the center drawer in the desk. It was in the same strongly accentuated writing, and read without preamble:

"Where do you think you get off, Gene? You are in too deep to back out now, as I meant you should be. Your mother's went through without a hitch and the next one will if you only keep your nerve. It's got to be done by the sixth or you know where the first one will send you. I mean business, my boy.

"FARLEY DREW."

Barry Odell folded the letter slowly and replaced it in its envelope. To-day was the fourteenth, and Julian Chalmers had come to his death just eight days before—on the sixth!

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

CHAPTER V

"I WISH IT HAD BEEN YOU"

ODELL put the letter back into his pocket and striding across the room unlocked the door and flung it wide. He was only just in time; for he could hear hurried footsteps bounding up the stairs, and in another moment Gene's head appeared above the landing.

Its owner peered suspiciously first toward his desk and then at the grate; but nothing seemed amiss, and the police sergeant was standing before him with his hand outstretched authoritatively.

Silently Gene surrendered the keys.

"Thanks." The detective made no move toward the other room. "Mr. Chalmers, how long have you known Farley Drew?"

The question came so abruptly that Gene shot the inquirer a startled glance, which then strayed once more uncontrollably to the desk, while a deep flush came again into his cheeks.

"What has Mr. Drew to do with the matter you have under investigation?"

"That does not reply to my question, Mr. Chalmers." From taking part in many far more strenuous examinations Odell well knew the value of the repetition of a name.

Gene flung himself into a chair; and for a moment there

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

was silence while he puffed at his pipe. At length he looked up and met the detective's gaze.

"See here, Sergeant, I told you downstairs that you could count on me, and I want this d—n mystery cleared up as much as the rest do; more, since my own life was attempted last night! But I don't like to discuss my private affairs, and I won't have my friends dragged in. Unless you have been prying into my letters while I was out of the room, I suppose our attorney must have been unearthing the family skeletons and black sheep and all that sort of thing for your benefit. However, I've no reason for concealing my friendship for Mr. Drew. I met him about four years ago."

"Where?"

Gene had recovered his nonchalance and waved lazily toward a chair.

"I foresee that this interview is apt to be a protracted one." He knocked the ashes from his pipe into the hearth. "I met him at a private gambling club over Morey's, which I understand your enterprising organization has since closed up."

"With or through whom did you meet him, Mr. Chalmers?"

"I was with several friends of mine whose names I cannot recall at the moment and was presented to Mr. Drew by an acquaintance named Stone."

"Philip Stone the embezzler?" Odell's smooth, calm, level tones remained the same; but Gene stirred in his chair.

"I did not know he had attained such prominence as to be known as 'the' anything," he protested with a shrug.

Digitized by Google Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

"I believe he did get in some sort of trouble later with a trust company or bank or something, but as I told you he was a mere acquaintance; I had been introduced to him in a restaurant only a night or two before."

"You were then about twenty, I think, Mr. Chalmers?"

"I was. I must ask you again what all this has to do with your investigation." Gene's eyes began to glow sullenly. "May I suggest that you are wasting valuable time?"

"Mr. Chalmers, that is my affair. To return to your friend Farley Drew; when did you first bring him to your home and introduce him to your sisters?"

A touch of sternness had crept into the detective's tone; and the glow in the eyes of the young man changed to a furtive glint.

"I say, you leave my sisters out of this!" He half rose from his chair. "I'll tell you anything you want to know about myself, but I won't discuss them with you."

"That does not answer my question, Mr. Chalmers; and I doubt if your solicitude is as much for your sisters as for yourself." Odell eyed the squirming young man narrowly. "I represent the law, and there will be a lot more of our men here presently. It won't get you anywhere to try to oppose me."

"I have no reason for opposing you, Sergeant," Gene responded hastily. "It sort of gets my goat, though, to be hammered at like this when, by Jove, I'm the injured party. I introduced Farley Drew to my people about a year ago."

"And did you present him to your brother at the same time?"

"To Julian? Yes." He tried to reply with the old

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

sangfroid; but his chin trembled, and he put up his hand to mask it.

"Your brother then became one of his associates?"

"One of his friends," Gene remarked stiffly.

"Did that in any way affect your friendship with Drew, Mr. Chalmers?"

"Of course not; why should it? Julian and I traveled as a rule in different crowds, but we had many mutual friends, and—and Mr. Drew was one of them."

