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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE CRIME OF THE FRENCH CAFÉ AND OTHER STORIES ***

The Crime of the French Café Nick Carter's Ghost Story The Mystery of St. Agnes' Hospital

THREE COMPLETE STORIES OF THE EXPLOITS OF NICHOLAS CARTER, AMERICA'S GREATEST DETECTIVE

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THE CRIME OF THE FRENCH CAFE

CHAPTER I.

PRIVATE DINING-ROOM "B."

There is a well-known French restaurant in the "Tenderloin" district which provides its patrons with small but elegantly appointed private dining-rooms.

The restaurant occupies a corner house; and, though its reputation is not strictly first-class in some respects, its cook is an artist, and its wine cellar as good as the best.

It has two entrances, and the one on the side street is not well lighted at night.

At half-past seven o'clock one evening Nick Carter was standing about fifty yards from this side door.

The detective had shadowed a man to a house on the side street, and was waiting for him to come out.

The case was a robbery of no great importance, but Nick had taken it to oblige a personal friend, who wished to have the business managed quietly. This affair would not be worth mentioning, except that it led Nick to one of the most peculiar and interesting criminal puzzles that he had ever come across in all his varied experience.

While Nick waited for his man he saw a closed carriage stop before the side door of the restaurant.

Almost immediately a waiter, bare-headed and wearing his white apron, came hurriedly out of the side door and got into the carriage, which instantly moved away at a rapid rate.

This incident struck Nick as being very peculiar. The waiter had acted like a man who was running away.

As he crossed the sidewalk he glanced hastily from side to side, as if afraid of being seen, and perhaps stopped.

It looked as if the waiter might have robbed one of the restaurant's patrons, or possibly its proprietor. If Nick had had no business on his hands he would have followed that carriage.

As it happened, however, the man for whom the detective was watching appeared at that moment.

Nick was obliged to follow him, but he knew that he would not have to go far, for Chick was waiting on Sixth avenue, and it was in that direction that the thief turned.

So it happened that within ten minutes Nick was able to turn this case over to his famous assistant, and return to clear up the mystery of the queer incident which he had chanced to observe.

Nick would not have been surprised to find the restaurant in an uproar, but it was as quiet as usual. He entered by the side door, ascended a flight of stairs, and came to a sort of office with a desk and a register.

It was the custom of the place that guests should put down their names as in a hotel before being assigned to a private dining-room.

There was nobody in sight.

The hall led toward the front of the building, and there were three rooms on the side of it toward the street.

All the doors were open and the rooms were empty. Nick glanced into these rooms, and then turned toward the desk. As he did so he saw a waiter coming down the stairs from the floor above.

This man was known by the name of Gaspard. He was the head waiter, and was on duty in the lower hall.

"Ah, Gaspard," said Nick, "who's your waiter on this floor to-night?"

Gaspard looked at Nick anxiously. He did not, of course, know who the detective really was, but he remembered him as one who had assisted the police in a case in which that house had been concerned about two years before.

"Jean Corbut," replied Gaspard. "I hope nothing is wrong."

"That remains to be seen," said Nick. "What sort of a man is this Corbut?"

"A little man," answered Gaspard, "and very thin. He has long, black hair, and mustaches pointed like two needles."

"Have you sent him out for anything?"

"Oh, no; he is here."

"Where?"

"In one of the rooms at the front. We have parties in A and B."

"You go and find him," said Nick. "I want to see him right away."

Gaspard went to the front of the house. A hall branched off at right angles with that in which Nick was standing. On the second hall were three rooms, A, B and C.

Room C was next the avenue. The other two had windows on an open space between two wings of the building. Nick glanced at the register, and saw that "R.M. Clark and wife" had been assigned to room A, and "John Jones and wife" to room B. Room C was vacant.

The detective had barely time to note these entries on the book when Gaspard came running back.

His face was as white as paper, and his lips were working as if he were saying something, but not a sound came from them.

He was struck dumb with fright. Whatever it was that he had seen must have been horrible, to judge from the man's trembling limbs and distorted face.

Nick had seen people in that condition before, and he did not waste time trying to get any information out of Gaspard.

Instead, he seized the frightened fellow by the shoulder and pushed him along toward the front of the house.

Gaspard made a feeble resistance. Evidently he did not want to see again the sight which had so terrified him.

But he was powerless in Nick's grasp. In five seconds they stood before the open door of room B.

The door was open, and there was a bright glare of gas within.

It shone upon the table, where a rich repast lay untasted. It illumined the gaudy furnishings of the room and the costly pictures upon the walls.

It shone, too, upon a beautiful face, rigid and perfectly white, except for a horrible stain of black and red upon the temple.

The face was that of a woman of twenty-five years. She had very abundant hair of a light corn color, which clustered in little curls around her forehead, and was gathered behind in a great mass of plaited braids.

She reclined in a large easy-chair, in a natural attitude, but the pallid face, the fixed and glassy eyes, and the grim wound upon the temple announced, in unmistakable terms, the presence of death.

Nick drew a long breath and set his lips together firmly. He had felt that something was wrong in that house. The waiter who had run across the sidewalk and got into that carriage had borne a guilty secret with him, as the detective's experienced eye had instantly perceived.

But this was a good deal worse than Nick had expected. He had looked for a robbery, or, perhaps, a secret and bloody quarrel between two of the waiters, but not for a murder such as this.

One glance at the woman showed her to be elegant in dress and of a refined appearance.

She could have had nothing in common with the missing Corbut, unless, indeed, he was other than he seemed.

Certainly, whatever was Corbut's connection with the crime, there was another person, at least, as intimately concerned in it. And he, too, had fled.

Where was the man who had brought this woman to this house? How was it possible to account for his absence except by the conclusion that he was the murderer?

That was the first and most natural explanation. Whether it was the true one or not, the man must be found.

Nick turned to Gaspard. The head waiter had sunk down on a chair by the table and seemed prostrated.

From previous experience Nick knew Gaspard to be a man without nerve, and he was not surprised to find him prostrated by this sudden shock.

There was a bottle of champagne standing in ice beside the table. The detective opened it and made Gaspard drink a glass of the sparkling liquor.

It put a little heart into the man, and he was able to answer questions.

Nick, meanwhile, closed the door of the room. Apparently the tragedy was known only to Gaspard and himself and to the guilty authors of it.

"Did you see this woman when she came in?" asked Nick.

"No."

"Who showed her and the man with her to this room?"

"Corbut."

"Who waited on them?"

"Corbut."

"Who waited on the people in room A?"

"Corbut."

"They are gone, I suppose?"

"Yes; I looked in there before I came in here."

"Did you see any of these people?"

"I saw the two men."

"How did that happen?"

"One of them came out into the hall to call Corbut, who had not answered the bell quick enough."

"Which one was that?"

"The man in room A."

"How do you know?"

"Because I saw the other man, later, coming out of room B."

"This room?"

"Yes."

"You are sure of that?"

"Perfectly."

"Did he see you?"

"I think not. I was standing right at the corner of the two halls. The man came out and glanced around, but I stepped back quickly, because we do not like to appear to spy upon our guests. He did not see me."

"What did he do?"

"He went out the front way. I supposed the lady went with him, for I was sure that I heard the rustling of her dress."

"Where was Corbut then?"

"In room A."

"How long did he stay there?"

"Only a minute. I went back to the desk, and then was called by a waiter upstairs. Just as I turned to go I saw Corbut coming through the hall."

"Did you speak to him?"

"Yes; I called to him to stay by the desk while I went upstairs."

"Did he answer?"

"Yes; he said 'very well.'"

"And that's the last you saw of him?"

"Yes."

"All right; so much for Corbut. Now for the two men. Would you know them?"

"Not the man in room A. I didn't notice him particularly."

"But how about the man who came out of this room? He's the one we're after."

"I would know him," said Gaspard, slowly. "Yes; I feel sure that I could identify him."

"That's good. Now for the crime itself. Go back to the desk and ring for a messenger. When he comes, send him here. Don't let anybody else come, and don't say a word to anybody about this affair."

Gaspard, with a very pale face, went back to his desk.

Nick remained alone with the beautiful dead.

CHAPTER II.

GASPARD SPOTS HIS MAN.

A revolver lay on the carpet just where it would have been if it had dropped from the woman's right hand.

Its position suggested the possibility of suicide, and there was, at the first glance, nothing to contradict that theory, except the conduct of Corbut and the man who had registered as John Jones.

It might be that the woman had committed suicide, and the men had fled for fear of being implicated in the affair.

Nick examined this side of the case at once.

The pistol had evidently been held only a few inches from the woman's head when it was fired.

Her white flesh showed the marks of the powder.

The bullet had passed straight through the head.

The revolver carried a long thirty-two cartridge. Three of the five chambers were loaded.

One of them contained an empty shell, on which the hammer rested. The fatal bullet had doubtless come from this chamber, for the shell had been recently discharged.

In the fifth chamber was an old shell, which had apparently been carried under the hammer for safety, as is quite common.

The woman had a purse containing about twenty dollars, but no cards or other things which might lead to identification.

Her ears had been pierced for earrings, but she seemed not to have worn them recently. She had no watch.

There was one plain gold ring on the third finger of her right hand, and there was a deep mark showing that she had worn another, but that ring was gone.

How recently it had been removed was, of course, beyond discovery. There was no sign that it had been violently torn away.

When Nick had proceeded thus far with his investigation the messenger boy arrived. The detective sent messages to his assistants, Chick and Patsy.

He then notified a coroner, who came about ten o'clock and took charge of the body.

A minute examination failed to reveal any marks upon the clothing which might assist in establishing the woman's identity.

Nick then left the restaurant, taking Gaspard with him. Inspector Mclaughlin's men were by this time on hand, and they took charge of the house, under Nick's direction.

At seven o'clock in the morning Nick received a message from Patsy, who had been directed to find the cabman in whose cab Corbut had fled.

Patsy had located the cabman at his home on West Thirty-second street. The man's name was Harrigan.

Nick took Gaspard with him and went to the house where Harrigan boarded.

"I got on to him easy enough," said Patsy, whom they found outside the house. "I found the policeman who was on that beat last night, and got him to give me a list of all the night-hawks he'd seen around there up to eight o'clock of the evening.

"Then I began to chase up the fellows on that list. The second man put me on to Harrigan. He remembered seeing him get the job, but couldn't tell what sort of a man hired him.

"I guess there's no doubt that he's the man, but I haven't questioned him yet. He's in there asleep."

Nick passed himself off as a friend of Harrigan's, and was directed with Patsy to the man's room.

They went in without being invited, after having tried in vain to get an answer to their pounding on his door.

The cabman was snoring in a heavy slumber.

"From what I heard," said Patsy, "Harrigan had a very large skate on last night. He's sleeping it off."

Nick shook the man unmercifully, and at last he sat up in bed.

"What t' 'ell?" said he, looking about him wildly. "Who are youse, an' wha's the row?"

As the quickest way to sober the man, Nick showed his shield. It acted like a cold shower-bath.

"Say, what was it I done?" gasped Harrigan. "S' help me, I dunno nothing about it. I had a load on me last night, an' I ain't responsible."

Patsy laughed.

"There's no charge against you," said Nick; "I only want to ask you a few questions."

Harrigan sank back on the pillow with a gasp of relief.

"Gimme that water-pitcher," he said; "me t'roat's full o' cobwebs."

He drank about a quart of water, and then declared himself ready for a cross-examination. Nick sized him up for a decent sort of fellow; and saw no reason to doubt that he was telling the truth when he answered the questions that were put to him.

It appeared that he had been on Seventh avenue, near the French restaurant, from a little after six to about half-past seven on the previous evening.

At the latter hour a man had engaged his cab. He had taken it to the side door of the restaurant, and the waiter had got in. The man who hired the cab was already inside.

He had driven them somewhere on Fifty-seventh street, or it might be Fifty-eighth. He couldn't remember exactly.

The two men got out together. He didn't know what had become of them.

His fare was paid all right. Then he had a couple more drinks, and the next thing he knew he was at the stable where he had hired the cab.

Of course he didn't confess this in so many words, but Nick understood the facts well enough.

That was absolutely all that Harrigan knew about the case.

"Would you recognize the man who hired your cab if you saw him again?" asked Nick.

"Oh, sure," said Harrigan. "I wasn't so very full. I had me wits about me. Say, you ain't going to do me dirt an' git me license taken away? I was all right. I didn't do any harm."

Nick assured Harrigan that if he acted right in this case his license would be safe, and then left the man to his slumbers.

"Not very promising, is it, my boy?" said Nick to Patsy, as they went downstairs. "We've lost the trail as soon as we struck it."

"Do you think he's giving it to us straight?"

"Yes; he doesn't know where he took the men nor what became of them after they left his cab."

"It's a pity he had such a jag. He'd have been the best witness in the case."

Nick smiled.

"If he hadn't been drunk he wouldn't have had anything to do with the case," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"Why, it's clear enough. This man that we want saw Harrigan on that cab while the man was on his way to the restaurant with the woman. Then when it became necessary to get Corbut out of the way, he remembered the drunken cabman, and hired him."

"I don't see how you know that."

"A man would rather have a sober driver than a drunken one, wouldn't he?"

"Yes."

"Well, the man who told you he saw Harrigan get the job was sober, wasn't he?"

"Yes."

"Then why didn't the man take his cab? Because he wanted a drunken driver, who wouldn't be sharp enough to get on to any queer business."

"But he wouldn't have tried to find a drunken cabman just by luck, and he wouldn't have taken a sober one. Therefore he had seen Harrigan and hoped to find him in the same place."

"That's part of the plot. Now, then, you go to Chick, who's watching the body of the woman. I'm going to take Gaspard uptown and have a look at that part of the city where Harrigan left his passengers."

Nick and Gaspard went to the Thirty-third street station of the Sixth avenue elevated road.

They walked to the edge of the platform on the uptown end.

Suddenly Gaspard gave a violent start. He uttered an exclamation of surprise and pointed across the tracks.

"What is it?" cried Nick.

"The man who was in room B!" exclaimed Gaspard. "I am sure of it!"

At that instant a downtown train rushed into the station, cutting off Nick's view.

And a half-second later an uptown train pulled in on their side. Nick pushed open a gate before the train had fairly stopped. He dragged Gaspard after him.

The gateman tried to stop them, but Nick pushed the fellow in the car so violently that he sat down on the floor.

Then the detective pulled the other gate open, and, still dragging Gaspard, sprang down in the space between the tracks.

The other train was just starting. Nick leaped up and opened one of the gates.

Gaspard stood trembling. Excitement and terror rendered him incapable of action.

Nick reached down, and, seizing the man by the shoulders, lifted him up to the platform of the car as if he had been a child of ten.

"Look back," cried the detective, pushing Gaspard to the other side of the car. "Is your man still at the station?"

Two or three men were there, having, apparently, just missed the train.

It seemed possible that the criminal—if such he was—had seen Gaspard point, and had been shrewd enough not to board the car.

But Gaspard looked back and declared that his man was not there.

"Good," said Nick. "He must be on the train. We have him sure."

CHAPTER III.

JOHN JONES.

"I want you!" whispered Nick.

How many luckless criminals have been startled by those words! How many have seen the prison or the gallows rise before them at the sound!

In this case, however, the words seemed to produce less than the ordinary effect.

The man to whom they were addressed turned suddenly toward the detective, but did not shrink or tremble.

"I beg your pardon," said he; "I didn't quite understand what you said."

The man's coolness made Nick even more in doubt about Gaspard's identification.

After boarding the train they had walked through it hurriedly, and in the car next the engine Gaspard had clutched Nick's arm, whispering:

"There is your man!"

The person indicated was well-dressed, rather good-looking, and about thirty-five years old. There was nothing particularly striking about his appearance.

It would have been easy to have found dozens of such men on lower Broadway any day.

Nick feared a mistake. But Gaspard was sure.

"I never forget a face," he said. "That is the man whom I saw coming out of room B. That is the murderer."

The man was standing up and holding on to one of the straps. His profile was turned to them.

Nick waited until he turned and showed his full face. The detective was bound to give Gaspard every chance to change his mind.

But he remained firm, and at last Nick approached the accused and suddenly whispered the terrifying words in his ear.

Having done so, he was obliged to carry it through. Therefore, when the stranger asked Nick to repeat what he had said, the detective, in a low voice, inaudible to anybody else in the car, told him what the accusation was.

"This is ridiculous," said the man. "I read the story of this affair in the papers this morning, but I am not connected with it in any way. If you arrest me, you must be prepared to take the consequences."

"I guess we can manage the affair quietly," said Nick, "and give you no trouble at all. I suppose you were going downtown to business?"

"Yes."

"Well, I will go along, too, if you don't mind."

"By all means," said the man, and he looked much relieved.

"I understand what your duty is," he continued. "Since this imported French jackass has made this charge, of course you'll have to look into it. Come down to the office and make some inquiries, and then go up to my flat. I was at home last evening after eight o'clock."

"What did you do before that?"

"I had dinner with my wife, and then put her aboard a train. She's gone away on a visit."

"Where has she gone?"

"No, sir; none of that. I don't propose to have a detective go flying after her to scare her to death. She keeps out of this mess, if I have any say about it."

"But if you're arrested she'll hear about it and come back to the city."

"I'm not going to be arrested. You're too sensible a man to do such a thing. I can see that."

"Here we are. We get off at Franklin street. My place of business is just a little way up the street, toward Broadway."

They left the train. Nick was beginning to feel that a mistake had been made. This man's easy manner and perfect confidence were hard to square with the idea of his guilt.

"By the way," said the suspect, as they descended the stairs, "I forgot to give you my card."

He handed it to Nick as he spoke, and the detective read this:

MR. JOHN JONES.

ALLEN, MORSE & JONES,
Electrical Fixtures,
The "Sunlight" Lamp.

"What did I tell you!" exclaimed Gaspard, who was looking over Nick's shoulder. "It is the name that was on the register. He is the man."

But Nick took a different view. He was of the opinion that Mr. Jones had presented very strong evidence of his

complete innocence.

Anybody else might have signed himself "John Jones," but the real John Jones, never!

It would be mighty hard to convince a jury that a man meditating murder had recorded his correct name for the benefit of the police.

The coincidence was certainly astonishing, but it was in Jones' favor.

They walked over to the office of Allen, Morse & Jones.

Mr. Allen was there.

"Good-morning, Mr. Allen," said Jones, "My name has got me into trouble again."

"How is that?"

"Did you read about that French restaurant murder last night?"

"Well, I glanced at the story in one of the papers."

"This Frenchman here is a waiter in the place. He saw me in an elevated train just now, and told this other man, who is a detective, that I was the party who took that woman to the restaurant.

"That was bad enough, but when they found out what my name was, they convicted me immediately. It appears that the visitor to the restaurant signed the very uncommon name of John Jones on the books."

"Why, what the devil!" exclaimed Allen, looking wrathfully at poor Gaspard, who was shaking in his shoes. "Don't you know that this is a serious matter? What do you mean?"

"He is the man," cried Gaspard. "If I were dying, I would swear with my last breath that he is the man."

"But who's the woman?" asked Allen, turning to Nick. "And what has she to do with my partner?"

"That I cannot say," replied Nick; "she has not been identified."

"Then you have absolutely nothing to go upon except this fellow's word?"

"Nothing."

"Why, this is nonsense."

"Perhaps so," said Nick, "but you will admit that I would be false to my duty if I did not make an investigation."

"Investigate all you wish," laughed Jones. "But don't bother me any more than you have to. This is my busy day."

"I'm going right away," said Nick. "All I want of you is that you will give me your address, and meet me at your home in the latter part of the afternoon."

"Very well," said Jones, and he scribbled on a piece of paper. "I'll be there at half-past four o'clock."

Nick thanked Mr. Jones for his courtesy, and immediately withdrew. But he did not go far.

In a convenient doorway he wrote a note to Chick, on the back of the scrap of paper which Jones had given him, and sealed it in an envelope.

Then he sent Gaspard with it to Chick, who was on the lookout in the undertaker's room, where the body lay.

Having dispatched this message, Nick changed his disguise and kept watch over the establishment of Allen, Morse & Jones.

Nothing of importance happened until a little after noon, when a reply came from Chick.

Translated from the detective's cipher, it read as follows:

"The address is that of a good flat house. Jones lives there with his wife.

"They have been there only about two months. Nobody in the house knows anything about them.

"They had one servant, who was taken sick about two weeks ago and carried to a hospital, where she died.

"Since then they have lived absolutely alone. There was nobody in the house who had seen Mrs. Jones' face. She always wore a heavy veil.

"The only description I could get tallied with that of the body. The principal point was the hair.

"I have just found a woman who saw Mr. and Mrs. Jones go out yesterday afternoon. She remembers Mrs. Jones' dress. The description agrees with that found on the corpse.

"Jones carried an alligator-skin traveling-bag. Nobody saw either of them come back to the house, but Jones evidently slept there.

"I shall take the woman who saw them go out to the room where the body lies.

"Will send Patsy down with the result of this effort at identification. I believe it will show the woman to be Mrs. Jones. I send this that you may have warning."

"CHICK."

Nick read this note and then glanced across the street toward the office of Allen, Morse & Jones.

Through the window he could see Jones calmly writing a letter. Could it be possible that this man was guilty of so hideous a crime?

Half an hour passed, and then came the second message, as follows:

"Identified as Mrs. Jones."

CHAPTER IV.

ALL SORTS OF IDENTIFICATIONS.

"I am sorry to tell you, Mr. Jones, that the body of the woman murdered last night has been identified as that of your wife."

So spoke Nick, and this time Jones' calmness was not proof against the surprise.

"It can't be possible!" he exclaimed, leaping from his chair.

"I am so informed," said Nick, "and I must place you under arrest."

"But there is some infernal mistake here," said the accused. "I know that my wife is all right. This must be somebody else."

"A lady living in the same house with you has recognized the body."

"I don't care if she has. Nobody in that house knows my wife."

"Is there anybody in the city who does know her?"

"I can't think of anybody."

"How about the grocer with whom you traded?"

"Our servant attended to all that till she was taken sick. Since then I've done what little there was to do. We've eaten most of our meals at restaurants."

"What restaurants?"

"Oh, all around. There's the Alcazar, for instance, where we have sometimes dined together."

"Does the head waiter there know her?"

"I suppose he would remember her face. He doesn't know the name."

"All right. I'll have him look at the body."

"But, man, you're going to let me look at it, aren't you?" exclaimed Jones. "That would settle it, I should think."

"I'll take you there now, and we will try to get somebody from the Alcazar at the same time."

Nick took the prisoner at once to the Alcazar. The head waiter remembered Jones' face. He had seen him dining with a lady who had beautiful light hair.

The three went to the undertaker's rooms.

Nick watched Jones narrowly as he approached the body. He started violently at the first sight of it. Then he became calm.

"The hair is wonderfully like," he said, "but there is no resemblance between the two faces."

"That is true, gentlemen," said the head waiter; "this is not the lady."

"On the contrary," said a voice close beside them, "I believe that this lady was your wife, Mr. Jones."

All the color went out of Jones' face as he turned quickly toward the man who had spoken.

"Ah, Mr. Gottlieb," he said, "I am surprised to hear you say that."

"Mr. Gottlieb is the grocer from whom the Joneses bought their supplies," said Chick, who had advanced to Nick's side.

"I was not aware that you had ever seen my wife," said Jones, looking searchingly at the grocer.

"I never saw her plainly," said Gottlieb. "She came into my store once or twice, but always closely veiled. So I cannot be sure; and, of course, if you insist that this is not your wife's body, I must be mistaken."

"You are mistaken, sir," said Jones, coldly.

He turned to Nick.

"Mr. Gottlieb has sealed my doom for the present," he said, with a smile. "I am ready to go with you."

Nick took his prisoner to Police Headquarters.

The detective had meanwhile sent Patsy in quest of Harrigan, the coachman.

Jones was taken into the superintendent's room, and a dozen other men were assembled there, waiting for the arrival of the cabman.

Harrigan was very nervous when he appeared.

"Youse fellies are tryin' to do me out o' my license," said he; "but I'm tellin' yer I was all right last night. I wasn't half so paralyzed as youse t'ink I was. Show me your man and I'll identify him."

Harrigan was led into the superintendent's room. When he saw how many men were there he seemed to be a great deal taken aback.

But he put a bold face on the matter, and promptly advanced, saying:

"This is the man."

Nick made a gesture of disappointment, and then he laughed, and the superintendent with him.

The man whom Harrigan had selected was Chick.

It was evident that the cabman was going upon pure guess-work. Being sharply questioned, he confessed that he had no idea how his "fare" of the previous night looked.

"I'll give it to youse dead straight," said he, at last; "I don't know whether the mug was white or black. Say, he might have been a Chineese."

"I believe that fellow is faking," said the sergeant to Nick, as Harrigan left the room.

"No; he's straight enough, I guess," said Nick. "He's not the sort of man who would have been let into a game of this kind."

Nick then proceeded to question the prisoner in the presence of Chick and the superintendent.

His answers were straightforward enough, but they threw little light upon the affair.

The only subject which he refused to discuss was the whereabouts of his wife. When questioned about her, he invariably declined to speak.

"She's gone on a little pleasure trip," he said, "and I want her to enjoy it. This affair will be all over when she gets back. She'll never hear of it, where she is, and that's as it should be."

Nick returned to his house, where he was informed that a visitor was waiting for him.

He found a gentleman somewhat under forty years of age, and apparently in prosperous circumstances, pacing the study floor.

The visitor was evidently greatly excited about something, for his hands trembled and he started nervously when Nick entered.

"Mr. Carter," he said, anxiously, "can I trust you fully?"

Nick laughed.

"I shan't do anything to prevent it," he said.

"Will you swear to keep what I shall tell you a secret?"

"No, sir; I will not."

The man made a despairing gesture.

"I supposed that your business was always strictly confidential," he said.

"So it is, but I take no oaths."

"I didn't mean that exactly, but—but—"

The man hesitated, stammered, and was unable to proceed.

"Come, sir," said Nick; "be calm. Tell me plainly what you want me to do for you."

"It isn't for me; it's for a—for a friend of mine."

"Very well; what can I do for your friend?"

"He is accused of a terrible crime, of which he is entirely innocent. I want you to save him."

"I have been asked to do that many times."

"And you have always succeeded?"

"Oh, no; in several cases the persons have been hanged."

The visitor shuddered violently.

"I had heard," he said, "that you never failed to find the guilty persons and to save the innocent."

"That is the truth. It has been my good fortune to leave no case unsettled."

"But you said that these innocent persons had been hanged."

"They were hanged," said Nick, "but they were not innocent. Their friends assured me that the persons were entirely guiltless, but it was not true."

"And therefore," Nick continued, looking straight into the man's eyes, "I should advise you to be very sure of your friend's innocence before you put the case in my hands."

The visitor looked very much relieved.

"I'm perfectly sure of it," he cried. "My friend had nothing to do with this case."

"I'm glad to hear it. Who is he?"

"The man who has been arrested in this restaurant murder case."

"John Jones?"

"That is the name he has given to the police."

"But isn't that his right name?"

"I—I don't know," stammered the visitor.

"He must be a very particular friend of yours, since you don't know what his name is!"

"I never saw him in my life."

"Look here, Mr.—"

"Hammond is my name."

"Well, Mr. Hammond, your statements don't hang together. You began by saying that this man was your friend."

"I didn't mean that exactly, but I sympathize with him. It must be terrible to be arrested for such a crime and to find the evidence growing stronger in spite of your innocence."

"How do you know that he is innocent?"

Before Hammond could reply there came a knock at the door.

Nick answered it.

"Come in, Gaspard," he said, throwing the door wide open.

"You sent for me, and—Good God! who is this?"

"You know him, then?"

"Yes, yes, I know him," cried Gaspard; "he is the man who was in room A last night."

CHAPTER V.

PATSY'S TIP.

Gaspard's declaration produced a stunning effect upon Hammond.

At first he seemed thunderstruck. There was a look in his face which made Nick say to himself, "It isn't true."

But whether the accusation was true or false, Nick knew at once that Hammond recognized Gaspard.

Yet he couldn't be a regular visitor to the place, because Gaspard had said that he had never seen either of the two men before the fatal evening.

Therefore, as Hammond had recognized Gaspard, he must be the man who was in room A, because the man in room B had not seen the head waiter, according to Gaspard's story.

Hammond, after the first shock of surprise, recovered his nerve wonderfully.

He calmly took a chair and sat there in deep thought for nearly five minutes. He paid no attention to questions.

Finally he looked up and said:

"I don't know why I should deny it to you. There is no charge against the man in room A."

"None whatever," said Nick. "He is wanted merely as a witness."

"It occurred to me that you might have some theory of a conspiracy in which both men were concerned."

"I never thought of it."

"Then I am not to be put under arrest?"

"Certainly not, unless some new evidence appears, and I do not expect it."

"Very well; I was the man in room A."

"And who was the lady?"

"I decline to mention her name. She has nothing to do with this case. You will easily understand that I do not wish to bring a lady's name into a tragedy of this kind."

"I can understand that. Now tell me why you feel so sure of this man Jones' innocence."

"Will you promise to keep me out of this affair as much as you can?"

"Why do you wish it? What are you afraid of?"

"Well," said Hammond, looking very much embarrassed, "I'm a married man, very respectable sort of a fellow; and the lady with whom I dined was not my wife. It's all right, you know. My wife is not a jealous woman. But the thing would not look well in print."

"I won't make this public if I can help it, Mr. Hammond. Not that I have much sympathy for you. You shouldn't have been there. But the publicity would annoy your wife, and do nobody any good."

"Thank you," said Hammond, with a grim smile; "now I will tell my story. There is very little to tell."

"We arrived before the other party. We heard them go into room B."

"By and by, I went out into the hall to find the waiter, who didn't answer my ring. I saw this man," pointing to Gaspard, "at the desk, and should have spoken to him, but just then the waiter hove in sight at the end of the hall."

"So I went back. Just as I was closing the door of our room, I heard the man come out of room B."

"I didn't see him, but I know that he went down the front stairs, for I heard his footsteps, and also heard the door shut."

"The waiter came in and finally went out again. We were just ready to leave the place when we heard the pistol-shot in the other room."

"Then we got out of the house just as fast as we could. It was cowardly, perhaps, but I knew that something terrible had happened, and I didn't want to be mixed up in it."

"Of course I wanted to keep the lady out of it, too, and—and—well, you can see that there were many reasons why I should have decided to make tracks."

"You know that the man was not in room B when the shot was fired?" said Nick.

"I'm sure of it."

"He might have come back."

"No; the front door makes a loud noise when it is shut I should have heard him if he had come in that way. And if he had come the other way this man would have seen him."

"You didn't see him at all, did you?"

"No."

"So you can't say whether Jones was the man?"

"No; but I'm sure he wasn't the murderer."

"You think it was suicide?"

"I'm sure of it. How could it have been anything else? The woman was alone."

"There might have been somebody else in the room."

"No; our waiter told us that the party consisted of only two."

"You mean Corbut?"

"I believe that's his name—the fellow who disappeared."

"How do you account for his disappearance?"

"I don't; but perhaps he was afraid of being mixed up in the affair. He may have a record which won't permit him to go before the police, even as a witness."

"How could he have got that cab?"

"I've thought a good deal about that. It was mentioned in the papers. I believe he may have slipped out the

front way, called the cab, and then gone back to get something.

"Perhaps he went back for his clothes but didn't dare to take them."

"And how about the cabman's story of the man who engaged the cab?"

"The cabman's a liar. That's plain enough."

"I'm afraid he is. Now, Mr. Hammond, could either Corbut or this man Gaspard have got into room B without your knowing it?"

"Easily. Great heavens, I never thought of that! One of them may be the murderer!"

Gaspard, at these words, turned as white as a sheet.

He was so frightened that his English—which was usually very fluent—deserted him, and he mumbled protestations of innocence in his mother tongue.

"Thank you, Mr. Hammond," said Nick, without appearing to notice Gaspard's distress. "I have no more questions to ask, but I would be obliged to you if you would wait here a few minutes for me."

Nick went into another room, where he knew that Patsy was waiting.

A set of signals is arranged in Nick's house, by which he always knows when one of his staff gets in.

"Patsy," said Nick, "there's a fellow up stairs whom you'll have to shadow."

"Gaspard?"

"No; a man who calls himself Hammond. Gaspard has identified him as the man who was in room A."

"Look here," said Patsy, "am I a farmer, or is the man Gaspard the greatest living identifier?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why, it strikes me that he picked out his men a good deal too easy. If it's all straight, I'd like the loan of his luck for a few days.

"That identification on the elevated station looked to me like a fake. I don't believe he ever intended that you should get hold of the man.

"In my opinion, he's simply running around identifying everybody he sees."

"But this man Hammond admits it."

"Is he telling the truth?"

"No," said Nick, with a peculiar smile, "I don't believe he is."

"Well, then, Gaspard's a liar, and if he's lied here, he may have done the same thing in Jones' case."

Nick looked shrewdly at his youthful assistant. He is very fond of this bright boy, and gives him every chance to develop his theories in those cases in which he is employed.

"Come, my lad," said the famous detective, "tell me what has set you against Gaspard."

"He's going to skip."

"Is that so? Well, this is serious."

"It's a fact. I got it from one of the men in the restaurant. My man was told of it by Corbut."

"Corbut?"

"Yes; and there's another suspicious circumstance. There's a Frenchwoman who is going to give little old New York the shake at the same time as Gaspard. They're going back to sunny France together.

"Now, nobody knows this but the man I talked with. Gaspard thinks that Corbut was the only one who knew it.

"So it was for Gaspard's interest, in case he really did this job, and lifted some valuable plunder off that woman, to get Corbut out of the way.

"Did he pay Corbut to skip first? And is he now identifying Tom, Dick and Harry for the purpose of bothering us and keeping us busy till he can light out?"

"It's worth looking into," said Nick. "At any rate, you stick to Gaspard. I'll put somebody else onto Hammond."

CHAPTER VI.

MRS. JOHN JONES.

Nothing of great importance occurred in the case until the next afternoon when Nick was at Police Headquarters.

He was talking with Superintendent Byrnes.

"The identification of that woman gets stronger all the time," said the superintendent. "I'm beginning to think that she is really the wife of our prisoner."

"It looks so," said Nick.

At that moment a card was brought in. The superintendent looked at it and whistled softly.

Then he handed the card to Nick, who read the name. The two men exchanged glances, and both smiled.

"Mrs. John Jones," said Nick; "well, this puts a new face on the matter."

"It's a great case," was the reply. "I'm mighty glad you happened to be on the scene at once."

He turned to the officer who had brought the card, and directed that Mrs. Jones should be admitted immediately.

A pretty young woman entered. She was of about the same height as the unfortunate victim of the tragedy in the restaurant, and much like her in build.

The faces did not resemble each other in outline, but the coloring was similar. There was a faint resemblance in the large, light blue eyes.

The hair was of the same peculiar shade, and nearly as luxuriant. But nobody would ever have mistaken one woman for the other, after a fair look at their faces.

The costumes, however, were positively identical. Mrs. John Jones, to all appearances, wore the very same clothes as Nick had seen upon the woman in room B.

Mrs. Jones was evidently very nervous, but she made a fine attempt to control herself.

"You have my husband under arrest, I believe," she said. "And he is accused, they say, of killing me."

She tried to smile, but it was rather a ghastly effort.

The superintendent motioned the woman to a seat.

"Mr. John Jones is here," he said, "and he is suspected of murder."

"I have read about it," replied the woman. "There certainly appeared to be evidence against him, but of course you must be aware that I know him to be innocent."

"How?"

"Because I was with him when the crime was committed. At half-past seven o'clock of that evening we were walking toward the Grand Central Depot.

"We had dined in our flat. The people who say they saw us go out tell the truth.

"But we came back. It was my intention to take an afternoon train, but I decided to wait.

"So we came back and had dinner. Nobody saw us go in or out of the flat.

"After dinner we walked to the depot, and I took the eight-ten train for my home in Maysville, ten miles from Albany.

"I arrived in Albany Wednesday morning, and remained there with friends throughout the day and night. Then I went to Maysville, where I heard the news, and came back at once."

The superintendent touched his bell. Two minutes later John Jones was brought into the room.

"Amy!" exclaimed he. "How came you here?"

He ran up to her, and they greeted each other affectionately. The woman, who had controlled herself up to this point, burst into tears. Jones turned in wrath toward Nick.

"Haven't we had enough of this infernal nonsense?" he exclaimed. "You have raised the devil with my business and scared my wife into a fit. Now let me out, and arrest the Ameer of Afghanistan. He had more to do with this affair than I did."

Nick did not reply, but he made a secret sign to the superintendent.

"You are at liberty, Mr. Jones," said Byrnes, calmly. "I regret that it was necessary to detain you so long."

"I have no complaint to make against you," said Jones. "It was that man's work, and he shall pay for it."

He scowled at Nick, and then, after bowing to the superintendent, walked out of the room with his wife on his arm.

"Shall I call a man?" asked Byrnes.

"If you please," said Nick. "My force is pretty busy."

"Musgrave!" said the superintendent.

A man appeared so suddenly that he seemed to come out of the wall.

"Shadow the couple that has just left here," said Byrnes. "You are under Mr. Carter's orders until dismissed by him."

Musgrave turned to Nick.

"I have no special instructions," said Nick, "except that you keep your eyes on the woman."

The officer saluted, and vanished almost as quickly as he had come in.

At half-past seven o'clock that evening Musgrave was on guard outside the flat, the address of which had been given to Nick by Jones.

An old man selling papers came along the street, calling "Extra!" in a cracked voice.

Musgrave bought a paper.

"Well," said the newsman, in Nick Carter's voice, "what have you to report?"

"From headquarters they went to an employment agency on Sixth avenue. They engaged a colored girl as a servant.

"They then came straight here, and the girl followed them. Mr. and Mrs. Jones have not been out since."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Perfectly. There is no way to get out of that house from the rear."

"How about the fire-escape?"

"There is only that one on the side which you can see. The little yard back of the house is walled in by buildings."

"So Mr. and Mrs. Jones must be inside?"

"Yes."

"And the girl?"

"She is out. She has been going on errands half a dozen times, but usually to the grocer's or the butcher's around the corner. I don't know where she has gone this time. She's been out about a quarter of an hour."

"All right. I'm going over there."

Nick changed his disguise to that in which Jones had seen him. He did it in the hall of the flat house, while waiting for the door to be opened in answer to his ring.

Jones met him on the upper landing.

"Look here," said Jones, when he recognized Nick, "isn't this going a little too far? What do you want now?"

"I would like to ask Mrs. Jones a few questions if you have no objections."

"I object very seriously."

"Will you ask her if she is willing to see me?"

"No; I won't."

"Then I shall have to use my authority."

"Don't do that. Come now, be a good fellow. Amy is sick with all this worry. She's just gone to bed. Let her alone until to-morrow."

"I will," said Nick. "Good-night."

He descended the stairs and rejoined Musgrave, who was standing in a dark place on the opposite side of the street.

"Have you seen a light in that window?" asked Nick, pointing to the flat.

"No."

"Then Jones lied to me a minute ago when he said that his wife had just gone to bed. That window is in the principal bedroom of the flat."

"There's been no light there."

"Then they've fooled you, Musgrave."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Mrs. Jones is out."

"It can't be possible."

"It's true. She's gone out disguised as her own servant."

"I can't believe it. Why, the girl's black as your hat."

"That's why they engaged her, in my opinion. It made the trick easier. A black face is a good disguise. But I'm going to be sure about it."

"How?"

"I'm going to see whether the colored girl is in the flat."

"How can you get in?"

"I'm going down the air shaft. The servant's room opens on that shaft. They'll have made her go in there so that her light won't show, as it would if she were in the kitchen."

Nick went to an engine-house near by, where he secured a coil of knotted rope.

He wished to make his investigations secretly, so as not to put Jones on his guard. It would not have been safe to get into the flat by the ordinary methods.

By using the fire escape of the building next door to the flat house, Nick got to the roof.

The top of the air shaft was covered with a framework, in which large panes of glass were set.

Nick removed one of them. Then he made his rope fast, and crept through the space where the glass had been.

The Jones' flat was next to the top, so Nick had a short descent.

But there was an awful stretch of empty air under him as he hung there.

The shaft went to the basement floor, about seventy feet below the level of the window which opened into the room occupied by the Jones' new servant.

He found that window readily. One glance through it was enough to satisfy him.

There sat the colored girl, reading a book. Nick's suspicions had been correct.

Naturally he did not delay very long in the air shaft. He had a hard climb to make, hand over hand, to the roof.

The instant that his eyes rested on the girl, he began the ascent.

He had gone up less than six feet when the rope suddenly gave way, and he found himself plunging downward through the shaft.

CHAPTER VII.

THE WARDROBE OF GASPARD'S FRIEND.

Nick Carter is hard to kill. A good many crooks have tried to put him out of the world, and a fair percentage of them have lost their own lives in the attempt without inflicting any injury upon Nick.

He is a man of resources, and that's what saves him. When one thing fails him, he finds something else to take its place.

And so, when that rope gave way, he took the next best thing.

That happened to be the sill of the window of Mr. Jones' bath-room. Nick seized it with a grip of iron as he shot downward.

The strain on his arms was something awful, but he held on. His fingers gripped the wood till they dented it.

In two seconds he had scrambled through the window into Jones' flat.

It was done so noiselessly that the colored servant in the room directly opposite, across the narrow shaft, was not disturbed in her reading.

From the bath-room Nick made his way to the hall, and thence to the parlor, where Mr. Jones—to judge by the light in the window observed by Musgrave—had decided to spend the evening.

Mr. Jones was not visible when Nick looked into the room.

The bedroom adjoining was also empty.

Nick ran through the flat, but saw nobody. He returned to the parlor, and there stood Mr. Jones under the chandelier.

"Well, upon my word!" exclaimed Jones, "how did you get here?"

"I might ask you the same," said Nick, "but it isn't worth while."

"I've been here all the time."

"Except when you were on the roof."

"Nonsense! What should I be doing on the roof."

"It wasn't what you were doing; it was what you were undoing that bothered me. You were undoing the knot with which I fastened my rope before I descended your air shaft to get a peep at your servant."

"Nonsense again, Mr. Carter. How could I get to the roof?"

"I'll show you just how it was done. In the first place, you saw me coming back to the house, and you guessed what I was going to do.

"You went into this room," and Nick dragged Jones into a sort of closet adjoining the parlor, "and you got out of that window onto the fire escape.

"That led you to the roof, and the rest was simple. You saw me go down, and you tried to make me go down farther and a good deal faster. But you failed, and the game's up. Now come to headquarters again."

"What for?"

"For trying to kill me. That's the charge against you. And I haven't got through with you on that other matter."

"But for heaven's sake pity my wife!"

"What's the matter with her?"

"She will be crazy when she gets back and finds me gone."

"One of my men will tell her where you are. Why did you lie to me about her going out? I've a great mind to place her, too, under arrest."

"You can't do it. It's no crime to dodge a detective. I admit that she did it, but for a very innocent purpose. She has gone to see our lawyer."

"Very well; I will attend to that later. Now, come with me."

Nick took Jones to the street. Musgrave got a policeman, and Jones was put in his care.

Musgrave remained on the watch for Mrs. Jones, while Nick went to get a report from Patsy, who was shadowing Gaspard.

Jones' last words to Nick were these:

"I am a victim of circumstances. I had nothing to do with the murder in the restaurant, nor with any attempt upon your life. You are doing me a grave injustice. If you were not as blind as a bat you would see who the real criminals are."

These words were pronounced in a calm and steady tone, and it cannot be denied that they produced a great effect upon Nick.

"If it should prove that I have wronged you," he said, "I will repay you for the injury to the limit of your demand."

And the detective did a lot of hard thinking while he was walking toward Gaspard's lodgings, where he expected to meet Patsy.

Certainly if Jones ever succeeded in establishing his innocence he would have won a friend in Nick Carter, whose good will is worth a fortune to any man.

Nick found Patsy outside the house where Gaspard lodged.

"I'm dead onto this fellow," said the youth. "He's just about ready to flit. He's bought lots of stuff to-day, and is flush with money.

"A man just went in there with a suit of clothes. Two delivery wagons from dry goods stores have been here. I suppose that the stuff they brought belongs to the woman who is going with Gaspard."

"Have you seen her?"

"No; she has kept mighty dark."

"Hello! what's this?"

Nick drew Patsy more closely into the shadow of the steps by which they were standing.

A carriage rumbled over the pavement and stopped before the door of Gaspard's lodging-house.

"Upon my word," said Nick, "it's my old friend Harrigan on the box. The way people keep bobbing up in this case is something wonderful."

"Perhaps the woman's in the cab," whispered Patsy.

On the contrary, the cab was empty.

Harrigan got off the box and rang the bell.

Nick heard him ask for Gaspard Lebeau. Gaspard was summoned.

"I've two trunks for you," said Harrigan.

"For me?" asked Gaspard.

"Yes; a young woman hired me to bring them, and she said it would be all right. You'd pay the price."

"What sort of a woman?"

"A very gallus French siren with a big white hat and a black plume as long as the tail of me horse."

"All right," said Gaspard, promptly; "bring in the trunks."

They were carried up the stairs to Gaspard's room.

Harrigan mounted the box and drove away.

"Follow him," said Nick. "Bring him back here in about half an hour."

Patsy darted away in pursuit of the cab.

Nick walked up to the door of Gaspard's house and rang the bell.

He was directed to the Frenchman's room.

Gaspard was examining the two trunks. He looked very much embarrassed at the sight of Nick.

"What's all this, Gaspard?" asked the detective. "I hear you're going back to France."

"I? Oh, no. New York suits me much better."

"But what are these trunks doing here?"

Gaspard looked particularly foolish.

"They are the property of a friend—a lady. To tell the truth, I hope to marry her. A charming girl, monsieur; and innocent as a dove."

"Why does she send her trunks here?"

"Ah, that I do not know. It was not agreed upon."

"Have you any idea what is in them?"

"Her wardrobe. Ah, she is extravagant. She buys many dresses. But then, what would you have? When one is young and beautiful—"

Gaspard finished his sentence with a sweep of the arms.

"They are heavy," said Nick, lifting one of the trunks and setting it crosswise on a lounge.

He took a bunch of keys from his pocket. Gaspard seemed aghast.

"You would not open it?" he cried.

"Perhaps it won't be necessary," said Nick. "This may answer."

He drew a knife from his pocket and opened one of the blades, which was sharpened like a very large nut-pick.

With a sudden movement, he struck this into the bottom of the trunk, and then withdrew it.

A dark red stream followed the blade when it was withdrawn. The end of the trunk projected over the side of the couch, and the red fluid dripped upon the carpet.

"My God!" exclaimed Gaspard. "It is blood!"

"So it would seem," said Nick, quietly.

He set the trunk upon the floor and snapped back the lock with a skeleton key.

Then he threw open the lid and revealed a mass of excelsior and scraps of newspapers.

This being torn away disclosed a dead and ghastly face—the face of unfortunate Corbut, the waiter.

CHAPTER VIII.

TRACING THE TRUNKS.

Corbut's body had been cut in two. Only half was in the trunk which Nick had opened.

The other half was not, however, far away. It was in the other trunk.

Both trunks contained considerable blood, but they had been neatly lined with rubber cloth, apparently taken

from a rubber blanket and a man's heavy waterproof coat.

It was so fitted that the trunks, when closed, were water-tight.

"The neatest job I ever saw," said Nick. "Come, Gaspard, tell the story."

"I swear to you," cried Gaspard, "that I know nothing about it."

At this moment Patsy rapped on the door. He had brought back Harrigan.

"Come in!" said Nick; and they both entered.

"Holy mother!" shrieked Harrigan, when he saw the open trunks. "So help me, gentlemen, I don't know nothing about this business. I ain't in it. I'm tellin' yer straight. Youse don't believe I had anything to do wid this, do yer?"

"You brought the trunks here," said Nick.

"Lemme tell youse all about it," cried Harrigan, who was so anxious to tell that he couldn't talk fast enough. "De French leddy struck me on me old place. You know. Where I was de odder night.

"She talked a kind o' dago, but I tumbled to what she was a-givin' me. This was about half-past seven o'clock.

"'Meet me,' says she, 'in an hour.' An' she give me street an' number.

"It was West Fifty-seventh street; but dere ain't no such number. Dere's nuttin' but a high board fence.

"But that didn't make no difference, 'cause when I got dere, her jiblets was a-standing on der sidewalk, waitin' for me.

"'Drive over ter de corner,' says she, 'and' turn round an' come back.'

"I did it, an' when I got dere, she showed me dese two trunks. I hadn't seen 'em before.

"Den she give me dis mug's address, an' two bones for me fare, an' tole me ter come down here, which I did, an' I wish ter — I hadn't; see?"

"That's a pretty good story, Harrigan," said Nick. "Patsy, get a policeman to stay here with Gaspard."

Patsy brought the blue-coat in a few minutes.

"Now, we'll go up to Fifty-seventh street," said Nick.

Half an hour later they had found the place where, as Harrigan claimed, "de French leddy" had delivered the trunks to him.

"I t'ought o' course she'd been fired out o' some boardin'-house," said Harrigan. "Dere's a hash-mill dere on der right. I had an idea she'd been trun out o' dere."

Nick meanwhile had been examining the sidewalk with the aid of his dark lantern.

"Clever work," he said. "There are no marks on the sidewalk. The trunks were not dragged. That woman must be pretty strong. You say you didn't see the trunks when you first drove up?"

"No."

"Then they couldn't have been here. Where were they? Not in any of these houses. She couldn't have got them out quick enough. Then they must have been behind that fence."

There was a little gate in the fence, which Nick opened as he spoke.

"Ah, here we have tracks," he said. "It's all clear enough now. The trunks were brought across this vacant lot from one of the houses facing the other street."

The lot is the width of three flat houses, which stand behind it. There are no gates in the fence between the yards of the houses and the lot, but Nick found a wide board that could be pulled off and replaced without much trouble.

Passing through the opening made by taking away this board, he found himself in the yard of the middle house.

"The trunks came from here," he said. "They were lowered down in the dumb waiter to the cellar and then carried through the lot to Fifty-seventh street.

"I'll leave the rest of this job to you, Patsy. Find out all you can and have as many witnesses as you can get together, at the superintendent's office to-morrow afternoon, at three o'clock. We're going to have a special examination into this case."

The special examination began promptly at the hour named by Nick.

All the persons hitherto mentioned in connection with the case—except, of course, the two victims—were present. There were also several witnesses whom Patsy had secured.

"The case which I have made out," said Nick, "is perfectly clear. It begins with Gaspard's identification of the prisoner, Jones.

"We know that he was at the restaurant when the crime was committed. His name is on the books.

"In some way, which I am not now prepared to fully explain, the waiter, Corbut, obtained a knowledge of the crime. It was necessary for the criminal to get Corbut out of the way.

"I saw Corbut get into a cab at the door of the restaurant. The driver, Harrigan, testified to taking him and another man to a point on West Fifty-seventh street. He was not sure of the exact spot, but he fixed the locality in a general way.

"From that point all trace of Corbut was lost for a time. At last his body was found.

"I succeeded in tracing the body back to a place near the spot where Harrigan last saw Corbut alive.

"I discovered that the body had been removed from a flat house on West Fifty-eighth street.

"My assistant, Patsy, questioned the people in that house. He learned that the third flat had been occupied by a couple who lived very quietly.

"The man was often away. I now desire to ask the witness, Eliza Harris, who lives in that house, when she last saw the man in question—the man who rented that third flat."

A bright-eyed little woman arose at this, and said:

"I see him now. There he is!"

She pointed to John Jones.

"He wore a false beard," she continued, "but I know him. And there's the woman."

She stretched out her hand toward Mrs. Jones.

"To their flat," Nick continued, "as I have every reason to believe, Corbut was taken by Jones on that night, and there he was murdered and his body cut in two.

"It was placed in the trunks. Jones intended, probably, to remove it next day, but his arrest prevented.

"Of course it was necessary to get the body out of the way very soon. But Jones was too closely watched. That work had to be done by the woman, and she did it exceedingly well."

Nick told how Musgrave had been duped.

"Now," he continued, "nothing remains but to clear up the details of the crime in the restaurant. I shall proceed to state exactly how it was done."

At this moment Jones, who had previously remained perfectly calm, uttered a horrible groan, and half arose to his feet. He sank back fainting.

And then came a surprising incident, for which even the shrewd superintendent of police had been wholly unprepared.

A pale-faced man, who had been sitting beside Nick, arose and cried, in a voice that trembled with emotion:

"Stop! Stop! I can bear this no longer!"

It was Hammond, the man who begged Nick to save Jones.

While Nick had been speaking, Hammond's eyes had been fixed upon Jones' face. He had watched the agony of fear growing upon the wretched man and gradually overcoming him.

And when the burden became too great for the accused to bear, Hammond also reached the limit of his endurance.

"I can't stand it," he cried. "You shall not torture this innocent man any longer."

"What do you mean?" asked the superintendent.

"This is what I mean. The fear of disgrace has kept me silent too long. Now I will confess everything. Do you think I will sit here and let an innocent man be condemned and his wife put to torture to save me from the just punishment of my fault?"

"Never! Listen to me. It was I who took that unhappy woman to the place where she met her death. It was I who wrote that name in the register.

"I! I, and not that innocent man, was her companion. The waiter, Gaspard, is mistaken.

"I am the man who was in room B!"

CHAPTER IX.

HAMMOND'S STORY.

The effect of this statement can hardly be exaggerated.

It shook the very foundation of the case against the prisoner. If Gaspard's identification could be disproved, it seemed almost sure that Jones was saved.

Even though it could be shown beyond a doubt that Corbut had been murdered in a flat which was rented by Jones, that would not prove that Jones had done it.

The murderer was evidently the man who had ridden in the cab with Corbut. And Harrigan, the only witness, had failed to recognize Jones as that man.

The suspicion must instantly arise that a plot had been carefully laid, with the purpose of putting the crime upon Jones.

Some enemy had signed his name on the register, and the same cruel wretch had decoyed Corbut to the vacant flat and murdered him there. It was easy to suppose that the criminal knew the flat to be empty and had obtained a key.

It might have been by this secret enemy's connivance that the trunks were removed and sent to Gaspard.

But if Hammond was the wretch who had done all this, why had he confessed?

All these and many other thoughts must have rushed through the mind of the superintendent, in the pause which followed Hammond's declaration.

Byrnes looked at Nick for an explanation.

"This is an extraordinary statement, Mr. Hammond," said Nick. "Have you any evidence to support it?"

"I have ample evidence. I was seen in the company of the woman now dead, not fifty yards from the restaurant on the night when she met her death. I can call one of the most prominent and respected men in this city to prove that. The Rev. Elliot Sandford is the man."

This name produced a great impression.

"Why has he kept silence?" asked Nick.

"He promised me that he would do so as long as his conscience would permit. I called upon him on the morning after the crime.

"He believed me when I asserted my innocence. He agreed to be silent for the sake of my family."

"But who is the dead woman?" asked Nick.

"I have not the least idea."

"You did not know her!"

"No. Let me tell the full story. It was a chance acquaintance. I met her on the street that afternoon.

"I was walking behind her on Twenty-third street. You know what wonderful hair she had. I was admiring it.

"Suddenly I saw her drop a little purse. I picked it up and handed it to her, and somehow we fell into conversation.

"Her manner mystified me. Sometimes she seemed to be laboring under some secret grief which nearly drove her to tears. In another moment she would be apparently as merry as a schoolgirl.

"She showed no reserve whatever, but something in her manner warned me that she was a lady, and I did not presume upon her confidence.

"We walked together a long while, and at last we found ourselves near that restaurant. How we came there I do not know. I paid no attention to where we were going. I was too much fascinated by my companion.

"Suddenly she said: 'It is late and I am hungry. Let us go to dinner.'

"I thought it a strange thing to say, but I was glad enough to comply. We went into that restaurant because it was right before us.

"I signed the first name that came into my head, and then Corbut showed us into the private dining-room.

"I ordered a dinner, but before it was served, I began to be a good deal surprised at my companion's behavior. She paced up and down the room, and every now and then she listened at the door which was between us and room A.

"'I have all a woman's curiosity,' she said, 'I'd like to hear what those people are saying over their dinner.'

"I tried to make her sit down, and playfully took hold of her. Then I made a discovery which frightened me.

"The woman had a pistol in her pocket.

"Suddenly she turned upon me and exclaimed:

"'What shall we do after dinner? I'll tell you what I'd like. I want to go to the theater. Let's see something real funny. Yes, I must go. You run out now and get the tickets. There's a place just down the street where they're sold. You can get back before your dinner is cold.'

"Of course, it was perfectly plain that she was trying to get rid of me. Well, I had no objection. That pistol had scared me badly. I didn't want to be mixed up in a scandal.

"So I took my hat and cleared out. But once on the street, my courage came back, and also my curiosity. I wanted to know more of that strange woman.

"I bought the theater tickets and hurried back. I opened the door of room B.

"You know what I saw. She sat there dead, with the pistol by her side. She had committed suicide.

"I rushed out with the intention of calling for help, but fear overcame me. I looked around into the hall. This man Gaspard was at the desk.

"I dared not summon him. I turned and ran."

Hammond ceased, and a sigh ran around the room. Nick could read relief in all the faces. The mystery was solved. The innocent man was no longer to suffer under unjust suspicion.

That was what could be seen in the faces. Hammond's words had the ring of truth. Neither the superintendent nor Nick nor any other person there doubted a single statement of his story.

"When Gaspard identified me as the man in room A," Hammond continued, "I thought I saw a chance to save Mr. Jones very easily, and so I told a falsehood."

"It was a foolish thing to do," said Nick. "The truth is always best. If we had known at the outset what we know now, Mr. Jones might have been spared a great deal of trouble. Since the woman committed suicide—"

"Hold on!" cried the superintendent. "How do you account for the murder of Corbut?"

"He must have found the body and robbed it. Probably he took some money and a diamond ring. There was the mark of a ring on her finger, but the ring was gone.

"Corbut fled with these things. He engaged Harrigan's cab. He was decoyed to that flat by some woman, probably, who knew that nobody was in it, and was there murdered.

"Of course, neither Mr. nor Mrs. Jones had anything to do with it. Now, if Mr. Jones would only explain how he happened to be at that restaurant, the case would be clear. We know positively that he was there."

A great light of hope had shone in Jones' face while Hammond was telling his story, and when Nick added his explanation of Corbut's death, the prisoner nearly laughed for joy.

"It's true I was there," he said. "My wife and I dined in room A, and—"

"Fool!" exclaimed the woman, in a terrible voice. "Don't you see that this is a trap?"

In her wild excitement, she covered Jones' mouth with her hand to prevent his speaking further.

"That is true," said Nick. "It was a trap, and the wretch has fallen into it. Jones, you have put the halter around your neck."

"No! It is a lie!" exclaimed Jones, freeing himself from the woman's grasp. "I tell you that I was in room A. The crime, if there was a crime, was committed in room B."

"No, it wasn't," said Nick. "It was committed in room A."

CHAPTER X.

THE TRUE STORY OF MRS. JOHN JONES.

Jones fell back into his chair. The woman bit her lip till the blood spurted out.

Then suddenly the color left her face. She sat up, staring straight before her, and she did not move during the explanation which Nick gave.

While he was speaking, the detective watched her narrowly. Certainly she was meditating some remarkable action. He wondered what it could be.

"Yes," said Nick, turning to the superintendent, "we have at last straightened out the matter of those two rooms and their occupants.

"As to the spot where the crime was committed, I have not been in doubt from the first.

"You will remember that the fatal wound was visible on both the woman's temples. The bullet passed entirely through her head.

"But where was the bullet? That was the question which I asked myself at once.

"I could not find it in room B, where the body lay. Then I tried room A, with no better success.

"At this point Chick took up the hunt, and carried it to the end. The bullet was in neither room. It was just between them.

"You remember that there was a door which I found fastened upon both sides.

"Chick opened that door, and in its framework, the wood of which was old and soft, he found the bullet.

"The mark was covered when the door was shut. Therefore the door must have been open when the shot was fired.

"The position of the bullet shows that the shot was fired from room A. Then the woman, for some reason, had got into that room. She had unlocked the door on her side and had managed to induce the persons on the other side to slip their bolt.

"Now, why did she do this? Of course there is only one answer. Jealousy was her motive. The man in room A was her husband.

"I have satisfied myself of that. She must have known that he was going to dine in that house with another woman.

"It is clear that she made the acquaintance of Hammond because she was determined to get into that restaurant, and women are not admitted alone.

"The dropping of the purse was, of course, a very simple trick. She had noticed Hammond behind her, and as he was evidently a gentleman, she decided to use him for her purpose.

"You have heard how she led him to the restaurant. Of course it was only by chance that they got the room next to that in which her husband was.

"Hammond has told how she listened to the voices, and how she got rid of him.

"What followed can be easily understood. She got into room A. She drew her pistol and attempted to shoot either her faithless husband or his companion.

"Jones disarmed her and shot her with her own pistol.

"Then he carried her into room B, and put her in that chair.

"At that moment Corbut entered, for the door of room B was not locked.

"In some way they bribed him to keep silence. They sent him into room A, where he locked the connecting door on that side.

"Jones fastened it on the side of room B and fled. It was then that Gaspard saw him coming out of room B. And that's what mixed the case so badly.

"It gave us the wrong arrangement of men in those rooms. That was the only reason why I ever doubted Jones' guilt. I was convinced that the man who had brought the woman to the house was not the man who had shot her.

"You did not know, Mr. Hammond, that when you told me, in my house, that you were the man in room A, that you practically confessed to being the murderer."

At these words, Hammond gave a dry and painful gasp. He saw what an escape he had had.

"As to the two women," Nick continued, "it is easy to read the secret.

"Jones had two wives. The real wife, now dead, lived in the flat the address of which Jones gave me. This woman lived in the Fifty-eighth street flat, where Corbut was murdered.

"Jones divided his time between them. He really loved this one and wished to be rid of the other.

"His true wife surprised his secret at last, and it led her to her death.

"That night after the murder the plan was formed by which this woman was to personate the other. The striking similarity in the hair, which was the most conspicuous beauty of each, suggested the plot.

"Perhaps Jones had thought of such a thing long before. That may have led him to keep his real wife practically unknown in this city, while he was frequently seen with this woman.

"As to the dresses, this woman, who is a very clever dressmaker, as I am told, doubtless had time to copy the other's costume in the night and the day following the crime.

"She did most of the work in Albany, where she went as soon as possible. Then wearing the duplicate dress, she went to her friends in Maysville, and afterward came here.

"Is it all plain now?"

"It is clear as a bell, Mr. Carter," said the superintendent.

"Wait a moment!"

It was the woman's voice. She spoke calmly, and looked straight into Nick's face.

"You have made one grave error," she said. "It was not John who killed that woman; it was I.

"She tried to shoot him, and I wrenched the pistol from her hand. I shot her dead.

"The plot was all mine. It was I who bribed Corbut. It was I who killed him.

"John brought him to our flat. I sent my husband away, and when he returned a few minutes later, Corbut was dead. John had no guilty hand in either crime.

"He fainted at the sight of Corbut's body. When he came to himself, the body was no longer to be seen. I had put it into the trunks. It was I who afterward sent them to Gaspard.

"These crimes I committed for love of this man. I had been his wife for five years, and for three of them I did not know he had another.

"And when I found it out, I did not do as this woman did. I simply loved him more.

"I love him still, and because I love him I tell the truth to save him. Yes, more, because I love him, I will shed more blood. He shall not see me imprisoned or condemned to death. I will spare him that pain."

As she spoke, she drew a little ornamental dagger from her dress. It was a mere toy. Nobody would have supposed it to be a deadly weapon.

However, Nick sprang forward to prevent her from doing herself an injury.

He was too late. She plunged the dagger into her brain.

So firm and true was her hand that the slender blade pierced the thin bone of her right temple, and was driven in until the hilt made an impression on her white skin like a seal upon wax.

Jones uttered a scream of horror at this sight. He, too, had attempted to stay her hand, but had been too slow.

As she fell, he plucked the dagger from the wound and attempted to drive it into his own brain. But Nick caught his arm and wrested the blood-stained weapon from him.

Deprived thus of the means for ending his life, Jones fell upon his knees before the woman and covered her hands with kisses, nor could he be taken away, until the hands were chilled by death.

And that was the strange end of the affair. The woman's confession, though it may not have been true, will doubtless save Jones' life.

At the time of this writing the district attorney is of the opinion that a plea of murder in the second degree had better be accepted. There is no indication that the prisoner will fight the case.

So Jones will spend his days in prison, though he will escape the death chair.

A word should be added about the witness, Gaspard. He has been cleared of all reproach, and has sailed for France with his bride.

NICK CARTER'S GHOST STORY.

CHAPTER I.

THE VANISHING THIEF.

Nick Carter's friends often ask him whether, in the course of his remarkable experience as a detective, he has ever encountered anything which could not have been the work of human hands.

Few people, nowadays, will own that they believe in ghosts. Yet most of us would be less sure about it in a grave-yard at midnight than on Broadway at noon.

A man who can tell a reasonable story about having seen a ghost may not find many believers, but he will get plenty of listeners, for we are all eager to hear about such things.

So Nick, who always likes to oblige his friends, does not deny the existence of spirits when he is asked whether he ever saw any. On the contrary, if he has the time to spare, he usually tells the following story:

A broad-shouldered, square-jawed, bright-eyed young man called on Nick one afternoon, and was ushered into the study.

His card had gone up ahead of him, and it bore the name—Horace G. Richmond.

Nick ran his eye over his visitor, and decided that he was a fellow who knew the world and was getting everything out of it that there is in it.

He met Nick's eye with the air of a man who is going to do something unusual, and wants to announce at the start that he can back it up.

"I have a case for you, Mr. Carter, if you will take it," he said.

"State it," replied Nick.

"It's a robbery case, and a mighty queer one. I don't pretend to understand it or any part of it."

"Who's been robbed?"

"My uncle, Colonel Richmond, or, I should say, his daughter, Mrs. Pond. But the robbery affects my uncle perhaps more seriously than his daughter. It is on his account that I am here."

"Tell the story."

"I'll do it, but first let me say that whatever others may think of the case, I believe it's just simply theft. Mrs. Pond has a lot of jewelry and somebody is stealing it a piece at a time.

"That's my view, but my uncle's is different. He says that these robberies are not the work of human hands.

"Now, as for me, I try to keep my feet on the earth all the time. I want you to understand right at the start that I don't believe in any stuff about ghosts and hobgoblins.

"In my opinion, ghosts that steal diamonds ought to be in the jug, and will probably get there unless they turn over a new leaf.

"My uncle doesn't see as straight as that. Perhaps you remember that, three or four years ago, he fell into the hands of a couple of sharks who pretended to be mediums.

"He had always believed in spiritualism, and those crooks caught him just right. They called up the spooks of all the dead people he could think of. They got messages from the spirit land seven nights in the week and two matinees. My uncle simply went wild about it. You remember. It was all in the papers. They worked him beautifully, and if I had not stepped in and exposed them just in time they'd have got every cent he had."

"That would have been quite a haul," said Nick.

"Well, I should remark! He's worth more than four million dollars. I tell you, those bogus mediums thought they'd struck something very soft.

"However, I showed them up, and convinced my uncle that they were rank frauds. They're in Sing Sing now.

"My uncle did not give up his belief in spirits. He said 'these people are frauds, but there are others who honestly and truly hold communication with the departed.'

"I tell you, we've had a hard time keeping him out of the hands of sharpers since then. But we've succeeded.

"And now, by bad luck, this queer affair has come up, and all my uncle's faith has returned. He wants to consult mediums, and all that sort of thing.

"That's the only serious part of it. The jewels that have been stolen aren't worth over a couple of thousand dollars, all told.

"Of course, it's a nuisance to have such a thing happen in anybody's house, but we wouldn't care much if the mysterious circumstances were not driving my uncle's mind back to his pet delusion."

"What are these mysterious circumstances?" asked the detective.

"Why, it's like this: Colonel Richmond's aunt, Miss Lavina Richmond, was a queer old lady, who was once very rich. At that time she had a passion for collecting jewels. She used to invest her money in diamonds, just as another person might buy houses or railroad stock.

"Only about a tenth part of her fortune was invested so that she got any income out of it. In the last part of her life she lost all that part of her property, so that she hadn't anything in the world but her jewels.

"She wouldn't sell one, and there she was as poor in one sense as a lodger in City Hall Square—for she hadn't a cent of money—and yet owning diamonds and other precious stones worth nearly a million dollars.

"She wouldn't borrow on them; she wouldn't do anything but keep them locked up; and so she had to depend absolutely on my uncle for the necessities of life.

"He didn't mind that, of course, for he had plenty. She lived at his house, and eventually died there.

"She and my uncle never got along well, in spite of his kindness to her, and she had no friends except a Mrs. Stevens and her daughter. They're related to the Richmonds, but the money is all in the colonel's branch of the family.

"Mrs. Stevens and Millie, her daughter, are poor. They have just enough to live on. The colonel would take care of them, but they won't have it. They're too proud.

"Now, everybody thought that old Miss Lavina Richmond would leave her tremendous pile of diamonds to Millie Stevens. Indeed, Miss Richmond used to say so continually. I've heard her say, in the colonel's presence, that Miss Stevens should have the jewels; that such was her wish.

"Well, she died suddenly a year or more ago, and the only will that could be found was dated many years back, and left everything she possessed to the colonel's daughter.

"It was the greatest surprise that you can imagine. We all knew that such a will had been made, but we hadn't the slightest idea that it still existed, and that she had made no other. On the contrary, we knew positively that she had made a much later will in favor of Millie Stevens. But the document couldn't be found, and so the old one was submitted for probate.

"The colonel expected a contest, but the Stevenses did not make a murmur. It must have been a tremendous disappointment to them, but they bore it with perfect good nature. They didn't seem to feel half so badly about

it as my uncle did. If he had had his way, he would have given all the jewels to Miss Stevens.

"He said over and over again that he believed it was his aunt's wish that the girl should have them. And I can tell you, there's no man so particular as he is about respecting the wishes of the dead.

"Mrs. Pond would have turned over the whole lot to Millie Stevens, I believe, if it hadn't been for her husband.

"Mr. Pond isn't a rich man, and he didn't feel that he could afford to yield up a million dollars' worth of property that had been thrown at him in that way. And, to speak plainly, he isn't the sort of man to let go of anything that comes within his reach.

"My uncle offered to do the fair thing out of his own pocket, but, as I've said, the Stevenses wouldn't touch his money; and there the case has stood ever since.

"The most valuable of the jewels are in the vaults of the Central Safe Deposit Company in this city. Some of the smaller pieces are in Mrs. Pond's possession. She is a woman who likes to wear a lot of jewelry, and, by Jupiter, she can do it now if she likes, for she owns more diamonds than the Astors.

"Mr. and Mrs. Pond live in Cleveland. Mrs. Pond, as I've told you, is now visiting her father. You know he bought the old Plummer place on the shore of Hempstead Harbor, Long Island.

"She has been with him about two weeks. She has two rooms on the second floor of the house, a sitting-room and a bed-room. The bed-room opens off the hall. It has only one other door, which leads to her sitting-room.

"The first robbery occurred on the second day after she had arrived. It was late in the afternoon.

"Mrs. Pond had been out riding. When she returned she hurried up to her room to dress for dinner.

"She took off some of her jewelry—some rings, pins and that sort of thing—and laid them on the dressing-table. Then she went into her sitting-room.

"Remember, I'm telling this just as she told it. How much of it is fact and how much is hysterics I can't say. She was scared half out of her wits by what happened afterward, and may have got mixed up in her narrative.

"This is what she told us: When she had been in the sitting-room about a minute she turned toward the bedroom and saw the door slowly shutting.

"She was surprised at this, for she had locked the other door of the bed-room, and it did not seem possible for anybody to be in there.

"In fact, such a thing did not come into her mind. She supposed that a draught of air was swinging the door.

"She hastened toward it, but it closed before she got there.

"She turned the knob and tried to open the door, but was unable to do so. It did not seem to resist firmly, as it would if it had been fastened. Instead it gave slightly, as if some person had been holding it.

"If that was the case, he was stronger than she was, for she didn't succeed in opening the door.

"Then she screamed. Such a yell I never heard a woman utter. I was in my own room, which is over hers, and I jumped nearly out of my skin, it startled me so.

"I was dressing, and was in my underclothes, so it took me a minute, I should say, to get a pair of pantaloons on.

"Then I ran out into the hall and down the stairs. At the same moment my uncle ran up from the ground floor.

"I mention these facts, because they seem to me to be important. You see, we approached that room by two ways—by the only two ways except that by which Mrs. Pond came.

"Just as I got to the hall door of her bed-room she opened it, and fell into my arms in a faint.

"She lost consciousness only for a moment, and, on coming to herself, she cried out that a thief had been in her room.

"By this time there were three or four servants in the hall below. One of them staid there by my uncle's orders. The others went outside and made a circuit of the house.

"We led Mrs. Pond back into her room, and she pointed to her dressing-table.

"There lay two or three rings and a pin, but the most valuable ring that she had put there was gone.

"It was a queer, old-fashioned ring in the form of a snake, and in its mouth was a ruby worth about two hundred and fifty dollars. The eyes were made of small diamonds.

"She declared that she had left the ring there. She told us how the door between the two rooms had closed.

"It appears that after she had struggled to open it for several minutes it suddenly yielded, and she almost fell into the room.

"Of course, she expected to rush straight upon the thief. He had been holding the door, and naturally he couldn't have gone far after releasing it.

"She was inside just as soon as the pressure on the other side was removed. But the room was empty.

"She thought of her jewels at once. She rushed to her dressing-table, and instantly missed the ruby ring.

"Now, that's all there is to it. We hunted high and low for the thief, and did not find a trace of him.

"How did he get away? That's where I give up the riddle. The door in the hall was locked on the inside, and practically guarded by my uncle and myself. At the other door stood Mrs. Pond.

"There is only one window. It looks out on a sort of court with the house on three sides of it.

"A man with a wagon was almost under the window all the time. He was delivering groceries to the cook.

"It's absurd to suppose that anybody got in or out by that window. No thief would have been fool enough to try it at that time of day, and, as I've told you, there were two persons who would have been perfectly sure to see him if he had. And he couldn't have got in or out without a ladder.

"I admit that it looked very queer. What do you make of it, Mr. Carter?"

"Are you sure the ring was really taken? Couldn't she have been mistaken about it?"

"That's the idea that occurred to me. But it happens that when Mrs. Pond came back from the drive my uncle banded her out of the carriage, and he distinctly remembers seeing the ring on her finger.

"She went straight to her room, and she couldn't have lost the ring by the way, for there was a guard ring on the outside of it, and that we found on the dressing-table.

"Of course, we hunted for the ruby ring. We took up the carpets; we made such a search as I never saw before. The ring was not there.

"I don't think there's a shadow of doubt that the ring was stolen, but I can't form an idea of how it was done.

"The more I think about it the more confused I get. To my mind the queerest part of it is that somebody held the door, and then let go of it and vanished in a quarter of a second. How are we going to explain that?"

"Didn't the thief put something against the door?"

"I thought of that, and tried to work out that theory, but it's impossible. Not a piece of furniture was out of place, and there wasn't a stick or a prop of any kind in the room that could have been used for such a purpose."

"Well, that's strange, I must admit," said Nick. "I guess it will be necessary for me to go down and look the ground over."

"That's just what we want."

"Come along, then. I'm ready."

CHAPTER II.

NICK IS BOLDLY CHALLENGED.

Nick knew the old Plummer mansion well. There is not a house to match it in this country.

A hundred years and more ago it must have been the scene of strange adventures. It was built, certainly, by one who did not expect a peaceful and quiet life within it.

The thick stone walls, which look so unnecessarily massive, are really double. There are secret passages and movable panels and trap-doors enough in that house to hide a man, if a regiment of soldiers was after him.

Evidently such a place offered every chance to shrewd criminals who might have a motive for playing upon the superstitious beliefs of the present proprietor.

Anybody who couldn't get up a respectable ghost in the old Plummer house must be a very poor fakir.

The mere fact that all the doors and windows of a room were closed did not prevent any person from going in or out at will, if he knew the secrets of the house.

Nick thought of these things as he rode down there in the cars, and he prepared himself for an interesting time, chasing bogus ghosts through secret doors and panels.

But a surprise awaited him on his arrival. Colonel Richmond met him at the door, and, by Nick's request, took him at once to the room from which the articles had been stolen.

It was a modern room in a new part of the house.

Nick was entirely unprepared for this. He did not know that the colonel had built any additions to the old mansion.

Colonel Richmond spoke of this remarkable feature of the case at once.

"If this thing had happened in the old part of the house," he said, "I shouldn't have thought that it was anything but an ordinary robbery.

"Every room there can be entered in a secret manner, and no doubt there are plenty of panels and passages which even I do not know.

"But there's nothing of the kind here. This wing was built under my eye, and from my own design. I saw the beams laid and the floors nailed down.

"There is absolutely no way to enter the room in which we now stand except by the two doors and the window.

"My nephew has told you about the robberies. You know that the doors and the windows were practically guarded all the time.

"I don't believe that any mortal being could have got in here and got out again without being seen.

"As for myself, I understand the case perfectly. My belief will seem strange to you, because you do not see with the eye of the spirit. Everything has to be done by human hands, according to your matter-of-fact notion.

"I know better; and I tell you that these jewels were taken by the spirit of my deceased aunt, and that she did it to show me that my daughter was wrongfully in possession of them."

When a healthy, hearty old man, who seems to be as sane as anybody else in the world, stands up and talks such nonsense as this, what can one say to him?

It is useless to tell him that he is wrong about the whole matter. It is folly to attempt to reason with him.

The only way to do is to show him a perfectly natural explanation of the mystery, and simply make him see it.

That was the task which Nick had before him, and it must be owned that, at the first glance, he did not see how he was going to accomplish it.

He examined the room and satisfied himself that it had no secret entrances.

Such being the case, Nick was unable to form a theory of the robbery which would fit the facts as they had been stated to him.

After looking at the rooms, he went with Colonel Richmond to the parlor, on the ground floor, and there proceeded to question him about the mysterious occurrences.

"There have been three robberies in all," said the colonel, "and they have been exactly alike.

"In every case my daughter has left some articles of jewelry on the dressing-table in her bed-room, and one of them has vanished. Never more than one at a time.

"Twice it happened while she was in the adjoining room. The bed-room door which opens into the hall was locked on these occasions.

"The third time she was in the hall, talking with my nephew. He was standing in the upper hall, leaning over the banister rail. They were discussing a plan for a drive out into the country. Quite a party was to go.

"Horace had just received word from a gentleman whom they had invited that he would be unable to go. He had read the note in his room, and he called downstairs to my daughter to tell her about it.

"That was how they happened to be standing in the hall. Presently she went back into her room, and almost immediately noticed that a small locket set with diamonds had been taken.

"She screamed, and Horace and I came running to her room. We searched it thoroughly.

"There was nobody there. The door between the bedroom and the sitting-room was open, but the other door of the sitting-room, which opens into the old portion of the house, was locked and bolted on the inside.

"Now, I submit to you, Mr. Carter, whether in that case any other way of entrance or exit was possible except by the windows."

"I'm bound to admit," responded Nick, "that if the doors were in the condition you describe, no person could have entered or left those rooms except by the windows."

"Well, it had been raining hard, and the ground was soft. We looked carefully under all the windows.

"There was no sign of a footprint, and nobody could have walked there without making tracks. Oh, it is clear enough! Why do we waste your time in a search for invisible spirits of the dead?"

He rambled on in this way for several minutes, and Nick did not try to stop him.

The colonel was at last interrupted, however, by the entrance of his daughter.

Mrs. Pond had been out driving. She learned, on her return, that a stranger had come to the house, and she hurried into the parlor, suspecting who was there.

"I am delighted to see you, Mr. Carter," she exclaimed. "You will clear up this abominable mystery and relieve my father's mind from these delusions."

"Then you do not share his opinions," said Nick.

Mrs. Pond laughed nervously.

"No, indeed," she said, "and yet I must admit that I am quite unable to explain the facts. I suppose you have heard the story?"

"Yes."

"What do you think about it?"

"It is much too early in the case for me to express an opinion. But there are one or two questions that I should like to ask you."

"Do so, by all means. It was at my request that you were called in."

"At your request?"

"Yes; I talked with Horace about it, and at last we agreed to ask you to take the case. He didn't believe in it at first, for he did not want to let anybody into our family secrets."

She glanced at her father as she spoke. It was evident that the family was a good deal ashamed of Colonel Richmond's spiritualistic delusions and wanted to keep quiet about them.

"I talked Horace into it after a while," Mrs. Pond continued, "and at last he became as enthusiastic as myself. We know that you will find the thief."

"Thank you," responded Nick. "There is one point which seems peculiar to me. After you had been robbed once, why did you continue to leave the jewels unwatched in the very place from which one of them had previously been taken?"

"I insisted upon it," said Colonel Richmond. "I told my daughter that she must make no change in her habit of wearing or caring for my aunt's jewels. I wished to show that we were not foolishly trying to hide them from the eye of a spirit, but that we wished to learn the desire of my departed aunt as soon as possible."

"It was by your order, then," said Nick, "that your daughter continued to put the jewels on her dressing-table when she laid them aside for any reason?"

"It was."

"I have just left some of them there now," said Mrs. Pond. "I went to my room after my ride, and took off a light cloak which was fastened with three pins, each having a diamond in its head. I stuck them all into a cushion on that dressing-table."

"Is the room locked?" asked Nick.

"Yes," replied Mrs. Pond, and she produced the key of the door which opened from the hall above.

"Will you allow me to go up there now?"

"Certainly."

She handed the key to Nick.

He took it and walked out of the parlor.

Nick had already formed a sort of working theory in the case. He scarcely believed that it would hold water, but it would do for a starter.

The most probable explanation that had come to him was that Mrs. Pond had not really been robbed at all.

It might be that she had some motive for making these articles vanish. Perhaps she had some need of money, and was secretly selling them against the wish of her husband and her father.

So, when Nick took that key and went toward that room he did not expect to find the three diamond pins in the position described by the lady.

He found the door locked, and he opened it by means of the key. Then he locked it behind him, leaving the key in the lock.

He turned at once to a dressing-table.

The three pins were there, just as Mrs. Pond had said.

Nick laughed softly to himself.

"That looks bad for my first shot at this queer case," he said; "but perhaps she didn't dare work the game while I was in the house."

He glanced out of the window of the room.

Two servants were in the yard. They seemed to be explaining the robberies to a new driver of a groceryman's wagon, for they had one of his arms apiece, and were pointing to the window.

Nick walked into the sitting-room, and spent some minutes examining the walls, and especially the door leading toward the old part of the house.

He found nothing at all to reward his search. There absolutely was no secret entrance.

The detective decided that nothing further could be done in that room. He walked toward the other.

To his astonishment he found that the door had been closed while he had been busy with his investigations.

He sprang against it.

The door yielded a little, and yet he could not open it.

Some person stronger than he seemed to be holding it on the other side.

He drew back for a spring. That door would have gone to splinters if it had stood in his way again.

Instead, it swung open the instant he touched it, and the force of his lunge took him nearly to the middle of the room.

In an instant he was on guard, but he saw no one.

The room was quiet, and it was empty.

The door into the hall was locked as he had left it.

All was the same, except that on the dressing-table was the cushion bearing two diamond pins instead of three.

The robbery had been done, as one might say, under the nose of the greatest detective in the world.

"Well, this takes my breath away," said Nick to himself. "It's the nerviest challenge that ever was sprung on me."

CHAPTER III.

HOW NICK FOUND THE JEWELS.

It certainly looked like sheer recklessness for this thief, whoever he might be, to play his game on Nick almost at the very moment when the great detective appeared upon the scene.

Shrewd as Nick was, he had not expected this. His first thought, as the reader knows, was that it was a bold challenge, the defiance of a nervy criminal who thought himself absolutely safe from detection.

But a moment's reflection made this seem less probable.

Was it not more natural to suppose that this event proved that the detective was unknown to the thief?

Such being the case, Colonel Richmond, his nephew and Mrs. Pond were acquitted at the start.

It may seem ridiculous to suspect them, in any case, but so strange was the nature of this affair that Nick gave nobody the credit of certain innocence.

Colonel Richmond was certainly very nearly crazy on one point. He might be so much of a lunatic as to commit these robberies from simple delusion. Or he might wish to prove to his daughter that the diamonds were not rightfully hers.

Mrs. Pond might be pawning them for small extravagances which she was afraid to have known.

As to Horace Richmond, there was no motive which seemed plausible. The value of the articles taken was so small as to make the game not worth while for a man in his position.

And it was perfectly certain that no professional thief or dishonest servant was doing the work.

If such a person had been in the game, he would not have taken one of those diamond pins; he would have taken all three.

It was impossible to lose sight of the fact that the Stevenses would be the real gainers, if this ghost business led Colonel Richmond to insist that his daughter should give up the jewels.

Mrs. Stevens and her daughter could not be doing the job personally, but they might have a secret agent among the servants, or more probably concealed in some secret recess of the strange old house.

Nick resolved to go to see Mrs. and Miss Stevens without delay. He hoped to judge by their conduct whether they knew anything about the robberies.

These thoughts passed through his mind in a flash.

He quickly searched the room to be sure that the thief was not concealed in it, and then descended to the main hall. The outer door was open, and Colonel Richmond and his daughter were standing on the steps.

Just as Nick joined them Horace Richmond strolled up. They all stood looking at a carriage which was coming up the driveway.

"Why, it's Mrs. Stevens," exclaimed Mrs. Pond. "I thought you said she did not come here any more."

"She hasn't been here in some time," responded the colonel. "I have thought that she avoided us because of this matter of the jewels."

Nothing more could be said on the subject, for at that moment the carriage drew up before the door.

Colonel Richmond advanced courteously and assisted Mrs. Stevens to alight.

Nick noticed at once that she was much agitated.

Colonel Richmond asked her into the house, but she said that she preferred to sit on the veranda. She had come on business, and would stay but a moment.

She evidently wished to speak to the colonel privately, and so the others stepped aside; but Nick's eye was upon the woman every moment.

Very few words had passed between them, when the colonel uttered a cry and called to Nick.

The detective instantly advanced. He made a sign to Richmond, but it was not understood, and the colonel introduced Nick by his right name.

"Here is an extraordinary thing, Mr. Carter," he said. "We now have proof positive that this affair is not the work of mortal hands."

"What is that?" asked Nick.

"The jewels have appeared!"

"Where?"

"In Mrs. Stevens' house. They have been mysteriously transported there without human aid."

"I should be glad to have that proven," said Nick.

"It shall be," said the colonel. "Tell your story, Mrs. Stevens, if you please."

"It is very simple," she said. "This noon, when I returned to my room after lunch, I found upon my dressing-table certain pieces of jewelry which I recognized as having belonged to the late Miss Lavina Richmond.

"I knew them well. Nothing that I can imagine could have surprised me more than to find them there. I have no explanation to offer. I can't explain how it happened."

Nick could explain it very easily, at least so far as the appearance of the jewels in that particular place was concerned. It looked like a natural development of the plot. But his face expressed no emotion as he asked:

"Who had access to that room?"

"Nobody," replied Mrs. Stevens. "It was locked."

"Is it customary for you to lock your bed-room door when you go to lunch?"

"No; it is quite unusual. But we have a new servant in the house, and, as I had considerable money in the room, I took that precaution.

"All the doors were locked. I had the key to one of them. The others were on the inside of the locks.

"When I went to lunch the jewels were not there. When I returned they were there. That is all that I know about it. Here they are."

She drew from her pocket as she spoke a small cardboard box.

The woman was making heroic efforts to be calm, but it seemed as if she might either faint or go into hysterics at any moment.

Was she playing a game that was too hard for her?

That was the question for Nick to answer; and yet, when he looked at this gentle, refined woman, he hardly had the heart to suspect her of any dishonesty.

"I will show you the jewels," she said, struggling to command her voice, "you can then see whether they are all here."

Her trembling hands could hardly find the string which was tied about the box.

While she pulled at it she kept talking as if she must do it to relieve her overburdened mind. She described the articles of jewelry which were in the box.

"They are the very ones," said the colonel.

As he uttered the words the string was loosened, and the cover fell off the box.

There was a sharp cry. It came from Mrs. Pond, who, with Horace, had approached during this scene.

"Why, there's one of my diamond pins!" she exclaimed. "How on earth did it come to be there?"

Well, if Mrs. Pond was surprised, she wasn't a bit more so than Nick Carter.

The pin referred to was the one which had been stolen from the cushion in Mrs. Pond's dressing-room not ten minutes before.

"Why, this is impossible," cried Mrs. Pond. "I left that pin with the two others like it in my room."

Without saying another word, she turned and ran into the house.

Almost immediately her voice was heard in the hall.

"It's gone!" she cried. "It's been taken out of my bedroom."

She appeared at the door with a very white face.

But her excitement was nothing to that of Mrs. Stevens.

Nick dropped the role of detective and assumed that of doctor in less than a second.

When he had saved Mrs. Stevens from an attack of hysterics, he said:

"I was aware that that pin had been taken. It was done while I was in your room, Mrs. Pond. The circumstances were exactly the same as those attending the other robberies."

"But I did not put it in the box," exclaimed Mrs. Stevens. "It was not among the jewels which I found."

She turned to Colonel Richmond. Her face was ghastly pale.

"I have scorned your belief," she said; "but now I am convinced. No mortal being could have done this thing."

"What do you say to that, Mr. Carter?" cried the colonel, with flashing eyes.

"I would like to ask a few questions," rejoined Nick. "Were you alone when you put those jewels into the box?"

"I was."

"Has it been in your possession ever since?"

"It has not been out of my care."

"Did you tell anybody about the finding of the jewels?"

"Nobody."

"Please describe everything that happened after you found them."

"I was, of course, greatly agitated. I did not know what to do. For some time I sat staring at the jewels and trying to think what was my proper course.

"At last I took this box from a drawer of my dressing-table and put the jewels into it.

"Then I called to the servant who was in the dining-room, and asked her to see that the carriage was got ready, for though it is a long drive, I had resolved to make it, because I felt safer in that way."

"Did you go out of your room to call the girl?"

"Only into the hall."

"Who could have got into your room while you were out?"

"Nobody."

"Where was your daughter?"

"In her own room."

"How do you know?"

"I called to her after I had dressed, and she answered me. I told her that I was going to drive over here, and she was very much surprised. I did not tell her why."

"Did you meet anybody on the way over who spoke to you or came to the side of the carriage?"

"Nobody."

"That is all I wish to ask."

In fact, Nick had no more questions. He was really at a loss for an explanation of this strange occurrence.

If the pin had been taken from the room, by a person concealed in the house, it might have been possible that that person had escaped from the grounds unseen, and had given it to Mrs. Stevens.

There was hardly time for such a trick to have been done, but in so strange a case every possibility was to be considered.

If such a thing had been done, it must have been very near to the house.

The thief must have known when Mrs. Stevens was coming, or she must have waited for him just outside the colonel's grounds.

There was a place where the road was heavily fringed with trees, not more than a hundred yards from the colonel's gate.

The trick must have been done there, if at all.

Nick resolved to settle this small point, if possible, immediately.

It was of no use to ask the man who had driven Mrs. Stevens' horse. Of course, he would lie, if there was any

need of it.

So Nick excused himself from the group on the pretext that he was going to search Mrs. Pond's rooms again.

He remembered that just after Mrs. Stevens had arrived, a wagon belonging to the colonel had driven into the grounds. He quietly looked up the two servants who had been in this wagon. They told him that they remembered seeing Mrs. Stevens drive up.

She had passed them on the road. They had had her carriage in sight for a mile before it turned into Colonel Richmond's grounds.

Her horse had been driven at a good pace. It had not stopped. Nobody had approached the carriage.

Nick was convinced that the men were telling the truth.

Then how had Mrs. Stevens obtained that pin?

Her possession of the other articles might be explained, but the pin was a "stickler."

CHAPTER IV.

MILLIE STEVENS.

After questioning the two men whom he had found in the stable, Nick walked toward the house.

On the way he met Horace Richmond.

"Mrs. Stevens has gone home," said Horace. "She would not remain for dinner, although she has such a long ride before her. She seems terribly distressed by this strange affair."

"What did your uncle say to her?"

"Not much," was the reply; "and I was a good deal surprised. He begged her not to be nervous about it, and talked very pleasantly to her, but he steered clear of the matter of the jewels."

"I don't understand it. I thought he would insist upon what he calls a restitution of the property."

"Perhaps, after all," said Nick, "he isn't so far off his base on the ghost question as you think he is."

"Don't you deceive yourself about that. He is just as sure that his aunt's spirit removed those jewels as you are that that house is resting on its foundations."

"And I wouldn't try to shake his belief just now," continued Horace, seriously. "Simply say nothing about the affair this evening. Talk about something else to him. Stay with us as long as you can, and quietly look the ground over. Then tell me privately what you think."

This advice seemed good to Nick. He passed a quiet evening in the house, and nobody but Mrs. Pond referred to the robberies. Horace managed to quiet her quickly.

But the next morning after breakfast she came to Nick with a very long face.

"My father has been talking to me," she said, "and I'm going to lose those jewels surely, unless you do something and do it very quickly. I don't care for their value, but they're mine by right, and I mean to keep them if I can. But, of course, I can't bear to make my father's life miserable. It will probably end by my compelling my husband to let me give them up."

Nick had his doubts about the possibility of such a thing, and they were made certainties very soon afterward.

Mr. Pond arrived unexpectedly. When the story was told him, he "danced the war-dance," as our young friend Patsy might have expressed it.

"You don't seem to realize the importance of this matter," he exclaimed. "Why, it's a million-dollar robbery, that's what it is! If we give up the jewels, the colonel will give us their value. By jingo, he'll have to."

"Well, what's that but the theft of a million from him?"

Nick was compelled to confess that it was just that, and nothing else.

"And who'll reap the proceeds?" continued Pond. "Why, the Stevenses, of course. Nobody else gets anything out of it. They're playing on the colonel's superstitions for a million dollar stake."

"Now, Mr. Carter, you go ahead and work this thing out. Catch the thief. Don't let the colonel get you out of the way. If there's a question of money, I'm good for the best fee you can name."

Nick's first move that day was to go to Mrs. Stevens' house.

She lived well on her small income. It was a nice old country-house, with grounds of considerable extent, and a stable in which two good horses were kept.

Nick rode over there on one of Colonel Richmond's fine saddle-horses.

As the detective rode up the winding, shaded walk toward the house, he noticed a man-servant just ahead of him.

This servant had a newspaper and some letters in his hand. He seemed to have come from the village post-office.

Leaning over the railing of the veranda, as if waiting for this servant, was one of the handsomest girls Nick had ever seen. She was a beauty of the dashing, dark-eyed type—a girl of courage and strong will.

The servant gave her the letters just as Nick came in sight. He not only gave her those he had been carrying in his hand, but he drew one from his pocket with a motion that suggested secrecy.

Nick rode up to the veranda, introduced himself, and asked to see Mrs. Stevens.

"Let James take your horse," said the girl. "Come into the house, if you please. I will speak to my mother."

Nick went into the cool and pretty parlor. Miss Stevens left the room for a moment, and then returned with her mother.

The detective spoke of the occurrences of the day before, and requested permission to see the room in which the jewelry had so mysteriously appeared.

While they were talking thus, it happened that Miss Stevens drew her handkerchief from her pocket, and as she did so two little pieces of paper fell to the floor.

"So she's read that letter, and torn it up so soon," was Nick's silent comment.

Almost immediately Miss Stevens said:

"There's the mail on the table, mother. I forgot to give it to you. There are several letters."

Mrs. Stevens glanced at the addresses.

"They are all for me," she said. "Was there nothing for you?"

"No, indeed," cried the girl. "There's nobody who writes letters to me."

"Lies to her mother, does she?" said Nick to himself. "Well, it begins to look bad for her."

Miss Stevens did not notice the bits of paper on the floor, and Nick by clever work succeeded in getting possession of them.

Then, by Mrs. Stevens' permission, he went to look at the room already referred to.

No sooner was he there than he got rid of the lady upon some plausible excuse, and so had an opportunity of examining the bits of paper.

They were ordinary letter paper impossible to trace.

One bit was blank on both sides. The other bore some queer little marks, but no writing. To Nick the marks were quite clear. They were the dots and dashes of the Morse telegraphic alphabet. They represented the letters n, t, b, e, t, r, a, written very small on a narrow scrap, not more than an inch long.

"Don't betray," muttered Nick. "Worse and worse. Miss Stevens will evidently bear watching."

As to the room, his inspection of it was of little use. He had not expected much. He had come to see Miss Stevens, principally, and in her case the investigation had certainly begun better than he could have reasonably expected. She was engaged in some secret affair. She concealed letters from her mother. She had bribed one of the servants. This last fact was proven by the manner in which the letter had been delivered to her.

As he was turning these matters over in his mind, Mrs. Stevens and her daughter entered the room.

"What have you discovered, Mr. Carter?" asked the girl. "You must know that my mother has told me all about this strange affair, and I am deeply interested."

"I have learned nothing," said Nick, "except that this room can be easily entered, even when the doors are locked."

"Take this door leading to the rear room, for instance. The key was on this side, it is true, but it turns very easily. A person with a pair of nippers could get in without trouble, and lock the door afterward."

"I can't tell from the appearance of the key whether or not this was done, but I think it probable."

"You mean that somebody came in here while mother was at lunch, and put the jewels where they were found?"

"Exactly."

"But who could it have been?"

"I don't know," answered Nick, frankly.

"And how do you explain the presence of that other pin in the box?" asked Mrs. Stevens.

"There is an explanation," said Nick; "but I prefer not to give it now."

"As you please," responded the lady, haughtily. "I can only say that I trust you will find this thief speedily, and end this annoyance to which we are being subjected."

"I don't think it ought to be hard for a person of your abilities," said Miss Stevens. "I have already solved the puzzle."

"And who is the guilty person?" asked Nick, with a smile.

"Colonel Richmond, of course."

"Why should he do this?"

"Because he's crazy. That's reason enough."

"I'd like to hear you explain your theory a little further."

"Why, Mr. Carter, I'm surprised at you. Is there any motive for this so-called crime? No. Then it must be a crazy person's work. Is there more than one lunatic among us? Certainly not. So, as two and two make four, and the sun doesn't rise in the west, Colonel Richmond is the man. What kind of a detective do you think I'd make?"

"There isn't any one alive who could compare with you," said Nick.

"You're joking."

"No; I'm serious. There are plenty of detectives who can reason up to the wrong man, but none, I'm sure, who can do it so quickly as you can."

Mrs. Stevens laughed at her daughter's discomfiture, and the girl joined heartily.

"Supposing for a moment that your theory is true," continued Nick. "How do you suppose that Colonel Richmond managed to get the jewels over here?"

The girl became serious in a moment.

"This is a very delicate subject," she said. "I hate to cast suspicion upon any one."

"You refer to the new servant, of course."

"Well, we know nothing about the girl," said Mrs. Stevens, "and, of course, when anything so strange happens in the house we naturally think of her. She brought good references, and she certainly looks honest."

"Did she have an opportunity to put the jewels into this room?"

"As to that, I have talked it over with my daughter, and it seems just possible that the girl could have done it. I thought at first that it was not."

"Of course, it was possible," exclaimed Miss Stevens. "She could have run up the back stairs at any time."

She proceeded to explain this theory, until it seemed quite plausible.

And yet all the time she was filling the detective's mind with the blackest suspicions against herself.

Here was the case: The plotters were trying to work on Colonel Richmond's superstitions.

A celebrated detective had been called in. If he succeeded, the plotters failed, and the Stevenses lost the jewels.

What more natural than that the criminals should wish to throw the detective on a wrong scent? Was it not to be expected that they should pitch upon this new servant as the best person with whom to deceive Nick.

Altogether, Miss Stevens was making out a very strong case against herself.

CHAPTER V.

COLONEL RICHMOND'S NIGHT ADVENTURE.

Of course, Nick questioned the servant. To have failed to do that would have been to throw light upon his real suspicions.

She was a tall, slender, and rather pretty Irish girl, named Annie O'Neil.

Her answers to all questions were plain and simple.

She told what she had been doing on the previous day while Mrs. Stevens was at lunch. She had not been in the dining-room all the time, but had come in twice or thrice when summoned.

During the remainder of the time she had been in the kitchen. Nobody had been with her there.

When Nick left the house, he rode half a mile back along the road, and then dismounted and sat down under a

big tree. In a few minutes a farmer's wagon came along. A young man, who looked like a farm laborer, was riding beside the farmer. He did not ride far beyond the place where Nick was sitting. In a few minutes they sat together under the tree. The young farm laborer was Patsy.

"I got your message," said Patsy. "I took the chance to ride over from the station with that fellow, and I've asked him a few questions about the house where you want me to go on duty. It seems that there's no show to get in there on any pretext. I'll have to camp around on the outside like a grass-eater."

"That won't hurt you, Patsy, my lad," said Nick. "The weather's good. You're to keep an eye on the whole household, but on Miss Stevens especially."

"This is the way the case looks at present: The girl is doing the work on this end in connection with some confederate concealed in Colonel Richmond's house."

"You understand the game. It's to work the spirit racket on Colonel Richmond until he buys the jewels from his daughter or her husband, and gives them to Miss Stevens."

"You must watch for the system by which she communicates with her confederate in Richmond's house. They work the mails, but there must be some quicker means to use in emergencies."

"Try to snare a letter, or get a sight of the other party."

"And be sure not to jump at conclusions, Patsy. I've told you how the case looks, but it may be any other way. I haven't begun to work down to it yet."

Nick mounted his horse, and Patsy strolled away in the direction of the Stevens house.

When the detective got back to Colonel Richmond's, it was well along in the afternoon.

He spent the remainder of his day in exploring the secret recesses of the old house. It was, indeed, a marvelous place, and Nick got a very high opinion of the ingenuity of the man who had designed its mysterious passages.

He got little else, however. One or two discoveries he certainly made. They were important as indicating that somebody had recently been in the secret passages.

There was nothing to show what that person had been doing there, but the probability was, of course, that he had concealed himself in the old part of the house while preparing for his operations in Mrs. Pond's room, or while escaping from them.

These indications were very vague, and did not point to the principal in this affair—that mysterious thief who worked invisibly and by such strange methods.

After dinner Horace Richmond took Nick aside, for what he termed a discussion of "this ghostly rot."

"The very devil is in this business," said Horace. "The servants are getting scared out of their wits."

"They all sleep in the old part of the house, you know, and there isn't one of them who hasn't some story to tell of what goes on there in the night."

"Some of these yarns are the old-fashioned business about sighs and groans, and doors opening and shutting without anybody to open and shut them."

"But under it all I must say that there seems to be a basis of fact. There's John Gilder, the coachman. You've seen him, Does he look like a man who can be scared easily?"

"I should say not," laughed Nick. "He looks to me like a Yankee horse-trader, who is too intimate with the devil and his ways to be at all alarmed about them."

"Just so. Well, John Gilder came to me to-day, and told me just as calmly as I'd tell you the time of day, that he'd seen the ghost of Miss Lavina Richmond. He saw her right in this room where we are now."

They had gone to the large dining-hall in the old mansion. Horace sometimes used it as a smoking-room, but otherwise it was seldom visited, except when the house was full of guests and all the old part was thrown open.

It was a long and high room, finished in dark wood, and decorated with moldering portraits in the worst possible style of art.

At one end was a gigantic fire-place, which was closed by a screen of boards.

"He told me," continued Horace, "that he was passing through here late last night—near midnight, he said—and that he saw Lavina Richmond standing just about where you stand now."

"He came in by that door, behind me, and she was directly facing him. He says that he didn't move or yell, or do anything, but just stood staring at her."

"She paid no attention whatever to him, but passed across the room and went out by that other door, which opened as she approached and closed after her of itself."

"Then he ran for his room. He claims that he wasn't scared—only a bit nervous."

"You can believe that if you want to. I tell you that he was scared, so that he won't get over it in a year."

"If it wasn't for that I might think he was lying; but when a man like Gilder quietly invites the footman—whom

he always hated—to take half of his bed for a few weeks, it's a sure thing that he's seen something out of the ordinary.

"And the footman, as I learn, was mighty glad to accept the invitation, for he's been having a few experiences of his own.

"Now, Mr. Carter, you and I believe that these things are done by some clever trickster. It may be that some bogus medium who used to get the colonel's good money away from him, wants more of it, and is taking this means of driving my uncle back to the fold of true believers.

"I'm beginning to believe that that may be the fact. But whatever it is, the case is almighty serious.

"Here's a nice old man, living happily, and gradually getting away from his delusion. Here's an agent of the devil trying to drive this old man back to his delusion, and make a lunatic of him, for that's what the doctor says will certainly happen.

"I say it's too bad, not to mention the jewels at all. Now, what are we going to do about it?"

"Catch the rascal," said Nick, promptly, "and catch him mighty quick."

"Well, I hope you'll succeed. I tell you, Mr. Carter, I feel toward Colonel Richmond all the affection that I would give my father, if he were alive, and I can't bear to see him driven out of his wits in this infernal way."

"Have no fear," said Nick; "we'll save him. This trickery with the servants may give us a chance to catch our man."

They returned to the parlor in the new part of the house.

Colonel Richmond was not there.

"Where is he?" asked Horace, anxiously, of Mrs. Pond.

"He has gone to his room. He said that the excitement of this affair had worn him out completely."

Horace looked relieved.

Nick said that he, too, would go to his room.

He went, but he did not remain long in it. He had a fancy for a quiet stroll around the house on the outside. It would be interesting to know whether anybody entered or left it during the night.

One of the secret passages of the old house communicated with a sort of tunnel, which had its outer extremity in an old well about twenty yards away. This tunnel had caved in long before, but had been restored by Colonel Richmond, who wished to preserve all the old-time peculiarities of the place.

The inner end of it had been closed by a strong door, so as to prevent anybody who might have the secret from entering in that way, but Nick was strongly of the opinion that it would not keep out the persons who were "haunting" the house in case they desired to come in.

If anybody was going in and out secretly this seemed to be the readiest way, so Nick had resolved to watch the well that night.

A little house with sides of lattice-work had been built over it, and vines covered it.

Nick stealthily crept into its shadow, and prepared for his vigil. But it was not destined to be a long one.

He had not been there ten minutes before he saw a figure hastening along one of the numerous paths which wound through the grounds.

This person evidently wished to avoid observation, and that was enough for Nick. He immediately started in pursuit.

He trailed his man to the edge of the colonel's grounds. During this pursuit the man kept in the shadow of some trees, and Nick had no opportunity to see him clearly.

But as the man stepped out into the highway, a ray of moonlight fell upon him, and Nick recognized him in an instant. It was Colonel Richmond.

Why this man should be leaving his own house by stealth and under the cover of darkness was an interesting problem.

Nick resolved to know all about it before the night was much older. So he trailed along.

The colonel walked up the highway with rapid strides.

About half a mile from the house he found a carriage standing under the shadow of a tree.

Evidently he expected to find it just there, for he immediately jumped into it, and the driver whipped up his horse.

Nick was unable to see the driver, for the carriage was a covered buggy, and had been standing with its back toward him.

The horse was evidently a good one, but Nick overhauled him, and got hold of the carriage behind.

There was no chance for him to ride there, but his grip on the wagon helped him along, and he ran about eight

miles quite comfortably.

His presence so near was entirely unsuspected by the occupants of the carriage. He was favorably situated for overhearing their conversation, but unfortunately they did not say anything.

Nick discovered that the driver was a woman, but he could only guess at her identity.

At last they turned suddenly out of the road, into the grounds of a private house.

The sound of the wheels was evidently heard within, and the front door was thrown open, letting out considerable light from the hall.

Nick could not go too near that light, so he let go, and crept into some shrubbery.

The carriage drew up before the door, and the colonel and his companion hurried into the house, leaving the horse tied.

The detective failed to obtain a good view of the woman or of the person who had opened the door. The latter seemed to be a servant.

When the door had closed, Nick crept up.

He manoeuvred carefully, and discovered that there was somebody sitting in the hall just inside the door.

Entrance by that means was out of the question.

However, he succeeded without much difficulty in entering the house from the rear.

He found himself in the kitchen, from which he passed to a dining-room.

This apartment was almost totally dark. Nick felt his way to the side opposite the kitchen, and came to a heavy pair of folding doors.

From the other side came a confused murmur of voices, as if many persons were talking in hushed tones.

Presently they became quite still and then there arose the sound of music. It was a slow and somber strain, as from an organ gently played.

Nick was crouching against the door, among the folds of a curtain which could be drawn across.

Suddenly he heard a slight sound behind him. He turned noiselessly.

A white figure flitted across the room.

Nick was at one end of the folding doors, and the figure passed to the other end and into the corner beyond.

There it suddenly vanished.

The light was so dim that Nick could not tell exactly what had happened.

It certainly seemed as if the figure had gone straight through the wall.

About a minute later another form appeared in the same way. It crossed the room, and vanished.

"Good!" muttered Nick. "I'll back these ghosts against any that Colonel Richmond can raise in his house."

Almost immediately there was the sound of a voice in the room beyond the doors.

"Does any person present recognize a departed friend?" it said.

Then Colonel Richmond's voice arose, hoarse and trembling with emotion.

"Aunt Lavina," he said, "tell me what you wish me to do. I will obey you absolutely."

"I thought so," chuckled the detective. "The colonel has come to attend a spiritualistic seance."

CHAPTER VI.

A ROUND-UP OF SPOOK-ARTISTS.

It began to look very much as if Horace Richmond's theory was correct. Certainly the colonel had fallen again into the clutches of bogus mediums.

It might be that the whole plot was directed to that end, and that the transfer of the jewels to the Stevenses was only to be an incidental result of the plot.

Yet so long as Miss Stevens' unusual conduct remained unexplained, it would not do to go upon this theory.

"One of the principal things that Horace Richmond employed me to do," said Nick to himself, "was to break up his uncle's belief in spiritualism. I guess that this is a first-class chance to do it."

He softly crept to the corner where the gliding figures had disappeared.

There, as he expected, he found one of those movable panels which the bogus mediums prepare so cleverly.

His experience of such affairs taught Nick exactly what he should find in the other room.

There must be a little cabinet in the corner covering the other side of the sliding panel.

The medium might be in it, or she might be sitting blindfold just by the door.

But the cabinet was certainly not empty. Two figures had gone into it, as Nick had observed.

One of these was doubtless playing the part of Aunt Lavina.

The other must be waiting to appear in some other role.

Nick listened. He could hear the colonel questioning the supposed spirit.

The replies were put in that silly and mysterious language supposed to be appropriate to visitors from the other world.

The meaning of them, however, was plain enough. Colonel Richmond was commanded to restore the jewels to Millie Stevens.

This point was made so exceedingly clear, and his promise was demanded in such stringent terms that Nick was no longer able to doubt that the interests of the Stevenses were being very carefully attended to by these "spook-compellers."

In view of the facts already known, it was hardly possible to reach any other conclusion than that Millie Stevens had hired this medium to do the whole job.

That it was being done "to the queen's taste," Nick was forced to admit.

Yet he couldn't help being sorry to believe that such a charming and beautiful girl as Millie Stevens should be mixed up in such a dirty business.

He waited till Colonel Richmond had completed his solemn protestations, and then suddenly slid the panel and passed through.

There was another person in the cabinet, who was, of course, instantly aware of Nick's entrance.

But the place was so dark that at first the bogus ghost did not know that Nick was not one of the regular company of spirits.

He had a chance to get his bearings before the discovery was made.

The shade of Aunt Lavina was just retreating toward the cabinet making that absurd series of nods and gestures which such spirits always use.

Nick could see this performance through an aperture in the side of the cabinet.

He instantly leaped out, and grappled with the spook.

Then there was an uproar. The whole room was in indescribable confusion.

Somebody turned up the light. For an instant Nick, grappling with the spirit, saw Colonel Richmond.

The colonel had not been given a private seance. Possibly he had not desired it. He had come with a dozen other victims of the same delusion.

He had been given a seat a little in the rear.

Before him, as is usual, was a row of persons who were "in the game."

The space where the spirits appear is always encircled by such a line as a guard against possible attempts at exposure.

Of course, everybody in the room was on his feet.

Some of the front-row people were rushing upon Nick.

Others had crowded around Colonel Richmond so closely that Nick was afraid he might not fully see the exposure of this fake.

The person whom Nick had seized was not a woman, as might have been expected, but a man. He was of short stature, but surprising strength.

Even in the mighty arms of the detective, he managed to struggle vigorously, and for a moment prevented Nick from tearing away the white and ghostly wrappings.

But a complete expose could not have been long delayed. In spite of the odds against him, Nick was certain to come out ahead.

He called out to Colonel Richmond:

"Look! Look at this! It's a man!"

Just at that instant a tall man who had been standing beside the female "medium," and acting as master of

ceremonies, seized an ornament from the mantelpiece, and hurled it not at Nick, as the detective expected, but at the lamp in the corner of the room.

This lamp had been turned up by one of the timid believers as soon as the row began.

The missile which the spiritualistic "bouncer" hurled was well directed. It smashed the lamp to fragments, and the room for a minute was dark.

Then another light flashed up. The broken lamp had set fire to the window curtains.

The scene hadn't been what one would call peaceful before, but it had been nothing at all to what it became when the fire leaped up.

Pandemonium broke loose. Doors and windows were burst out, and everybody rushed toward the outer air.

Among the last to emerge was Nick.

He held the "bouncer" in one hand and the ghost of Aunt Lavina in the other.

Both of them were very badly used up. When the detective dropped them on the lawn they made no attempt to rise.

Some of the medium's stool-pigeons were beginning to get their wits together, and were making preparations for putting out the fire.

Nick yelled to them, and pointed to a line of garden hose on the lawn.

There was a head of water in this pipe, and with the aid of its stream the fire was extinguished.

The detective did not assist. He turned his attention to discovering what had become of Colonel Richmond.

The colonel had disappeared. The carriage in which he had come was gone.

Doubtless the person who had driven him over had hustled him into the carriage at the earliest possible moment.

"A shrewd move," muttered Nick, "and a bad one for me. However, I've got this gang cornered, and if they've been doing the job at the colonel's house, their operations are over."

There was an excited group of people by the main door of the house. In the midst of them stood the medium, a fat and coarse woman, whom Nick had seen before in the same crooked business.

Those around her were the real believers in spiritualism, who had come to the show.

They had witnessed the exposure, and were ready to mob the medium.

Nick took his two prisoners to this group. He tied them securely, and then turned to one of the dupes:

"Why don't you have these people arrested?" he whispered. "Charge them with taking money under false pretenses."

"Good!" said the man. "There's a warrant for some of them already. I'll get the constable, who lives over across the fields, and he'll pull 'em all in."

A half-hour later the whole gang was under arrest and on the way to the nearest lock-up.

The detective felt that his evening's work was not in vain. Whatever might be the facts about the connection of this gang with the affair at Colonel Richmond's, it was a good thing to get them all out of the way.

The colonel's presence among them proved that they were the spiritualistic crowd which was after him. Their removal would simplify matters.

Moreover, the colonel's presence, and his questioning of the spook, showed that any theory connecting him with the disappearance of the jewels was wrong.

It was evident that he had asked the questions in all sincerity, believing that he was really in the presence of his aunt's spirit.

He could hardly be crazy enough to do that, supposing that his lunacy had led him to abstract the jewels.

Having witnessed the arrest of the gang, Nick procured a horse and drove rapidly toward Colonel Richmond's house. He arrived there about half-past eleven o'clock.

There was a light in the parlor, and through the open window Nick beheld an unusual scene.

The colonel, Mrs. Pond and Horace were present. Mr. Pond was not in the house. He had returned to New York.

Besides the persons named, there were in the parlor nearly all the servants connected in any way with the establishment.

It looked as if the colonel was holding court.

One of the servants seemed to be giving testimony. The expressions on the faces of the others showed deep interest and superstitious terror.

Nick had no doubt about what was going on. The colonel was getting to the bottom of the ghost stories. There

must have been more manifestations that night.

The detective was in doubt whether to enter the house in his own character. Finally he decided not to do so.

He disguised himself in the character of John Gilder, the coachman, who was not present in the parlor.

It seemed best to gain access to the room from an entrance toward the old part of the house instead of from the main hall.

So Nick passed around the corner of the house. As he did so he was aware of a dark figure crouching in the shadow.

He instantly grappled with it, and the figure was not less prompt in grappling with him.

The struggle was very brief. It ended with Nick on top, and no harm done.

The detective instantly leaped to his feet again.

"Patsy!" he exclaimed. "What brings you here?"

CHAPTER VII.

A REALLY COMPETENT GHOST.

Patsy told his story in a few words.

He had watched the Stevens house all day without discovering anything.

As evening descended, however, his patience had been rewarded.

"She came out," said Patsy, "and quietly scooted off across the fields."

"Millie Stevens?"

"Yes."

"What did she do?"

"She made for that big oak tree which stands in the middle of the field on the right of the road as you go from the station.

"I had to trail carefully, for it was not very dark and there was no cover. So I couldn't get very near her.

"Under that tree a man was waiting. He had a saddle-horse with him. The man and the girl exchanged a few words.

"Of course, I couldn't hear what they said. Neither could I get a line on the man.

"I resolved to get nearer, though it was taking big risks. It couldn't be done. They saw me.

"In a flash the man leaped into his saddle and pulled the girl up in front of him in regular old-fashioned style.

"They were off in no time. It was a fine horse they rode.

"I wasn't in it at any stage of the game. I ran myself out at the end of about a mile.

"They had disappeared in the darkness, but they were taking the road toward this place, and on a venture I came over. I hoped to connect with you, and get instructions."

"That was right. Come with me."

"What's up?"

"A ghost hunt, unless I'm very much mistaken. I guess we can join it without any trouble."

They made their way into the old portion of the house.

In the hall from which the broad stone stairs led up to the second floor they paused a moment to listen.

Steps were approaching. Before they could get into a place of concealment a door opened, and Colonel Richmond entered.

He carried a small lamp in his hand. Horace followed him.

"Gilder!" cried the colonel, seeing Nick disguised as the coachman. "Why were you not present in the parlor?"

"I've just got back to the house, sir," rejoined the detective, imitating Gilder's Yankee twang".

"Who's that with you?"

"My cousin, Frank Gilder."

"What's he doing here?"

"If you please, sir, I brought him over to spend the night with me. The footman and I don't get along very well together, and I don't like to be alone in a room in this house, sir, just now."

"So!" said the colonel. "I understand that you have seen strange things. Very well; I am going to investigate this matter. I shall pass the remainder of the night in the dining-hall above."

The colonel led the way up the stairs. The whole party followed him.

"May I ask where the other servants are, sir?" said Nick.

"They will pass the night in the new part of the house," returned Horace Richmond, with a grim smile. "You can do so if you like."

"No, sir," said Nick; "I think I'd rather sleep in my own room so long as my cousin is with me."

At the head of the stairs they turned at once toward the old dining-hall.

It was proper for Nick to follow, for the nearest way to Gilder's room led in that direction.

It was exactly midnight when they opened the door of the old dining-hall. A cool breath of air swept out upon them, for the thick stone walls of this part of the house resisted the hot weather, and this room had been kept closed.

The colonel shivered slightly in the draught.

He paused on the threshold for a moment, and looked into the room. It was lighted—except for the feeble ray from the lamp—only by the faint moonlight which found its way in through the hall and narrow windows, partly overgrown with clinging vines.

The whole party entered. The colonel set his lamp upon the sideboard.

He turned to speak to the supposed Gilder, probably with the intention of sending him at once to his room.

But at that moment the lamp suddenly went out.

With a low cry the colonel sprang toward it. The lamp was not there.

It had been removed. The room was almost totally dark.

The colonel lit a match. There was no sign of the lamp. It had utterly vanished.

As the burned match fell to the floor a beam of light suddenly shot across the gloom.

And there, before the old-fashioned fire-place, stood a figure corresponding in every particular to Lavina Richmond as she appeared in a portrait painted just previous to her death, and hanging at that moment in the colonel's room.

There was no sound in the room except the labored breathing of the excited old man, whose faith was now fully justified to his mind.

He was gazing straight at this apparition.

It was veiled, and the heavy folds of a black silk dress in the style of many years ago hung loosely about the form.

Immediately a white hand appeared. The veil was lifted, disclosing the thin and pale face of a woman of advanced age and feeble health. The likeness of Lavina Richmond was perfect.

The colonel tried to speak, but his voice stuck in his throat.

Slowly the veil descended. Nick made a sign to Patsy, who had pressed up a little in advance.

He had kept an eye over his shoulder, however, to be sure of getting any orders from his chief.

There was light enough to see the signal. Patsy sprang forward toward the specter.

The distance separating them was not more than twenty feet. The athletic youth would have covered it in a twinkling.

But suddenly he fell to the floor with a smothered groan.

"I'm hit hard," he cried; and, raising himself upon one knee, with his left hand pressed to his temple, he drew a revolver with the other.

"Don't shoot!" exclaimed Nick. "It's Millie Stevens!"

The detective made a bound toward the figure.

The light which had played full upon it wavered, as if about to vanish.

Yet there was time. Nick felt sure of his prize, as he sprang out from his place beside the colonel.

And the next thing Nick knew it was six o'clock of the following morning, and he was lying in a bed, looking up into Patsy's face.

CHAPTER VIII.

PATSY'S STORY AND THE TEST PROPOSED.

"Are you much hurt?" asked Patsy, anxiously.

Nick took in the whole scene before he replied.

Beside the bed were Colonel Richmond, Horace and a man whom Nick rightly judged to be a doctor.

"No," said Nick, "I'm not much hurt, except in my feelings. What happened, Patsy?"

"The ghost got away," responded the young man, in a tone of disgust.

"I wouldn't talk very much," said Colonel Richmond. "The doctor says that you have been subjected to a severe nervous shock, and—"

"My grandmother's ducks!" exclaimed Nick. "Nervous shock! Well, this makes me worse. Why, man, I've been sand-bagged."

The colonel shook his head.

"The power of the unseen forces," he began; but Nick interrupted him.

"Look here, Colonel Richmond!" he said, "if you had the sensation behind your ear that I've got, you wouldn't talk about mysterious powers of darkness. I know what's the matter with me, and what I want is a chance to get square."

"There is no evidence of any injury," said the physician.

"There never is in a case of this kind," rejoined Nick. "A sand-bag doesn't leave any mark. That's why it is so popular."

"It is impossible to convince a stubborn man," said the colonel. "I should think that this experience would have been enough."

"Quite enough, thank you," responded Nick, sitting up. "And so, if you gentlemen who kindly put me to bed will gracefully withdraw I will get into my clothes, and prove to you that I have had enough, and that it is somebody else's turn now."

He made them leave him with Patsy. Then he began to dress.

"Now tell me your story," he said.

"When I jumped for that spook," Patsy began, "I got the fearfulest thump on my crust that I've had since that marline-spike fell off the main yard on to me in the little affair of the Five Kernels of Corn.

"It couldn't have been a marker to what you got afterward, though. I went down, but not out.

"You saw me draw my gun. Well, when you yelled 'Don't fire!' I held off, but when I saw you go out I decided that all orders of that kind were canceled.

"I blazed away; and, Nick, I put five bullets through that figure just as sure as you're an inch high."

"What happened then?"

"The light went out. I got to your side, and flashed your lantern in half a second.

"The figure had vanished. The colonel's lamp stood on the sideboard just where he had put it.

"We had a fair light very soon. I examined you first, and, upon my word, I thought that you were done for.

"We got you up to this room, and Horace Richmond rode off for the doctor.

"From what he said about a nervous shock you can judge how much he knows.

"His help wasn't worth anything. I will back myself against him any day.

"I made sure that you were only stunned, and would come to all right. Then I hurried down to that room and began my search.

"Well, you know that room. It is simply built up of traps and panels. A man can go through the floor or the walls almost anywhere.

"My job would have been a good deal easier if there'd been less of that secret machinery.

"When there are five hundred ways in which a thing could have been done, it's pretty hard to say which one is right.

"There's a trap pretty nearly in the spot where the figure stood. Probably she came up and went down through that.

"But how about my shooting? There's the point.

"I took a direct line from the place where I was to the trap.

"Following that line, I came to the screen in front of the fire-place.

"In that screen, and about four and a half feet from the floor, were three bullets from my pistol. The other two are not there.

"Then, as I figure it out, that ghost has carried them away.

"My shooting was pretty good, considering the light. The three bullets were in the bigness of a watch-crystal.

"I feel sure that the other two were aimed just as well. If that's true, then one of the conspirators has some mighty serious wounds. Three went through her, and she stopped two.

"But there isn't a drop of blood to be found. The passage under the trap I have explored thoroughly.

"I can't find a human being or a trace of blood or any of the machinery which they must have used for the light or the ghost.

"Of course, the failure to find traces of the conspirators is not strange. These passages are so long, and so intricate, and so mighty well gotten up that I haven't had time to go through them all.

"But the wounded person is another matter. Where she is hidden is more than I can imagine."

"I hope it wasn't Miss Stevens," said Nick.

"You called her name."

"Yes; I thought the chances were that it was she, but, of course, I couldn't recognize her in that rig for certain."

"Well, if it was she, of course, we shall find it out. It's impossible for her to carry those two bullets around with her and not show it."

Nick was dressed by this time. They went out into the hall of the new part. Nick had been taken to a room there, instead of being carried to that which had been assigned to him in the old part of the house.

From below came the sound of voices. The colonel, the doctor and Mrs. Pond were talking of the case.

Patsy stopped before a closed door in the upper hall.

A sign from Patsy arrested Nick's attention. He communicated to Nick in their silent language:

"That's Horace's room, isn't it? Whom is he talking with?"

Nick listened. Then he laughed.

"You've fooled yourself there, Patsy," he said. "He's talking to a parrot. It's one of his pets. He has a good many."

Patsy looked a little sheepish.

"You can't blame me, Nick," he said. "We must suspect everybody in such business as this. Isn't that right?"

"Quite right," responded the detective.

They went at once to the old dining-hall. Colonel Richmond presently joined them there.

To him Nick frankly explained all the events of the previous night, including the disguise which he had adopted in order not to appear in the ghost hunt in his own person.

In return the colonel confessed the facts of his visit to the medium. He said that he had done it secretly, because Horace and his daughter so strongly objected to his seeing those who held communion with the other world.

As to the woman who had met the colonel, he said that he did not know her name. She was veiled all the time, and did not speak to him.

After the disturbance—he was careful not to call it an expose—this woman had led him to the carriage, and they had hastened away.

Such was the strength of his delusion that he still believed that the manifestations he had seen at that house were genuine. He would not accept Nick's version of the affair.

"I have made up my mind what to do," he said. "My decision is unalterable. I shall buy the jewels and give them to Millie Stevens. I believe that in so doing I shall carry out my aunt's wishes."

It was a queer case for Nick. He had followed up many crimes, and had recovered a hundred fortunes in stolen property, but this was the first time that he had seen a robbery going on before his eyes and been unable to prevent it.

His pride was aroused. There was no use in combating the colonel's delusion. Of that he felt sure.

The man must be humored in order to secure delay.

"Colonel Richmond," said Nick, "I wish to suggest to you a final test in this matter. It will settle all doubt and satisfy me thoroughly.

"If you can convert me to your views, I should think the achievement might be worth the trouble."

"It would, indeed," cried the colonel, with sparkling eyes.

Nick, with his usual tact, had hit upon exactly the right course.

"You believe, of course," he said, "that the spirits of the dead cannot be stopped by bolts and bars."

The colonel smiled, and nodded assent.

"The most of the jewels in dispute are, I believe, in the vaults of a safe deposit company," Nick continued. "Very well; my test is this: Name some article of the collection which you are sure is there, and see whether your aunt will transfer it to Miss Stevens' possession.