"And did you and your brother get on well together, Mr. Chalmers? You will have to pardon this question, but others will answer it if you refuse." Odell paused and repeated: "How did you and your brother get on together?"

"About as well as any brothers do, I fancy." Gene's gaze wandered to the littered top of his dressing-table, but as if conscious of the detective's eyes upon him he quickly averted it. "We had a healthy old row now and then, but—but we always patched it up. I'd rather not talk about it now, if you don't mind, Sergeant. It's only a week, you know—"

Odell rose.

"Of course. We will go down now and move your father to his room."

"But"—Gene rose also and stared in surprise at the detective—"I thought you wanted to go through Julian's room."

"That will keep." Odell smiled slightly. "Come."

Gene hesitated; but the other so obviously waited for him that he had no choice, and together they descended to the library.

When the injured man had been ensconced in bed and

Digitized by Google Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

made as comfortable as possible Titheredge announced that he must go to his office. Gene had taken the first opportunity to retire once more to his room; and the detective went down alone to the hall, where he came upon Miss Meade in the drawing-room doorway.

"You are feeling better?" he asked courteously. "I am sorry that my presence here startled you so this morning."

"I am glad that you are here," she replied. "I have been waiting until you had finished with my brother-in-law, for I want to talk to you; that is, if you can spare the time just now."

She added the last few words in a deprecating manner, which he realized must be an habitual one with her, as if all her life she had been kept in the background, set aside. She seemed not a looker-on but a mere shadow of those of stronger personality about her.

"I have been anxious for this opportunity myself, Miss Meade," he assured her. "I want to know a great many things which only you can tell me, if you feel strong enough. It will be painful to you, I am afraid, for I must touch on your double sorrow of the last month, but my only motive is to discover the truth."

"Come in and be seated, please." She led the way into the drawing-room and motioned toward a chair. "Tell me first of all, Sergeant Odell, is it true that attempts were actually made upon the lives of my nephew and my brother-in-law? I—I saw where the stairs had been deliberately cut through, of course, and yet I cannot seem to realize it. It is the total absence of motive which makes it all seem like some frightful dream."

"Nevertheless it is stern reality, Miss Meade."

Digitized by Google Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Her face quivered, and she bowed her head for a moment.

"You spoke of touching upon my grief. Does that mean that you think my sister and her oldest son—that they could have been killed? Their deaths were so plainly the result of what worldly people call accident that I believed our trial was the Lord's will, and was endeavoring to resign myself to it, although no one will ever know what my sister was to me. Is there a possibility that their deaths were the result of some evil human design?"

"That is what I must determine." Odell drew his chair closer. "When did Mrs. Lorne run the needle into her finger?"

"A little over five weeks ago, some time during the first part of August."

"Did it occur here in this house? Was anyone present at the time?"

"Yes, I was." Miss Meade shuddered. "If I had only known what it was to bring about! But she thought nothing of it at the time and wouldn't even trouble to use the witch hazel which I brought from my bathroom. Christine was always a—a rather dominant person and disliked advice."

Her voice trailed off vaguely, and Odell gently urged her on.

"Will you tell me about it, please, every detail you remember?"

"I will try, Sergeant Odell; but you must forgive me if I give you rather a—a rambling account. I am not accustomed to telling things; I usually listen."

While she paused it came to Odell that her last sentence epitomized what her years must have brought her. He was

Digitized by Google Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

not given to sentimentalizing over old maids, but he found himself all at once tremendously interested in this middle-aged spinster, colorless and negative as she was.

"In the first place you must understand that we were utterly unlike, my sister and I. Perhaps that was why we were so devoted to each other. I cannot describe her, but she was beautiful, brilliant, self-assertive; while I have always been as you see me now." Her voice trembled at first but steadied as she went on. "She loved youth and could not endure the thought of coming age. That is why we have all stayed in town this summer; she was taking a special beauty treatment which required some weeks for its completion. I was the only one who knew this. We told the rest of the family that it was ill-health and she must remain in the city for electrical treatments. You can see how close we were to each other, Sergeant Odell. There is a little dressing-room off her bedroom—I will show it to you presently—which she had furnished as a sort of boudoir; and we sat there for hours together, I mending and she embroidering. Christine was always fond of bright colors."