"It should be as easy for a ghost to take anything from the vaults of a safe deposit company as from that dressing-table upstairs. Will you consent to the test?"

The colonel stood irresolute.

"Consent," said a voice, as of a woman standing beside them.

Yet the three men were the only human beings in that room.

"The voice came from that screen!" cried Patsy, and he leaped toward the old fire-place.

He tore away the screen. No one was there.

"It was my aunt's voice," said the colonel, calmly. "I consent."

"Consent to what?" asked Horace Richmond, entering the room at that moment.

The test was explained to him.

"Good!" he whispered to Nick. "A fine idea."

"Name a piece of jewelry," said the detective to the colonel.

"Among all her wonderful collection," replied Colonel Richmond, speaking slowly, "there was no piece of which she was more proud than the gold clasp, studded with diamonds, which you well remember, Horace."

"I do," responded Horace. "There is an old tradition about it. A remote ancestor of ours is said to have brought it from the Holy Land at the time of the third crusade."

"An ancient family," said Nick. "You have a right to be proud of your ancestry. I accept the article named as the one upon which the test shall be made, provided that you are sure that it is now in the vault."

"Perfectly certain," responded the colonel. "I put it there with my own hands. Nobody else was present, except an officer of the company and my daughter. It is utterly impossible that the jewel can have been removed."

"I will take that for granted," said Nick. "The conditions of the test are that this piece shall not be found in the vault when we visit it this afternoon, and that it shall be afterward discovered in the possession of Millie Stevens."

"Granted," said the colonel; and then in a clear voice, as if he wanted to be sure that there was no misunderstanding in spirit land, he announced the conditions of the test.

CHAPTER IX.

THE DIAMOND CLASP.

They then left the room. Nick dispatched Patsy secretly to the Stevens house.

Shortly before noon, Colonel Richmond, Horace, and Nick took a train for the city.

At two o'clock they entered the vault of the safe deposit company.

It is a long room below the level of the street.

The walls are lined with metal drawers, fastened by locks of the most approved pattern.

The drawers near the floor are the largest. They are, perhaps, a foot square, as seen when closed. Near the top of the room they are much smaller.

A movable metal step-ladder stands ready for the convenience of those who wish to reach the boxes on the upper tiers.

The space in the middle of the room is railed off, and there sits a guard day and night.

"This is ours," said the colonel, advancing toward one of the larger drawers. "I placed the diamond clasp on the very top of the pile of jewels within. It was in a case of its own."

Nick turned to speak to the officer in charge.

He questioned him regarding the possibility of any person taking anything from the boxes. He asked especially about the custody of Mrs. Pond's jewels.

"Colonel Richmond and Mrs. Pond have the two keys necessary for opening the drawer," said the official.

"Yes," said Colonel Richmond, speaking over his shoulder to Nick. "I told you all about that, and I explained how the second key happened to be in my possession instead of Mrs. Pond's."

"True," said Nick, apologetically, "that was not what I was asking about."

At that moment he heard the click of the drawer as it was pulled open.

"Here, wait for me!" he cried. "I should see everything."

As he stepped forward Horace Richmond was just closing the little case which had held the diamond clasp. The colonel was turning away.

"I am deeply disappointed," he said. "The clasp is there."

As the colonel walked away with bowed head, Nick turned to Horace.

The young man's face was a study. He looked as if he had seen a grave-yard full of ghosts.

"Nick Carter," he whispered, "this is dreadful."

"What?"

"Hush! I had to fool him. I positively had to or he would have gone crazy."

He poured the words into Nick's ear in an excited whisper.

"I made him think the clasp was in the box, but it isn't. I substituted another piece. The clasp is gone. What shall we do?"

He showed Nick the box. It contained nothing. Horace had removed the piece which he had used in the deception.

"Good Heavens!" cried Horace. "He heard me."

He pointed to the colonel, who stood like one who has been struck upon the head.

"Gone!" he cried, rushing toward them. "You deceived me!"

Well, they searched the drawer, and the clasp certainly was not there.

Horace explained how he had deceived the colonel by quickly putting another piece of jewelry into the little case when he found it empty.

"I am clever at sleight-of-hand," said he, "or I could never have worked it. I just flashed it before your eyes, uncle, and made you think that you saw the clasp. Forgive me; I thought it was the best."

"I will forgive you, Horace," said Colonel Richmond, gently; "but now you must believe. And you, too, Mr. Carter. Here is proof positive."

They locked the drawer and left the vault.

In the ante-chamber Nick turned to Horace.

"I suppose you'll want to knock my head off when I tell you what I now propose to do," said the detective. "But I think it ought to be done."

"What is it?" asked Horace.

"I think you ought to be searched."

"Exactly my own idea," said Horace. "It is only fair to you. Proceed."

Nick searched him. The diamond clasp was not found. Horace certainly did not have it.

"I hope you're satisfied," he said to Nick. "You know perfectly well that I have had no opportunity to dispose of it. There wasn't much chance in that vault."

Nick laughed.

"I should say not," he replied. "I'm afraid we shall have to fall back upon the theory of the colonel."

"No theory," cried he; "but the living truth, and now proven before you both. But let me ask, Mr. Carter, why you suspected my nephew of taking the clasp."

"I didn't," replied Nick promptly. "I searched him in order to remove every possibility."

"Surely he would have no motive for such an action."

"None that I can see," said Nick, with perfect sincerity.

They proceeded at once to Mrs. Stevens' house.

It was about seven o'clock when they arrived.

They drove up from the station, and on the way picked up Patsy.

During the remainder of the drive, he was busy communicating with Nick in their sign language.

"Miss Stevens is in her room," said Patsy. "She has had a doctor with her almost all the time. He refuses to say anything. I believe, upon my soul, that I shot her last night."

Annie O'Neil, the servant, answered the bell.

She ushered them into the parlor, and said that Mrs. Stevens was in the room of her daughter who was quite ill.

Annie went upstairs to summon her mistress.

A minute later the party below heard a scream.

Then Mrs. Stevens appeared. She was very pale.

In her hand she held a small object wrapped in paper.

"I have just found this upon my daughter's pillow," she said. "I have not removed the paper, but I know instinctively what is within. It is another jewel."

"I am equally sure of it," cried the colonel. "Open the package, Mrs. Stevens."

"My hand trembles so," the lady began.

"Don't open it now," said Nick, "wait a moment. I have a suggestion to make. And, at any rate, we all know what is within."

"Colonel Richmond. I suppose it is useless to plead with you further?"

"Quite useless," said the colonel. "Millie shall have all the jewels. I am determined to buy them of my daughter, and make the transfer at once."

"Well, I am beaten," said the detective. "The case has gone against me. But I will still try to help you. I wish to call your attention to the legal aspects of this case."

"They may surprise you, but, before, going further, I think you should know them. You will not accept my authority, if I state the facts as they are."

"Mrs. Stevens, is it not true that you have one of the judges of the Supreme Court as your neighbor?"

"Yes; Judge Lorrimer is our next neighbor on the south."

"Will you kindly send your servant to his house, or perhaps—"

He glanced at Horace.

"All right, I'll go," said Horace. "I know the judge. But I don't see what you are driving at, Mr. Carter."

"I want to persuade Colonel Richmond to get the law in the case before he goes further. He should consult an authority about this transfer before he makes any more promises which may or may not be legally good."

"I think it a good idea," said Colonel Richmond. "Horace, go over to the judge's house."

During the interval while he was gone very little was done. Mrs. Stevens sat holding the package, and apparently deeply moved.

She several times declared to Colonel Richmond that she did not wish her daughter to get the jewels in such a way, and that she was still convinced that human beings had planned and executed the whole strange series of robberies and surprises.

"If it should prove," said Nick, "that this is a conspiracy, do you wish any arrests?"

He turned toward the colonel as he spoke.

"If it does," said the colonel, with a smile, "you can arrest me. It won't."

"But I am serious."

"So am I. Of course, if there had been a crime I would not shield the guilty parties, whoever they might be."

At that moment Horace returned with Judge Lorrimer, whom he had met walking just beyond Mrs. Stevens' grounds.

"I have tried to explain the case to him," said Horace; "but he says he doesn't understand how any legal complications can arise."

"We will try to make that clear presently," said Nick. "Mrs. Stevens, open that package. No; wait a moment. You are agitated. You should have a glass of water. Permit me to ring."

He put his hand upon the bell-cord.

As he did so, Mrs. Stevens opened the package. The article within rolled out upon her lap.

It was not the diamond clasp, but an ordinary pocket-knife of large size.

"Why, Nick, it's yours," cried Patsy.

"So it is," responded the detective. "But this is a diamond clasp."

He drew the relic of the third crusade from his pocket as he spoke, and handed it to the colonel.

At that moment Annie O'Neil appeared at the door in answer to the bell.

"And now," said Nick, while the others stared in wonder. "We will consider the legal points involved.

"Judge Lorrimer, here are the necessary blank forms. Please grant me warrants for the arrest of Horace Richmond and Annie O'Neil for criminal conspiracy."

CHAPTER X.

SOME CLEVER TRICKS EXPLAINED.

No sooner had Nick uttered these words than a loud cry rang through the house.

Instantly Millie Stevens appeared upon the threshold of the parlor.

"Horace!" she cried. "Tell me it is not true. You have not done this."

"Certainly not," he exclaimed. "It is an absurd slander. Carter, you'll be sorry for this."

The girl looked straight into Horace's face for an instant.

Then she uttered a moan.

"He is guilty!" she cried; "I can read it in his eyes. And I loved him so."

She sank upon the floor at her mother's feet.

"Oh, mother," she said, "this is a just punishment for me. You told me I must give him up. You read his heart.

"But I secretly accepted his love. I received letters in which he begged me to keep our love a secret, and in which I should have read a confession of guilt.

"And all the time he loved me only because he thought that I should have a fortune in gold and diamonds."

"You have stated the case exactly," said Nick. "When he thought you would inherit all those jewels, he made love to you. Heaven knows that your own attractions should have been enough, but they were not for him.

"When the jewels went elsewhere, he was probably on the point of giving you up. I judge that from certain letters of yours in that telegraph cipher which I found in his room.

"Then he wormed his plan for making you rich. He managed the robberies at the house with the aid of John Gilder and one or two of that spiritualistic gang whom he smuggled into the house.

"He did everything to increase his uncle's delusion. It was he who put Colonel Richmond again in the hands of that medium."

"I supposed that that affair was all over," said Mrs. Stevens; "both the colonel and I had disapproved of it."

"Annie O'Neil," said Nick, turning to the servant, "a full confession from you is what we now require. It may save you from prison.

"We know that you managed the affair from this end. It was you who put the jewels where they were found, after they had been given you by Horace. It was you—catch her!"

This last exclamation was addressed to Patsy. The girl was wavering as if she would fall.

Before Patsy could reach her she sank sobbing to the floor. She proceeded to pour out an incoherent confession, in which little was clear but the name of Horace Richmond, and the fact that the girl "loved him still."

"I've been waiting for this," said Horace, with a brutal sneer. "Trust a woman and lose the game. Well, it's all up. I loved you, Millie, but not enough to marry you without the jewels. So I schemed for the transfer, and I have failed."

"It was Annie O'Neil whom you followed last night, Patsy," said Nick. "Who was the men?"

"John Gilder," gasped the terrified girl.

"And you played ghost?"

"Yes, sir."

"But how about my shooting?" asked Patsy. "How does Annie O'Neil happen to be alive?"

"Read that from Chick," said Nick, producing a paper. "He's made some discoveries in the colonel's house today while we were all away.

"He's found the ghost. It seems that this girl was inside of a hollow dummy.

"She stood over a trap door. Just as soon as she had shown her face, she dropped the veil, and went through the trap."

"The dummy still continued to stand there, and you shot at it. Two of your bullets flattened on its steel braces. The rest went through.

"John Gilder flashed the light. When he turned it off, the dummy was hauled down through the trap, and hidden in a place that neither you nor I found, Patsy."

Colonel Richmond seemed to be in a trance.

"But the mysterious force," he said, at last. "The injury to yourself and your assistant. How do you explain that?"

"It was done by John Gilder swinging a sand-bag on a string at the end of a pole which he poked through one of those panels.

"It couldn't be seen in that dim light, and it made a fearful weapon. It's a wonder that he didn't knock our heads off."

"I thought that I heard something whiz," muttered Patsy.

"And yet I heard her voice this morning," said the colonel. "She said 'consent.'"

"No, she didn't; I said it," rejoined Nick. "I'm something of a ventriloquist."

"How was the affair managed at the safe deposit vault?" asked the colonel, after a pause.

"Why, Horace took the clasp out of the box and put it into your pocket. You really saw it, only he made you think afterward that you didn't.

"After I had searched him he picked your pocket and got the clasp. Then he wrapped it in paper.

"I picked his pocket to make matters even, and substituted my knife similarly wrapped up.

"When we got to this house he gave the knife to Annie O'Neil, who put it on Miss Stevens' pillow when she went upstairs to call Mrs. Stevens."

"You have not explained the robberies at my house," said Colonel Richmond.

"I'll do that over there. Is the rest of it clear? Has anybody a question to ask?"

Nobody spoke.

"Annie O'Neil," said Nick, "I'll leave here in Patsy's charge. Horace Richmond, come with us."

Horace looked ugly for a moment, and then he calmed down and sullenly complied with Nick's order.

Judge Lorrimer begged to be of the party in order to see the explanation of the mysterious robberies of which he had heard.

Two hours later they all stood in Mrs. Pond's room.

"The essential part of this matter," said Nick, "was this door which appeared to open and close of itself.

"I saw that at a glance, and made a secret investigation. It is done by electricity.

"There's a magnet in the casing which is powerful enough to swing the door to, after which the same magnet pushes this little bolt—which looks like an ordinary screw—into position, and that holds the door, but not very steadily.

"You may say that this should have given me the criminal at once, but it didn't.

"You see, this electro-magnet works whenever a current is turned into the wires. Horace was clever enough to have the wires lead all over the house.

"A connection with the electric light wires, furnishing the current, can be made in almost every room in the house.

"Of course, I suspected Horace at once, because his room was directly overhead. In fact, the two are connected, as you see, by a ventilator in the form of a pipe with a grated opening in each room.

"The grating here, you see, is open."

"But, bless me," exclaimed Judge Lorrimer, "no thief could come through such a place. Why, it isn't six inches square."

"Step in here a minute and see," said Nick, and then he called out:

"All ready, Chick!"

The whole party had by this time gone into Mrs. Pond's sitting-room.

Nick said hush, and pointed to the ventilator. Most of the party could see it through the door.

Instantly there appeared a mass of green feathers, and then Horace Richmond's parrot fluttered noiselessly down into the room.

For a minute or two it ran around the floor. Then it flew up on to the dressing-table, seized a small gold bar pin in its beak, and flew back into the ventilator pipe.

"A nice trick," said the detective. "I believe it took you some time to teach the bird that."

"About a year," growled Horace. "The bird was well trained before."

"Is it all clear?" said Nick.

"Perfectly," said the colonel. "But how did you get at it?"

"Simply enough. There was only one way into this room when those robberies were committed, and the parrot was the only living thing in the house that was small enough to go through that pipe and intelligent enough to do the trick.

"You see, Horace trained the bird to pick up bright objects, and especially articles of the color of gold, and to go up and down that pipe.

"Then he schemed to have your daughter come here. The rest was easy. He waited till she was in the farther room, and then closed the door between by the electrical device.

"Immediately he sent down the parrot. The bird was so well trained that he required only a minute or two to secure something.

"Of course, it was not always something of value. There were probably a dozen failures where the bird brought back nothing or some useless object that glittered.

"I suspected the bird, and so put Chick on that lay. As you see, he has got the creature to work very well.

"Now, colonel, what more can I do for you? What shall be done with the prisoners?"

"Nothing; I will not prosecute."

"I guess we can hush it up, if you say so," responded Nick. "By the way, there's one thing that I want to explain. I mean the strange appearance of that diamond pin in the box on the occasion of Mrs. Stevens' first visit.

"It was not the real pin, but a duplicate which had been prepared in advance. Horace had put up that game as a finishing touch for his uncle.

"Mrs. Pond had forced Horace to go for me; but he wouldn't be scared out. He played the game right under my nose.

"Annie O'Neil had the duplicate pin. She opened that box while Mrs. Stevens was calling to her daughter, as she testified, and put the duplicate into it. Then she wrapped it up just as before."

"So I won't have to give up the jewels," said Mrs. Pond.

"I am afraid you will," said Nick; "the queerest part of the story is to come.

"Chick has found a later will by Miss Lavina Richmond. It is undoubtedly genuine.

"And where do you suppose it was found? The strangest of all places—in Horace Richmond's room."

"She died there," responded the colonel. "She must have hidden the will during her last illness."

"It is strange to think of Horace Richmond struggling with that parrot, and putting up his elaborate schemes, while the document which would have given him all he wanted was hidden in his own room."

Horace Richmond's face at that moment was an amusing spectacle.

So was Mrs. Pond's.

"Never mind, daughter," said the colonel. "It is better so. I will make good the loss to you."

And so ends Nick Carter's ghost story in a most natural manner.

Nobody was ever punished for the affair. Even the gang of mediums and heelers whom Nick had rounded up were released after their night in jail, because, on sober second thought, their dupes were ashamed to complain against them.

THE MYSTERY OF ST. AGNES' HOSPITAL

CHAPTER I.
LAWRENCE DEEVER DEMANDS JUSTICE.

"I call it a perfectly plain case, Mr. Colton."

"A case of what?"

"Why, murder, of course."

"Who has been murdered?"

As "Mr. Colton"—who was no other than Nick Carter—asked this question, his face looked as innocent as a babe's. He seemed surprised to hear that there had been a murder, though his companion, Lawrence Deever, had been saying so repeatedly during the last half hour.

Deever now looked at Nick with eyes and mouth wide open.

"Who has been murdered?" he repeated. "My brother has been murdered."

"What makes you think so?" asked Nick, calmly.

"What, indeed!" exclaimed Deever. "I have told you already."

"No, you haven't. You have told me that your brother has been missing since night before last."

"I told you more than that," cried Deever. "He is known to have quarreled with that man Jarvis."

"Dr. Jarvis, of St. Agnes' Hospital?"

"Of course. And I have proved—"

"You have proved nothing," said Nick. "Let me repeat your statements:

"Your brother Patrick worked for Dr. Jarvis, or under his direction, in the garden of St. Agnes' Hospital. The doctor frequently remonstrated with Patrick for drinking too much whisky, and—"

"Remonstrated!" exclaimed Deever. "That's hardly the word for it. He abused the lad. He struck him half a dozen times during the last week."

"With the flat of his hand," said Nick, smiling. "That is hardly the foundation for a charge of murder."

"It shows that Jarvis is a violent man," said Deever, "and everybody knows that he is."

"He has a bad temper, I will admit."

"He's a dangerous old crank."

"Well, to continue your statement of the case, late on Monday afternoon they were heard quarreling in the garden. They were seen there about half-past six o'clock.

"A little after half-past seven the doctor was seen coming toward the hospital. He was greatly excited. He passed Martin Burns, who drives the hospital ambulance.

"Martin went into the garden and failed to find Patrick. Nobody can tell what became of your brother or how he got out of the garden."

"Yes; that's the point," Deever cried. "How did he get out?"

"He may have climbed over the wall."

"You've forgotten that his coat, with a little money in the pocket, was found hanging on the limb of a tree."

"No, I did not forget that."

"Well, why did he leave it?"

"I don't pretend to know."

"And what has become of him?"

"There, again, I shall have to find out the facts before I answer."

"I tell you he was murdered."

"Now," said Nick, smiling again, "I shall have to turn your own question against yourself: If he was murdered, what's become of him?"

"You mean where's his body?"

"Exactly."

"But do you mean to tell me," cried Deever, indignantly, "that if this man has hidden my brother's body so that

nobody can find it he will escape punishment for his crime?"

"Nothing of the sort," Nick replied. "I only wish to curb your impatience."

"I'm not more impatient than any man in my situation ought to be. I simply demand justice."

"Or, in other words—"

"I want you to arrest Dr. Jarvis."

"I can't do it."

"Why not?"

"We must have some sort of proof that your brother is dead. We can't try a man for the murder of somebody who may be alive for all we know."

"You seem to be working in Jarvis' interest," said Deever, with a sneer.

"Not a bit of it. You know why I am here in your house."

"Because Superintendent Byrnes sent you; and I supposed that he had sent a good man. He promised the best."

"Well, that ought to satisfy you."

"There was no need of sending anybody. We might have arrested Jarvis at once. Any ordinary policeman could have got evidence enough to convict."

"But the superintendent did not think so."

"No; and I'm willing he should work in his own way, so long as I get justice in the end. Now, what do you want?"

"Well," said Nick, appearing to consider the subject deeply, "I would like some evidence of a motive."

"I don't believe there was any motive. The thing was done in anger."

"Then I want evidence of a really serious quarrel."

"Very well; you wait right here, and I'll bring a man who knows something about it. I heard of him this morning, and had time to ask him a few questions, but I don't know all he has to tell."

Deever hastily left the room. From the window Nick saw Deever pass up West One Hundred and Forty-third street, on which the house stood. He was going in the direction of St. Nicholas avenue.

In less than an hour he returned with a young man whom he presented as the important witness for whom he had been in search.

"Your name is Adolf Klein?" said Nick.

The witness nodded. He was a bashful, awkward fellow, who did not seem to be possessed of the average intelligence.

"Where do you work?" was the next question.

"I'm a bartender in Orton's saloon, up on the avenue."

"Do you know what has become of Patrick Deever?"

"All I know is this: I was passing the grounds of the hospital Monday evening and stopped just by the wall. The reason I stopped was that I heard Pat Deever inside, talking very loud. He called somebody an old fool and swore at him."

The witness paused. He seemed to be a good deal excited. It was not very warm in the room, but the perspiration was pouring off of Klein's forehead.

"Was that all you heard?" asked Nick.

"No; I heard more hard talk, and then a blow was struck. It sounded heavy and dull. Then came more blows. Somebody seemed to be pounding. It sounded as if he was pounding on the ground, and if it hadn't been for the loud talk just before, I'd have thought that Pat was smoothing down a flower-bed with his spade."

"Did you hear any talking after the blow?"

"I didn't hear Pat's voice again."

"Did you hear any voice?"

"I heard somebody muttering. The voice sounded like Dr. Jarvis'. I've been to the hospital, and I know the doctor."

"Did you look over the wall?"

"No; it's too high there. I ran around to the gate on St. Nicholas avenue and tried to see in; but I couldn't. There were too many trees between me and the garden."

"Then what did you do?"

"I went home."

"Did you say anything about what you had heard?"

"Not that night."

"When did you first speak of it?"

"This morning."

"To whom?"

"To Mr. Deever. He was in the saloon, and he told me that his brother was missing."

"Well," cried Deever, who could keep silence no longer, "what do you think of that?"

"It is important evidence."

"You remember," Deever continued, "that when I went to ask Jarvis where my brother was, he admitted having quarreled with him, but said that it ended in words. Now we know that it ended in blows."

"What time was it when you heard that blow?" asked Nick of Klein.

"Must have been about half-past seven," Klein replied.

"How do you know?"

"When I walked up the avenue I saw the clock on the church up by One Hundred and Fiftieth street. It was a quarter of eight."

"That fits the case exactly," Deever exclaimed. "It was a little after half-past seven when Burns saw Jarvis coming in from the garden."

"That is true."

"Will you arrest Jarvis now?"

"I will not," said Nick. "The evidence is not yet sufficient."

Deever made an impatient gesture.

"Remember," said Nick, "that an accusation of murder leaves an indelible stain. We cannot move too carefully."

"You will let him escape."

"His escape is utterly impossible," said Nick. "He is watched."

"A good many men have been watched and have got away."

"Nobody ever got away from the man who is watching Jarvis," said Nick, quietly; and that praise was not too high, for the person in question was Nick's famous assistant, Chick.

"And now," said Deever, "may I ask what more you need in the way of evidence?"

"I need proof of your brother's death."

"In short, we must find the body."

"Exactly."

"Very well," sneered Deever, "I suppose I must do it myself. I've got nearly all the evidence thus far."

"By all means do it," said Nick, with his calm smile, "if you can."

Deever stared at him for more than a minute without speaking. Then he said:

"Colton, why do you treat this case as you do?"

"What do you mean?"

"You don't seem to want to go ahead with it."

"I don't want to go ahead with it any faster than the facts will justify. If you had had more experience in such matters you would know the folly of arresting a man first and getting facts to warrant the arrest afterward. As I say, I want more facts, and you must help me to get them."

The last part of this conversation was held as Nick, Deever and Klein passed out upon the street.

A ragged young man who was leaning against a tree heard it, and was much surprised.

For the ragged young man was Patsy, and he had never heard Nick Carter ask anybody except his regular assistants to help him in that way before.

CHAPTER II.

THE DEAD MAN'S HEAD.

Dr. Jarvis, chief of the staff of St. Agnes' Hospital, was well known as a peculiar man.

He was rich enough to take his leisure, but he worked like a slave. He had an elegant house on St. Nicholas avenue, but he spent all his days and more than half his nights at the hospital.

A rude cot in a little room adjoining his laboratory in the hospital was his bed four nights in seven on the average. His only recreation was found in the care of a little garden in the hospital grounds; and it was the common talk of the younger physicians that Dr. Jarvis enjoyed finding fault with the gardener more than he did cultivating the flowers.

He had a wife and a young, unmarried daughter, whom he loved devotedly, but to whom he gave only a few hours of his time in the course of a week.

A negro named Caesar Augustus Cleary was the doctor's assistant in the laboratory.

The other physicians in the hospital said that Cleary had become so accustomed to Jarvis' ways that, like a Mississippi mule, he had to be cursed before he could be made to understand anything.

Cleary slept in a little closet similar to the doctor's, and on the opposite side of the laboratory. He was asleep there, about twelve o'clock on the night after Nick's visit to Lawrence Deever, when Nick crept softly through the window.

All these rooms were on the ground floor and entrance was easy.

Nick had spent a part of the evening in the garden. He had watched till the light went out in the laboratory and another appeared in the doctor's bed-room. Then he was ready for a search of the premises.

If, in a moment of anger, Dr. Jarvis had struck Patrick Deever and killed him, it was likely that the laboratory would hold some trace of the secret.

The best way to hide a human body is to utterly destroy it. This is no easy task for an ordinary man, but to a scientist, like Dr. Jarvis, it would be comparatively easy.

However, it would take time. Patrick Deever had disappeared on Monday night. Forty-eight hours had elapsed, but yet Nick hoped to find a trace, if the work of destruction had been attempted in the laboratory.

Nick had entered Cleary's room with the purpose of guarding against any interruption from the negro. He found Cleary sleeping heavily; but when Nick left the room and glided into the laboratory, Cleary's sleep was even deeper than it had been before.

An adept in chemistry, Nick knew how to produce a slumber from which no ordinary means could arouse the sleeper. His drug was sure and it left no bad effects.

The laboratory was unlighted, except by the moon, which shone in over the shutters, which covered the lower parts of the windows, preventing observation from without.

The first object which attracted Nick's attention was a corpse which lay upon a stone table in the middle of the room.

Nick had made a hasty search of the laboratory some hours before, while the doctor had been at dinner. He had then seen this corpse, and had assured himself that it was not Patrick Deever's; but he had been unable to do much more before the doctor returned. Therefore, he had made this late visit.

He first examined some instruments which lay near the dissecting-table. They revealed nothing. Then for perhaps half an hour, he searched various parts of the room without result.

Beneath the laboratory was a cellar in which, as Nick knew, were electric apparatus and a furnace which the doctor used for his experiments.

Nick was about to descend into this cellar when a noise in the direction of the doctor's room attracted his attention.

He turned and beheld Dr. Jarvis entering the laboratory.

Realizing the possibility of such an event, Nick had disguised himself as Cleary, yet he wished to avoid being seen if possible.

He got into the darkest corner available and watched.

Dr. Jarvis had on only his night-shirt, a skull-cap and a peculiar red dressing-gown, which he wore whenever he worked in the laboratory or in the garden. This dressing-gown and the queer red skull-cap were so old that nobody about the hospital could remember when they had been new. Cleary once said that he believed they were born and grew up with the doctor.

Without noticing Nick, Dr. Jarvis advanced directly toward the dissecting-table. He had no light, but the moon's rays glanced brightly around the slab.

The doctor drew back the sheet which covered the figure, revealing the head and naked breast.

Then he drew some instruments from a case, and proceeded to sever the head from the body.

This secret action in the dead of night surprised Nick greatly. Could it be that some clever trick had been accomplished? Had the body which Nick had seen been removed, and that of Patrick Deever substituted?

From where he stood Nick could not see the face of the body clearly enough to form a decision. If, however, this was only an ordinary subject for the dissecting-table, why did Dr. Jarvis mutilate it with such caution and at such an hour?

To cut off the head was the work of a very few minutes to the skillful physician.

He soon held it in his hands; and it seemed to Nick that the old physician gazed at it with peculiar attention in the moonlight.

Suddenly Dr. Jarvis turned, and, carrying the head in one hand, holding it by the hair, he advanced toward Nick. In his other hand the doctor held a knife which he had used in his ghastly work.

Nick had little hopes of escaping discovery. Evidently it was the doctor's intention to carry the head into the cellar, and the detective was concealed close by the stairs.

But Nick was not discovered. Dr. Jarvis stalked by, within six feet of him, and looked neither to the right nor to the left.

Still bearing the head, he descended the stairs, and Nick crept after him.

The cellar was perfectly dark except where a faint glow around the little furnace could be perceived. Nick was therefore able to follow the doctor closely.

But suddenly the place was made light. Dr. Jarvis had touched a button in the wall, and a row of electric lights, suspended before the furnace, flashed up.

Nick had barely time to drop flat on the floor behind a row of great glass jars full of clear fluid, the nature of which he could not determine.

These jars were set upon a sort of bench made of stone, rising about two feet from the floor. Between them and the furnace stood the doctor. Nick was on the other side.

It seemed tolerably certain to the detective that Dr. Jarvis would throw the head into the furnace. Nick determined to get a sight of the head at once. He was yet uncertain whether it was Patrick Deever's.

Rising on his hands and knees he peered between two of the jars. The head was not more than a yard from Nick's eyes, but the face was turned away.

By the hair, and the general outline, it might be Deever's. At all hazards Nick must get a sight of it before it was consigned to the furnace in which a fire, supported by peculiar chemical agencies and much hotter than burning coal, raged furiously.

Suddenly, when it seemed as if the doctor was about to raise an arch of fire-brick in order to throw the head into the fire, he turned and dropped the grim object into the jar almost directly above Nick's head.

It was carefully done, though quickly. The head sank without a splash. Only a single drop of the fluid—a drop no bigger than a pin's point—fell upon the back of Nick's hand.

It burned like white, hot iron. It seemed to sink through the hand upon which it fell.

Nick sprang to his feet, not because of the pain of the burning acid, but because he knew that he must instantly obtain a sight of the head or it would be dissolved.

It lay face upward in the jar, but the acid, even in that instant, had done its work.

All semblance to humanity had vanished. As Nick gazed, the head seemed to waver in the midst of the strange fluid, and then, suddenly, Nick saw, in a direct line where it had been, the bottom of the jar.

The head had been dissolved.

Nick raised his eyes to Dr. Jarvis' face.

There stood the doctor, entirely unmoved. He looked directly at Nick but seemed not to see him.

His eyes were fixed, and their expression was peculiar. One less experienced than Nick would have supposed Dr. Jarvis to be insane.

Certainly his conduct as well as his appearance seemed to justify such a

But Nick knew better. He recognized at once the peculiar condition in which Dr. Jarvis then was. He had seen the phenomenon before.

"Walking in his sleep," Nick said to himself. "Shall I wake him here? I think not. Let me see what he will do."

CHAPTER III.

THE DOCTOR OFFERS A BRIBE.

Nick was not greatly surprised by his discovery. He knew that Dr. Jarvis was a sleep-walker.

The reader may remember the case of a young woman who, in her sleep, walked nearly a mile on Broadway, and was awakened by a policeman to whom she could give no account of her wanderings.

At that time, the newspapers had a good deal to say about sleep-walking, and several good stories were printed about Dr. Jarvis. The doctor was sensitive on the subject, and he had threatened the most dreadful vengeance if he ever found out who had betrayed his secret to the reporters.

These stories came into Nick's mind at once. He decided to witness this strange scene to the end.

There was, however, little more to be observed. The doctor extinguished the lights and ascended the stairs.

He paused a moment beside the mutilated body; put away his knife, drew the cloth over the corpse, and then turned toward his room.

Nick followed, and entered the room close behind the somnambulist. It is sometimes possible to question a person in that condition, and to learn what he would not disclose when awake.

Some such intention was in Nick's mind, but he had no opportunity of executing it. The doctor walked to the window, of which the shade was drawn. Accidentally he touched the cord, and the shade, which worked with a spring, shot up, making a loud noise.

With a peculiar, hoarse cry, the doctor awoke. He exhibited the nervous terror common at such times. He jumped back from the window, and turned toward the bed.

Nick, disguised as Cleary, stood directly before him. It was impossible to avoid discovery. The moonlight flooded the room.

"Cleary!" cried the doctor, "why are you here?"

"I heard you moving about, sir," replied Nick, imitating Cleary's voice which had very little of the ordinary peculiarities of the negro. Indeed, he was an educated man.

"Walking in my sleep again," muttered the doctor. "And such dreams! Great Heaven! such dreams!"

"I thought you must have had a bad nightmare," said Nick.

"I have. It was dreadful."

The doctor pressed his hands to his head.

"What did you dream, sir?"

"What business is that of yours, you infernal, inquisitive rascal?"

"Well, sir," said Nick, respectfully, "I thought from what you did—"

"Did? What did I do?"

Nick very briefly described the scene which he had witnessed.

Dr. Jarvis seemed overcome with horror.

"Is it possible?" he cried.

Then suddenly he turned and hurried out into the laboratory. He went straight to the corpse upon the slab of stone, and drew back the cloth.

Nick followed, and together they gazed upon the mutilated body. It seemed to Nick that it was the same which he had seen before, and which he had known to be not that of Patrick Deever. But in the uncertain light he could not be certain.

Dr. Jarvis gave him little time for making his decision.

He hastily replaced the cloth, shuddering convulsively as he did so. Then he returned to his room.

He sat down upon the edge of his cot, and held his head in his hands. When he looked up his violent mood had passed away. He seemed to wish to talk.

"It was a hideous dream," he said.

"Murder?" asked Nick.

"There was murder in it," replied the doctor. "I thought that I had killed—that I had killed a man."

"Patrick Deever?"

"How the devil did you know that?" cried the doctor, springing to his feet.

"Well, sir, the man has disappeared, and—"

"And somebody has been filling your head with foolish stories. Who was it?"

"Mr. Deever was asking some questions about his brother."

"And you told him everything you knew, and a good deal more, I suppose?"

"I didn't tell him anything."

"It's lucky for you that you didn't. Now, look here, Cleary, you know where your interest lies. Don't you lose a good job by talking too much."

"No, sir; I won't. But there's something in dreams, and—"

"There was agony in this one. I thought that I had killed Deever, and was obliged to hide his body. I felt that the police were close upon me.

"It seemed as if I had only one night in which to make myself safe. I thought first of burning the body in the furnace. Then it seemed best to use the acid. Heavens, I am glad to be awake again!"

"Such a dream as that means something, sir."

"It means this—that miserable, drunken rascal has disappeared, and I am likely to have trouble about it."

"He'll come back."

"I don't know about that. Perhaps he won't come back."

"Have you any idea where he is, sir?"

"Do you think I killed him, Cleary?"

"No, sir; certainly not."

"But suppose I did? What then?"

"Well, sir; it's a terrible thing. I—"

"Would you betray me?"

"I would not say a word unless I was sure that you were guilty."

"Even then, why should you speak?"

"There's a conscience, and—"

"Nonsense! What business is it of yours? Now look here; you think a good deal more about money than you do about your conscience. I've got money, and I'm willing to pay well to keep out of trouble."

"But I don't want to get into any."

"You won't. All you've got to do is to keep still."

"Keep still about what, sir?"

"This sleep-walking to-night."

"I won't say a word, unless—"

Nick hesitated. He wished to give the doctor the impression that his innocence was by no means clear, and that the idea of shielding a murderer was not to be entertained.

His acting was evidently successful.

"Look here, Cleary," said the doctor, "I don't trust you. There's just one thing that will satisfy me. You must get away."

The doctor was trembling violently. Evidently fear had taken possession of him.

"Get away?" asked Nick, as if surprised.

"Yes; I'm afraid of you. You will talk."

"But where shall I go?"

"Go to Australia," said Dr. Jarvis, after a moment's reflection. "You have no family. It makes no difference to you where you go, so long as you have money."

"How much money?"

"In that safe," said the doctor, pointing to a steel box in the corner, "there is enough to start you. I have about five thousand dollars in cash there, and I will send ten times as much more after you. Is that enough?"

"You take my breath away," said Nick. "When must I go?"

"At once; to-night."

"But, Dr. Jarvis—"

"Don't talk. Do it. If fifty thousand dollars isn't enough, you shall have a hundred thousand within six months."

"How do I know that you will send it?"

"If I don't, come back and denounce me."

"But how will you explain my going?"

"I will say that you have gone to Europe for me as you did go three years ago."

Nick shook his head.

"Dr. Jarvis," said he, "I've worked for you twenty years, and I think as much of you as of any man living, but I can't do this."

"Why not?"

"I can't shield a guilty man."

"Nonsense, you idiot; I am as innocent as you are."

"Then why do you send me away? No, Dr. Jarvis, this is plain to me. You killed him."

"I killed him?" cried the doctor.

"Yes; but you are not a murderer at heart. Some accident led to this. Tell me how it happened, and if it is as I think, I will go."

"I tell you I am innocent. I had nothing to do with this man's disappearance."

Despite all Nick's ingenuity, Dr. Jarvis stuck to this assertion. There was nothing left for Nick, in the character of Cleary, except to pretend to believe it.

He resolved to accept the doctor's bribe. This was almost necessary, for in any case he would be obliged to remove Cleary.

After this conversation, it would not be safe to leave the negro there. The doctor would, of course, discover that some trick had been played upon him as soon as he mentioned the events of the night to Cleary.

The results which would follow such a discovery Nick wished to avoid.

He, therefore, with great caution, accepted the proposal, and received a large sum as the first installment of the blackmail.

As to the doctor's real intentions, Nick was in some doubt. It seemed probable that he meant to sacrifice Cleary to secure his own safety in case it became necessary.

If Cleary ran away, it would be easy to divert suspicion to him.

The case against Dr. Jarvis looked very plain. Innocent men do not take such desperate measures. And yet Nick was far from reaching a definite opinion in the case.

He returned to Cleary's room; and it required a good deal of skill to keep the doctor out of it. If he had entered, and had seen two Cleary's, it is hard to say what desperation would have led him to do.

For an instant Nick had an idea of letting him do it, and then attempt to secure a true statement of the case with the aid of the shock which the doctor would have sustained on discovering how he had been duped.

But second thought showed him the necessity for a different procedure.

From Cleary's window he signaled for Chick, who was in waiting near the wall, and to him he delivered the unconscious form of the negro.

Then he returned to take his leave of the doctor—a difficult business, which he managed with great skill.

This done, he secretly left the hospital.

What had been the true meaning of the night's events? It puzzled him to say.

Was the body on the slab that of Patrick Deever, or had the doctor gone through in his sleep the act which he intended to perform later with the real body?

Nick thought that the latter was more probable. He was inclined to believe that the body of Deever might be concealed about the building. If so, he would find it.

Reflecting thus, he passed outside the hospital walls.

Three men were approaching along St. Nicholas avenue. Two of these he quickly recognized as Chick and Lawrence Deever. The other was unknown to him.

Evidently Chick had sent Cleary away in a carriage which they had kept waiting near the hospital during the evening. How he had met Deever, Nick could not guess.

He went forward to meet the three men.

He had removed the disguise in which he had deceived the doctor, and was now as Deever had seen him before.

Deever recognized him at once, and started forward, saying:

"You ask for proof of my brother's death. I will give it to you. Here is a man who saw him buried."

And he pointed to the stranger.

CHAPTER IV.

WHAT WAS FOUND IN THIS GARDEN.

Nick received Deever's startling intelligence with every evidence of satisfaction.

"You are doing great work, Mr. Deever," said he. "We shall soon have this affair straightened out."

As Nick pronounced these words he signaled to Chick in their sign language as follows:

"What do you think of this witness?"

Chick promptly returned the answer:

"He seems to be telling the truth."

Then Deever turned toward the new witness.

"Mr. Haskell, Mr. Colton," said he, in hasty introduction. "Now, Haskell, tell what you know."

"Wait," said Nick, "who is this man?" And he pointed to Chick.

"He's a fellow that knows my brother. We met him just below, and brought him along to help in the identification. There are two more coming."

"Then you purpose to disinter your brother's body at once?"

"Of course I do."

"You have no tools."

"The others will bring them. That's what they're after."

"Where is the place?"

"The hospital garden. Haskell, tell your story. But, no; I'll tell it for you to save time."

He took Nick by the arm and led him along the hospital wall on the southern side of the ground. They followed the wall in the direction of the river, until they came to the corner.

Between them and the river was a large piece of ground nearly as wild in appearance as it was a hundred years ago. Many trees and bushes grew upon it.

"This place," said Deever, "is a sort of lovers' walk. Any pleasant evening in summer you can see dozens of couples walking down that path.

"Haskell was here Monday evening with a young lady. They sat for a while on the trunk of a fallen tree, looking off toward the river.

"It was nearly eleven o'clock when Haskell walked home with her. Then he discovered that he had lost his knife. He had been whittling the tree-trunk with it.

"It was a good knife, and he thought it worth while to go back and try to find it. He went back, and after quite a hunt, found it beside the tree.

"By this time it was after midnight. On his way home he passed the spot where we are now standing.

"Just as he got here, he heard a peculiar noise on the other side of the wall. It seemed strange that anybody should be at work in the garden at that hour, but the sound was as if somebody was using a shovel.

"Haskell has more curiosity than a woman. He resolved to find out what was going on inside that garden.

"The wall here is pretty high, as you see, but with the help of a piece of board he climbed up so that he could look over. Now, Haskell, tell us just what you saw."

Chick and Haskell had come up just as Deever finished his introduction to the story.

"I saw Dr. Jarvis digging," said Haskell.

"How did you know it was he?" asked Nick.

"He had on his dressing-gown and cap," Haskell replied. "I guess pretty near everybody who lives up this way knows those things."

"What did you do?"

"I watched him a couple of minutes. He seemed to be hard at work digging a hole. I never thought then that it was a grave."

"Could you see how big a hole he was making?"

"No; he was under the shadow of the trees. I could hardly see him at all there, but just as I got on the top of the wall, he came out for a second or two into the moonlight. Then I saw the old cap and dressing-gown."

"Did you see any object lying upon the ground which looked like a body?"

"No; it was dark under the tree. The body was probably there."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, it couldn't have been anywhere else."

"How do you know there was any body?"

"Mr. Deever has told me about his brother. I take it for granted that the doctor was burying him."

"Did you tell anybody about this occurrence?"

"No."

"Why not? It was strange enough."

"I didn't think it was strange for him. Everybody knows that the doctor is a sort of crank. When I saw who it was, I just slid down off the wall and went home. I never would have thought of it again if Mr. Deever hadn't spoken to me about his brother."

"You can point out the spot where the doctor was digging?"

"Sure."

"We will make an examination at once."

"I thought you'd find out that murder had been done," said Deever. "You'll find out, if you stick to me, that I pretty generally know what I'm talking about."

"That's right," said Haskell.

"Here come your friends," said Chick, who had not spoken up to that time.

Two men were seen coming from St. Nicholas avenue. They carried spades and pickaxes.

Thus reinforced, the party proceeded to scale the wall. Just as they did so, the moon, which had been very bright, was obscured by a heavy cloud.

It was in darkness, then, that they descended into the garden.

But Haskell seemed to be in doubt about the direction to be followed. He started off at once.

They had gone less than a hundred feet when suddenly Haskell shrank back. Deever, who was next to him, ran against him violently.

"What's the matter?" whispered Deever, in an anxious tone.

"There's somebody here ahead of us."

All looked where Haskell pointed, and they were able to make out the figure of a man standing in one of the numerous paths which wound through the garden. He appeared not to have noticed the advancing party.

"He isn't ten feet from the grave," whispered Haskell. "It's under that tree right beside him."

At this moment the moon broke through the cloud. Its light fell round the figure in the path.

It was Dr. Jarvis.

Nick's first thought was that this was another sleep-walking wonder, but in a second this idea was dispelled.

The doctor saw the intruders. He uttered an exclamation, and seemed about to retreat in the direction of the hospital. Then summoning up his courage, he paused, and confronted them as they came forward.

"Who are you?" he asked, in a trembling voice.

"I'll soon show you who I am?" cried Deever, angrily, "and I'll show these gentlemen what you are, in a few minutes."

"Lawrence Deever!" cried the doctor.

"Yes; I'm Lawrence Deever," was the reply, "and I've come to find my brother."

"You are a fool and a knave," the doctor exclaimed. "Your brother is not here."

"We'll see about that."

"I order you to leave this garden."

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," said Nick, stepping forward. "I have the proper authority, and what we shall do here will not harm you."

In a few words he showed Dr. Jarvis the futility of resistance. Nick explained in a few words the evidence of Haskell, and made no attempt to conceal its true bearing upon the case.

He spoke with his customary calm and steady tone, and his words seemed to reassure the doctor.

"The fellow is a liar and the tool of a liar," said the doctor, glaring at Deever. "I shall challenge you to find that body in this garden."

"It's here, unless you've taken it away," said Deever, roughly. "Now, Haskell, show us the spot, and we'll go to work."

Thus urged, Haskell, who had hung back, as if afraid, stepped forward with no sign of hesitation, and pointed to the ground under one of the trees.

"He was at work just under this long limb," said Haskell.

Nick bent down to examine the ground. It was a flower-bed which looked as if it had recently been sown.

The spot was excellently chosen for concealment. It was impossible to tell whether the earth there had recently been disturbed.

Deever seized a spade and began to dig. He was a man of enormous strength, and he worked furiously.

The two men who had brought the tools joined in the work, but they did less than half as much as Deever alone.

In an incredibly short time the hole was four feet deep. Then Nick suggested that they proceed with greater caution.

"The body," he said, "was probably buried without protection. If you strike it with your spades you may increase the difficulty of identification."

Thus warned, Deever's two assistants worked with care, but Deever himself continued to ply his spade like a madman.

Not knowing the exact spot, they dug a hole much larger than a grave, and thus the three men were able to work at the same time with advantage.

Suddenly Deever cried:

"Here it is!"

His spade had struck something more solid than the soft earth.

All sprang forward, and the doctor uttered a cry as of terror.

Hastily the earth was removed from the buried object, until it could be lifted to the surface.

Chick stepped forward, and brushed the last of the earth from the face with his handkerchief. Then it was dragged to where the moon shone full upon it.

A murmur arose from the little party. The face of the dead man was cut and mangled with many wounds.

"It's Pat," said one of those who had assisted in the digging. "There's no doubt about it."

"Yes," said Haskell, who was shivering with fear, "I recognize the clothes he had on."

"He's got no coat," said one of the men; "where's that?"

"It was hanging on a tree in this garden," said Deever.

Then he bent forward over the corpse, and took from around the neck a string to which a little cheap locket was attached.

"He always wore that, poor boy," said one of the men.

Deever turned to where Dr. Jarvis stood. The face of the doctor was whiter than paper, as the moon shone down upon it.

"What do you say now, Jarvis?" said Deever, coldly. "Do you confess your crime?"

The doctor recovered himself with a mighty effort.

"No," he cried. "I deny all responsibility for this man's death."

CHAPTER V.

THE BODY ON THE SLAB.

Nobody seemed to be much impressed by Jarvis' declaration of innocence.

The finding of the body in the exact spot indicated by Haskell looked like conclusive proof. Added to this was the doctor's presence beside the grave in the dead of night.

"It's a plain case," said Deever, turning toward Nick. "Will you make the arrest now?"

Dr. Jarvis shuddered as these words were spoken. It was easy to see that he was on the verge of despair.

"Let's not go too fast," said Nick.

"What stronger proof can you possibly desire?" exclaimed Deever.

He seemed to be dazed with surprise at Nick's delay, but Dr. Jarvis plucked up his courage.

"I wish first to examine the body," said Nick.

He bent over the corpse which lay in the bright moonlight. The cause of death was evident at a glance. The head had been beaten and cut in a frightful manner.

"See," said Deever, bending over the body, "these wounds were made with a spade."

"They have that appearance," said Nick.

"Why, it's as plain as the nose on your face," exclaimed Deever, utterly losing patience.

He seized a spade from the ground and applied it to the wounds.

"The first blow, the one which killed him," said Deever, "was struck with the side of the spade on the top of the poor boy's head. It was a terrible blow."

Nick examined the wound. It was plain that no person could live a minute after receiving such a fearful injury.

"The other blows," Deever continued, "were some of them made with the side, and some with the tip of the spade."

"I can see just how it happened. Pat angered Jarvis with the words that Klein heard. Jarvis rushed upon him, knocked him down with the spade, and then beat him like a maniac in his rage."

"And then buried him, eh?" said Nick, in a doubtful voice.

Chick looked inquiringly at his chief. He had never seen Nick conduct a case in that way before.

Instead of taking the lead in the investigation, the great detective seemed to wait for suggestions. After his first glance at the body, he had stood irresolute, as if he could not make up his mind about the value of the evidence.

This conduct of his chief interested Chick deeply.

"Watch Nick Carter," he said to himself, "and you'll always be learning something."

"Of course he didn't bury him then," Deever replied to Nick's question. "Haskell saw him digging the grave after midnight."

"Where do you suppose your brother's body was in the meantime?" asked Nick.

"Hidden in the garden somewhere."

Nick shook his head.

"There is no place in the garden where it could have been hidden. I have searched the place thoroughly."

"He may have taken it into the hospital; into his laboratory, perhaps."

"That can't be," said Nick. "You remember that Burns met the doctor coming in from the garden. If he had already brought in the body he wouldn't have come out again. On the other hand, the body couldn't have been in the garden, or Burns would have seen it. He looked all around for your brother."

For the first time Deever looked puzzled. He hesitated a long time before he replied. Then he said:

"Jarvis must have thrown Pat's body over the wall. He must have hidden it among the bushes in the direction of the river."

"Yes," Nick rejoined; "that seems probable."

"Well," cried Deever, "will you make the arrest?"

"I think not. The evidence does not seem to warrant it."

Deever threw up his hands in utter amazement.

"Not sufficient!" he exclaimed. "What remains to be proved?"

"I should like some evidence bearing on the question where the body was hidden during the evening, and how it was got back to the garden."

"You don't mean to say that you will wait for that before taking this man into custody?"

"Yes," said Nick, slowly; "I shall wait for that."

"But, meanwhile, how will you guard against his escape?"

"I will take him back to the hospital, where one of my assistants is waiting. I will put him in charge of that officer, who will remain with him until I feel justified in taking him to headquarters."

"Then you practically put him under arrest," said Deever, with evident satisfaction.

"Yes; but it will not be known except to us who are here. I expect your friends to be silent for the present."

"I'll answer for them," said Deever. "I know them all well, except that man—where is that man?"

He looked around for Chick, but that individual had disappeared. He had caught a glance from Nick when the latter had spoken of his assistant at the hospital, and had immediately slipped away under the shadow of the trees.

"That fellow will give it away," cried Deever. "That's what he sneaked for. He'll sell the news to the papers."

"If he does we can't help it," said Nick. "And as for you, I judge that you would not be sorry if he did."

"You are right," said Deever, looking grimly at Dr. Jarvis, "the sooner this murderer is held up before the public the better I'll be pleased."

"I shall be sorry," said Nick, "and yet perhaps it will not make much difference. In the meantime we will do what we can to keep the secret on our part."

Deever chuckled. It was evident that he regarded the secret as already out, and that he was entirely satisfied.

"Now come with me," said Nick to Jarvis, "and you others wait for me here."

He led the doctor to his room in the hospital, where, of course, they found Chick, in a different disguise, waiting for them.

Jarvis acted like a man in a trance, he was so thoroughly overpowered by the horror of his situation. In his room, he seemed to forget the presence of the two detectives. He flung himself down upon his cot, and appeared to sink almost instantly into a stupor.

After a word or two with Chick, Nick made his way back to the little group around the dead body.

"Get a carriage up to the wall," said Nick, "and remove the corpse to your house. I will see a coroner, and get the necessary permit. I will be answerable for the removal in advance of the permit."

In spite of Deever's distrust of Nick, the great detective's manner, when he spoke with decision, was such as to secure instant obedience.

The body was carried to the wall; two men were left to guard it, while Deever, with Klein, went for the carriage.

Nick separated himself from the party. He did not go to see a coroner, however. He went to Lawrence Deever's house, which he entered secretly, and searched from top to bottom, but without finding anything of interest.

Then he went to his own house, where he waked Patsy.

"Go to Lawrence Deever's country-house near Nyack," he said to his youthful assistant. "Watch it, and see that no man leaves it."

Morning was breaking as Nick secretly entered St. Agnes' Hospital, and made his way to Dr. Jarvis' room.

He pushed the door open softly, believing that the doctor would be still asleep, and Chick on guard.

The room was empty.

Nick was at first amazed, and then he reflected that it was quite possible that some disclosure of the prisoner had led Chick to accompany him in search of evidence.

He passed out into the laboratory. It was darker at this hour of dawn than at midnight with the moonlight in it.

The sheeted figure still lay upon the slab. Was it a body obtained in the usual way, under the sanction of the law, or had it a criminal history? Nobody knew better than Nick the secrets that may lurk in the dissecting-room.

With such thoughts, he paused a moment beside the body. He was about to lift the sheet in order to satisfy some doubts which still lingered in his mind when he was attracted by a slight noise in the cellar.

He quickly stepped to the head of the stairs. Certainly there was some person below.

Nick cautiously descended the steps. The electric lights were not shining, but the furnace sent up a glow in which the surrounding objects were dimly visible.

The first of these objects to command Nick's attention was no other than the white face of Dr. Jarvis bending over the furnace.

He had removed some portion of the arch above the raging fire, and just as Nick's eye fell upon him, he put a human arm into the white flame.

In that fierce heat it was almost instantly consumed, and only the faintest smell of burning flesh escaped into the cellar.

The corpse from which the arm had been taken lay upon the floor. Nick could not see it plainly, but his heart leaped wildly.

There was but one explanation of Dr. Jarvis' conduct.

Under the cloth in the laboratory above, Nick had seen the outline of a body.

Whose, then, was this man giving to the flames?

It could not be any but Chick's!

Evidently the doctor had, by some fiendish trick, succeeded in overcoming his powerful watcher, and he was now removing all trace of the body, preparatory to his own flight to the ends of the earth.

The horror of this thought was almost too much for Nick's iron nerves.

If this was Chick's body, all human help was now vain.

What should be done to secure the most certain retribution?

Plainly the corpse, or what remained of it, must be recovered before the fire had completely made away with it.

Nick was about to leap forward, and interrupt the dreadful work which was in progress under his eyes, when suddenly a new inspiration came to him.

With a bound as noiseless as a tiger's, he was at the top of the stairs. In another instant he stood beside the sheeted form upon the slab.

He withdrew the cloth.

The body was Chick's.

CHAPTER VI.

THE LAST LINK IN THE CHAIN.

Nick's first glance at the body of Chick took a weight like a mountain of lead off his heart.

Chick was bound and gagged.

This was enough to make Nick certain that no serious harm had come to him, but he was instantly made aware of it in another way.

Cautiously Chick lifted an eyelid. A less acute observer than Nick would not have seen the movement.

The eye opened wide, and then it winked. Chick was all right.

"Shall I cut this rope?" asked Nick.

Chick spoke straight through the gag with very little trouble.

"It isn't necessary," he said. "I can get loose at any moment. Dr. Jarvis is not an expert at tying knots, though there are some other things that he understands pretty well."

"How did this happen?"

"It was a clever trick," said Chick. "He threw some kind of a drug into my face. If I hadn't known—thanks to your teaching long ago—just what to do in a case of that kind, I should have gone to sleep in a second.

"As it was, the drug made my head swim. But I kept it out of my lungs, and pulled through.

"Of course, I pretended to be unconscious, for I wanted to see what he would do. He tied me up rather clumsily; gagged me exceedingly well; and laid me on this slab, after removing a headless body.

"He went down into the cellar, and I slipped my bonds and followed him. I found him getting his furnace ready.

"Knowing what he would do, I got back to my downy couch here, pulled the bed-clothes over me, and waited.

"He came back and got the body of my predecessor and took it down cellar. Of course, he is burning it. Look out! He's coming!"

Chick quickly replaced the sheet.

Nick could see that beneath it Chick slid his hands again within the rope that had been used to bind him.

Then Nick sprang toward the door of the doctor's room, pushed out a case of instruments from the wall, and got behind it.

Dr. Jarvis went to Chick's side, lifted the sheet, and looked at the quiet face.

Then he felt of the rope, but it seemed to be tight.

He replaced the sheet, and came toward the door beside which Nick was concealed.

No sooner had Jarvis passed within the room than Nick came out of his hiding-place and followed the doctor.

Jarvis was engaged in putting a few articles into a small bag. His back was toward the door, but he heard Nick's entrance and turned quickly.

He sprang to his feet with a cry. Then his hands fell to his sides. He was the picture of despair.

"I see," said Nick, "you were preparing to run away."

Jarvis made no answer.

"That would have been the most foolish thing you could do," said Nick. "It would have been equivalent to confession."

"And why not?" groaned the doctor.

"Do you admit your guilt?"

"No, I do not," said Jarvis firmly; "but everything is against me."

"Well, we will consider that subject later. What did you intend to do with my friend yonder?"

He pointed through the open door toward Chick.

"Nothing," said Jarvis. "I intended simply to leave him there. He would not have been discovered till I had got a good start."

"I believe that you did not intend to injure him," said Nick. "I suppose he might as well get up now."

He uttered a peculiar call. Chick instantly sat up under the sheet. Then he threw it aside, got down from the slab, and advanced toward Nick and Jarvis, removing his gag and bonds as he did so.

Jarvis regarded this performance with wonder.

"You should take some lessons in tying knots," said Nick.

"And now," he continued, "we will take you to my house."

"Arrest me?"

"I would hardly call it by that name, unless you prefer it."

"But I am innocent."

"That question we will pass for the present. There is one link wanting in the chain of evidence against you. I shall supply that link, and then we will see what comes of it."

With a hasty movement, Dr. Jarvis took a little vial from his pocket, and raised it toward his lips.

But Nick had been watching. He struck the vial from the doctor's hand, and it went flying through the window.

"If you will give me your word of honor not to attempt suicide again," said Nick, calmly, "I will not handcuff you."

Jarvis hung his head.

"Your word will bind you for three days, no more," said Nick.

"I promise," said the doctor.

"Remove your dressing-gown and cap," said Nick.

Jarvis complied with the request, and Nick received the articles from his hands. Leaving the care of the prisoner to Chick, he carried the dressing-gown to the window.

"Ah!" said he, "you have torn the dressing-gown."

"Where?" asked the doctor.

"It is ripped under the arms," Nick replied, "and the cloth is strained beside each shoulder seam on the back."

"I was not aware of it," said Jarvis.

"Put it on again," said Nick, and the doctor obeyed.

Nick studied his figure carefully. He made Jarvis assume a number of positions, and at last seemed satisfied.

Chick was not possessed of the information to fully understand these maneuvers, but he knew by his chief's manner that the subject was of the first importance.

After the doctor had been clothed properly for the street he was taken to Nick's home in a closed carriage.

Then Nick and Chick had a few words in private.

"That last link which I spoke of," said Nick, "must be supplied by you."

Chick nodded.

"The land back of St. Agnes' Hospital, as you know is a sort of lovers' walk," Nick continued.

"It is."

"If the body of Patrick Deever was hidden there, and was removed to the garden by night, somebody may have seen it done."

"And that somebody," said Chick, "may not come forward without being urged."

"Right."

"I think I can manage it, if there is any witness. Of course, there may be none."

"I will bet you a dollar to a doughnut that such a witness appears whether you get him or not."

Chick looked hurt for a minute, and then he caught a gleam in Nick's eye.

"I begin to understand you," said he.

"Your plan," Nick went on, "is to circulate among the young men who whisper their love in the paths of that particular region. Find who was there on Monday night. It is not easy, but you can do it."

"I will get about it at once," said Chick.

After this conversation, Nick went to see Lawrence Deever.

"Poor Pat's body is in the house," said he, meeting Nick at the door; "but I have kept my promise to you."

"Nobody knows of it, then?"

"Not from me or any of my friends."

"That is as it should be."

"I begin to believe," said Deever, "your idea is to spring this thing on old Jarvis complete. Make the case iron-clad; tie him up double and twisted; and then let it come out in the papers."

His eyes shone with malignity.

"I was surprised," he continued, "to see nothing about it in the papers this morning. Why do you suppose that fellow skipped out of the garden? Who was he, anyway?"

"Didn't you know him?" said Nick, who always escaped a falsehood when he could.

"No, I didn't."

"He may have run away, because he couldn't stand that horrible sight any longer, and he may have been ashamed to confess that his nerves were so weak."

"Perhaps. It doesn't matter. What is to be done to-day?"

"The only evidence I now require," said Nick, "is something to show that your brother's body was hidden in the vacant lot and brought into the garden by Jarvis."

"Why do you need that? But never mind; I will see what can be done."

They separated then, and until evening Nick saw neither Deever nor Chick.

But about six o'clock he met Chick by appointment in Deever's house. Deever himself was not present.

Chick was accompanied by a young man and a pretty young woman.

He presented them as Margaret Allen and Henry Prescott. Both lived on One Hundred and Thirty-fifth street, Prescott in a boarding-house and Margaret with her father.

By the secret sign Chick communicated his belief—founded, of course, upon investigations which he had made—that Prescott and Miss Allen were present to give true testimony.

"These two witnesses," said he, in conclusion, "will supply the only link in the chain which has been missing up to this time."

CHAPTER VII.

THE MAN WITH THE SACK.

"I will have your story first," said Nick to Prescott. "I will not subject Miss Allen to the annoyance of questioning, unless it is necessary."

"We are engaged to be married," said Prescott, beginning his story with evident embarrassment.

"And the course of true love does not run smooth," said Nick, with a smile.

"No, it does not," responded Prescott. "Her father is strongly opposed to our marriage. However, as both of us are of age, it will take place.

"We have been obliged to meet secretly, and we have frequently walked, in the evening, in the grove back of St. Agnes' Hospital.

"We were there Monday evening, and we remained much later than we should have done. We had many things to talk about.

"It must have been midnight when we left the place. As we were walking slowly up one of the paths we became aware that a man was approaching from behind us.

"Not wishing to be seen, we stepped aside among the trees and waited.

"The man came on up the path, and by the moonlight which struggled through the branches of the trees we saw that he was carrying a great sack.

"I instantly suspected that some crime was afoot. My first thought was that this was a grave-robber carrying a body.

"I supposed that he had brought the body to the shore of the river in a boat, and was carrying it to one of the doctors in the hospital.

"We allowed him to pass us, and then we followed him. He went to the wall surrounding the hospital grounds.

"Choosing a place where there is a bank of rubbish against the wall, he lifted the sack to the top. Then I knew that it could not contain a dead body."

"How did you know that?" asked Nick.

"Because he lifted it so easily. What was in the sack I do not know, of course. There was some crooked business about it, I have no doubt, but it was not a body that he had there, because, by the way he handled it, I saw that it could not weigh over fifty pounds, and the sack was too large to have only a child's body in it."

"What did you do?"

"We watched him lay the sack on top of the wall, and then climb up. He dropped the sack into the garden, and let himself down from the wall. We paid no further attention to the matter.

"It made Margaret very nervous, but I proved to her, by the weight of the sack, that her suspicions regarding its contents were unfounded."

"Did you know the man?" asked Nick.

"I hardly like to answer that question."

"Why not?"

"I am afraid of doing somebody an injustice."

"You have a suspicion, then?"

"I have."

"Was the man Dr. Jarvis?"

"I cannot say. I do not know him."

"But his dress—"

"I see that it is useless to try to conceal anything from you," said Prescott. "The man wore the peculiar cap and dressing-gown which everybody knows for the doctor's."

"There is no doubt about it," said Miss Allen. "It was Dr. Jarvis."

"I thank you very much for your evidence," said Nick.

"But why do you want it?" asked Prescott. "I have heard a rumor that Patrick Deever has disappeared. This is his brother's house. Is the doctor suspected of having murdered him?"

"He is," said Nick.

"Then I see the bearing of my story upon the case; but I assure you that that bag did not contain Patrick Deever's body. It was too light."

Prescott spoke with decision. Out of the corner of his eyes Nick could see Chick struggling with this phase of the evidence. Chick was too good a detective not to know that one little fact of that kind is worth a hundred that lie too near the surface.

"You can do me only one more favor," said Nick, addressing Prescott and Miss Allen. "Do not under any circumstances mention what you have seen without my permission."

"You can trust us for that," said Prescott, with a smile, "we are by no means anxious to have our connection with this affair made public."

The two witnesses withdrew, leaving Nick and Chick together. They were silent for several minutes, and then Nick said:

"Well, Chick, the chain is complete."

"It is," was Chick's reply, "and in all my experience I have never seen a plainer case made out against any man."

"You mean from a jury's point of view."

"Certainly."

"What do you think of it?"

"I wish you'd tell me just what you think of it, Nick."

"I guess we shouldn't be found to differ a great deal," said Nick, with a smile. "This is my view—but hold on. Here comes Deever."

Indeed Deever was at that moment entering the house.

He was accompanied by a young man of a very unpleasant appearance. To Nick's eyes he seemed a born thief.

"Well," said Deever, entering the room, "here we are."

"You mean that the case is complete," said Nick.

"Absolutely."

"This witness whom you have brought supplies the link that was wanting?"

"He does."

"I shall be glad to hear his story."

"His name," said Deever, "is John Flint."

"Where are you employed, Mr. Flint?" asked Nick.

"I ain't doing nothing just now," said Flint.

"What do you know about the disappearance of Mr. Deever's brother?"

"I don't know anything about it, but I saw something Monday night which Mr. Deever wants me to swear to."

"And you are willing?"

"Yes, I am willing; but I don't want to get into court if I can help it."

"I told him," explained Deever, "that we would try to keep him out of court. He thinks it might lose him a job he wants to get. There's evidence enough without his, the Lord knows."

"I will hear you now," said Nick.

"The way of it was this," said Flint. "Monday night, about midnight, I was down in the vacant lot of St. Agnes' Hospital. I was just looking for a fellow I heard had gone down that way."

"That was Klein," said Deever.

"I walked up the street, and had just turned the corner of the wall when I saw a man coming up under the trees. He was carrying a big bag.

"I kept out of sight, and watched him. I thought at first that there was some crooked work, but the man with the bag didn't seem to be afraid.

"He came up to the wall in a place where there was some rubbish piled against it, and lifted the bag on to the top of the wall. Then he climbed up himself and let the bag down into the garden. That's all I know about it."

"Did you notice how the man was dressed?"

"He had on a loose, long coat—a queer sort of thing—and a little round cap on his head."

"That will do," said Nick. "I am much obliged. It will not be necessary, I think, for you to testify to these facts in court."

"There's enough without it," said Deever. "You'll take Jarvis to headquarters now, won't you?"

"Well, no," said Nick. "I hadn't thought of it."

"I'll be doubly and eternally—"

Deever's wrath and surprise choked him.

"Never mind," he said, at last, mastering his rage. "Come along, John. And you get out!"

"With all the pleasure in life," said Nick, quietly walking toward the door.

Chick had slipped away at Deever's approach. Nick met him outside.

"What did Deever's witness say?" asked Chick.

"He told exactly the same story as Prescott."

"I'm surprised to hear it."

"Why?"

"Prescott, in my opinion, told the truth."

"So I believe."

"And Deever's man—I got a glimpse of him—struck me as a liar in the first degree. I took him for a man Deever had hired, in order to hurry up his vengeance on Dr. Jarvis."

"But as they told the same story, and Prescott can have no connection with Deever or the other man, it must be true."

"Right; but the meaning of it—"

Chick paused. Suddenly a flash came from his eyes.

"I have it!" he cried.

"That's good," said Nick. "Now, if you'll follow Deever, I'll go back to Dr. Jarvis."

Accordingly Nick hurried home. He found Jarvis in a state of great mental anguish.

"It is an extraordinary fate," he cried, as soon as Nick appeared, "which has twice brought these Deevers into my life to make me miserable."

"You have had to do with them before?" asked Nick.

"Yes, and in a way that is beyond belief."

"Explain yourself."

"This man, Lawrence Deever," said the doctor, with a groan, "had the incredible presumption to make love to my daughter."

Nick could not help smiling.

"What did you do about it?" he asked.

"I sent him about his business in a hurry."

"Was that all?"

"No; and I'm ashamed to say it. There is no possible way of accounting for the conduct of women. My daughter actually took this fellow's part."

"But nothing came of it?"

"No, sir. I am master of my own household."

"So your daughter really loved this man?"

"No; it was only her obstinacy. They became acquainted in some way. I don't know how. The fellow called at my house. I made my daughter promise never to speak to him, but it was a most unpleasant affair throughout. I thought Deever would murder me.

"It seems strange, perhaps, that I should speak of it in the midst of the terrors that surround me, and yet I can't help thinking of the whole affair as one freak of fate."

"And now tell me the truth about his brother and yourself," said Nick earnestly.

"I will," replied the doctor.

At this moment a messenger was announced. Nick knew that the matter must be of the greatest importance, or he would not have been interrupted in his conference with his prisoner.

It proved to be a message from Superintendent Byrnes asking Nick to come to his house as soon as he could.

CHAPTER VIII.

BEFORE THE SUPERINTENDENT.

As Nick expected, he met Chick outside Superintendent Byrnes's house.

"Go to Jarvis," said Nick. "He is going to tell the whole story. Personate me in this disguise."

Chick nodded and vanished.

Within the house Nick found Deever in the superintendent's presence. Deever's face was red, and he looked like a man who had been kicking a stone wall until he is tired.

"Mr. Deever has lodged a complaint against you, Mr. Colton," said the superintendent, with a twinkle in his eye.

"What's the matter?" asked Nick.

"He says that you ought to have had this man Jarvis electrocuted by this time."

"I have proceeded with great caution," said Nick.

"Yes, you have," said Deever. "You have been very careful to shield Jarvis at every step. He's a rich man, Jarvis is!"

"Deever," said the superintendent, sternly, "I have delayed answering your complaint until this time because I wished to have Mr. Colton present to hear what I said.

"And, now, what I have to say is this—don't you venture to hint at the shadow of a suspicion of his integrity. I am entirely satisfied with Mr. Colton's conduct. I sustain him absolutely. I have put this case in his hands, and there it stays."

Deever quailed at these words, but his natural obstinacy came to his aid.

"I can get a warrant for Jarvis' arrest," he said.

"Go ahead and do it, and make a fool of yourself," replied the superintendent.

"With your permission," said Nick, "I advise Mr. Deever to remain here. Meanwhile we will send a messenger for the witness, John Flint, whose testimony seems to me to be of the greatest importance."

"Proceed just as you wish," said Byrnes.

The messenger was summoned, and dispatched.

While they waited for him Nick reviewed in the presence of the superintendent and Deever the evidence against Jarvis.

Some of it, as the reader knows, was news to Deever. He seemed surprised to find the case supported and strengthened by the man whom he suspected of trying to weaken it.

"I call that plain enough," said he, when Nick had finished. "I will withdraw my charge against Mr. Colton, if some action is now taken."

"No action will be taken except on his advice," said the superintendent.

Deever became excited again. He ran over the evidence, and insisted on an immediate arrest.

Nick said nothing, and the superintendent maintained the calm of an iron statue.

When Deever had exhausted himself, Nick spoke.

"I promise you an arrest in one hour," he said.

At this moment a card was brought in and handed to the superintendent.

"From Chick," he said aside to Nick. "He and Jarvis are waiting. What do you say?"

"Let them come in," said Nick.

They were admitted. Chick, as the reader is prepared to learn, appeared as the exact counterpart of Nick.

Deever was struck dumb with astonishment at the sight, and the doctor's eyes nearly fell out of his head.

Byrnes smiled, and muttered "clever."

"Which of these two men do you complain of, Mr. Deever?" he asked, enjoying the man's mystification.

But Deever did not reply, except to mutter something about the interference of the devil in earthly affairs.

Dr. Jarvis, with some effort, recovered some portion of his composure.

"Well, sir," said the superintendent, addressing him, "I suppose that you have something to say to me."

"I have, sir," replied Jarvis; "and no man could be charged with a more painful disclosure."

"Speak up."

"I am guilty of the murder of Patrick Deever."

This confession produced no perceptible effect upon Nick, though the reader cannot have failed to perceive that the great detective had been working with a conviction of the doctor's innocence.

Of all the persons in the room, Deever exhibited the strongest emotion. He gasped, sprang to his feet, and then sat down again heavily.

"What do you say to that?" he exclaimed, turning to Nick.

"I am waiting to hear Dr. Jarvis' story," Nick replied.

"Yes," said the superintendent, "let us hear all about it."

Dr. Jarvis tried to speak, but the words would not come. He staggered and fell half-fainting into a chair.

"I cannot tell it," he said, when he had somewhat revived. "Wait till I am stronger."

"Perhaps that will not be necessary," said Nick.

"No, no; why should it?" said the prisoner, in a faint voice. "I confess, and that is the end of it."

"However, we would like to know more fully about this affair," said Byrnes, and he looked inquiringly at Nick.

"Let me tell the story," said Nick to Jarvis. "If I am right, you have only to nod. That will do for the present occasion. We are not taking testimony."

"But how do you know—" Deever began.

The superintendent cut him short.

"Proceed, if you please," said he to Nick, and then he fixed his eyes upon Dr. Jarvis.

"In the garden of the hospital," Nick began, "about half-past six o'clock on the evening of Monday last, you had high words with Patrick Deever, who was working under your direction."

Dr. Jarvis nodded, as Nick paused.

"He was somewhat intoxicated, and his language was very abusive. You replied in violent reproof, and he started forward, as if about to attack you."

Again the doctor made a sign of assent.

"You seized a spade—"

"It was in my hand," the doctor interrupted, feebly.

"That is right; correct me whenever I am in error. You raised the spade and struck Deever upon the head.

"He fell to the ground, and you, bending over him, were horrified to find that he was dead; or, rather, that he seemed to be.

"Exactly how he came to life I do not know, but it must have been while you were in the midst of your terror, and beginning to wonder what you would do with the body."

"How do you know all this?" asked the doctor, faintly.

"It is simply the only explanation of all the facts. The witness Klein heard the quarrel and the blow. That blow did not fall upon you, and there was nobody else present but Patrick Deever.

"Now, then, he suddenly came to himself. He sprang up. You were amazed. You advanced toward him.

"Believing that you intended to renew the attack, he ran away. He scaled the garden wall, and fled through the little grove toward the river."

"You are reading my mind," exclaimed the doctor, whose amazement acted as a restorative.

"No, I am not. How else could he have got out? On one side was Klein, on the other St. Nicholas avenue, with many people who would have seen him. He escaped toward the river."

"Then you didn't kill him, after all?" asked the superintendent.

"Of the remainder of that fatal affair," said Dr. Jarvis, "I have only one explanation to give, and that will seem miraculous.

"His body was found buried in the garden. I was seen to bury it. I was seen carrying it there by night.

"But upon my soul, I did not know that I did it. The evidence has convinced me, that is all.

"And this is the explanation: Patrick Deever, after escaping from the grove, must have fallen and died. I must have gone there in my sleep, have found the body, and brought it back to the garden.

"My habit of sleep-walking is well known. I have done things which, from a scientific point of view, were far more marvelous than this."

"Nonsense!" cried Deever; "you were wide enough awake. Superintendent Byrnes will not swallow that story."

"Is it any more wonderful," said Nick, "than what I saw the doctor do in his laboratory?"

The story of that night he had already told to Deever and the superintendent.

"Very little, if any," said Byrnes.

"I passed that night, or supposed that I passed it, at my home," said the doctor. "I took an opiate, and seemed to sleep. But I had dreams of murder and the hiding of dead bodies. I must have walked. It was fate."

"But the wounds upon the body? How about them?" asked Byrnes.

"They must have been made while he was pounding the body down into the earth," said Deever, quickly.

Then he turned to Nick.

"You promised me an arrest within the hour," he said; "now let me have the satisfaction of seeing it formally

made."

"Wait," said Nick. "I have yet several minutes