Miss Meade's voice died away in retrospection, but she recovered herself and continued:

"Her embroidery-basket was never taken out of that room, and on the morning when—when it happened we had been chatting and working for about an hour when suddenly she uttered a sharp exclamation and dropped the embroidery-frame in her lap. I supposed she had merely become impatient, and I did not even look up until she spoke. 'Oh, I've stuck my finger!' I can almost hear her say it now! As I told you, I got the witch hazel for her; but

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

she wouldn't use it, and the incident passed. The next day her finger was painful and inflamed; but she would not hear of a doctor until three days later, when her whole hand and arm commenced to swell.

"There—there isn't very much more to tell." Her voice faltered and then went on: "The day after the doctor was called in he sent for a specialist; then another, and a third, but it was no use; she was dead in ten days."

"Who attended her, Miss Meade?" Odell spoke quickly.

"Our family physician, Doctor Adams, who came to Richard this morning. He called in Doctor Kelland and Doctor Day and finally Doctor McCutchen. Then there were the two nurses, of course, Miss Risby and Miss Brown; but I scarcely left her bedside for an hour until the end."

"Miss Meade, who has access to the boudoir?"

"Why, all the household. Richard and the children were in and out constantly, and Jane every day to dust. And of course Gerda."

"Who is Gerda?"

"The lady's maid. She served both my sister and Cissie, the younger Christine."

"And not Miss Nan nor you?"

Miss Meade looked down.

"I always dress so simply that I have no need of a maid, and Nan is too independent to be annoyed with one. Would you—would you care to interview Gerda later?"

"I would, Miss Meade; but I want to know now what you can tell me of the second death, that of your nephew."

"It was—horrible!" She closed her eyes for a moment. "Richard can tell you more about that than I can when he

Digitized by Google Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

is better, for he and Gene were the first to see him after Peters came rushing down. I—I only caught one glimpse before they took me away; and the girls weren't allowed to go in at all."

"How did it occur?" the detective asked patiently. "Please try to tell me all you know of it. Was your nephew in good health and spirits—aside from his natural grief for his mother, I mean?"

For the first time Miss Meade hesitated.

"Well, no," she admitted at length. "He adored my sister, of course; and he felt her death deeply. He had been in a nervous, excitable condition for months; and the shock of losing her increased his nervousness. He started violently at the sound of an unexpected voice or the abrupt closing of a door; and he had been losing weight rapidly. I—I think he had had some trouble over money matters with his stepfather, but Mr. Lorne must tell you about that; I really try to keep out of family affairs as much as possible.

"Last Wednesday—a week ago yesterday—he did not come down for breakfast, nor ring for any to be brought up to him. Cissie had hers in bed, I remember; and Randall—my youngest nephew, who is an invalid—was not well enough to come down; but Mr. Lorne, Nan, and myself were in the dining-room. I was pouring the coffee when Gene appeared; and his stepfather asked him if Julian were up. He said that he didn't think so, he had not heard him moving about. Mr. Lorne was annoyed, because Julian had an appointment to go downtown with him that morning, and finally he sent Peters up to call him."

Miss Meade paused; and Odell, who had watched her closely throughout her narration, marveled. Her thin

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

hands were clasped tightly in her lap; but her voice was steady and quietly modulated, and her high-bred face as expressionless as a mask. What unknown reservoirs of strength and self-control lay behind that meek exterior! And this was the woman whom he had thought a spineless, colorless personality!

"We continued our meal as Peters went upstairs, when after quite an interval—it must have been five minutes at least—we heard a most dreadful cry, which brought us all to our feet. It was Peters and he came scrambling and stumbling downstairs screaming out with every breath in that frightful hoarse way. When he reached the dining-room door here he clung to it as if to keep from falling, and his face was the color of gray blotting-paper. 'For God's sake, go up, sir!' he said to Mr. Lorne. 'For God's sake, go up!'

"That was all they could get out of him, and Richard rushed upstairs with Gene after him. Nan ran over to Peters and commenced to shake him, but he would only groan; and I passed them and hurried upstairs myself. When I reached Julian's room Gene was lying face downward across the bed rolling from side to side and crying terribly, and Richard was standing in the doorway leading to the bathroom staring down at something which lay at his feet.

"I went to him, and there lay our poor Julian! I simply cannot tell you, Sergeant Odell! It seemed as if a wave of blood had engulfed him and then ebbed. It was a—a shambles! I covered my face with my hands and tottered back; and then Richard came to himself and led me away. And they tell me it was such a tiny wound in his throat,

Digitized by Google Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY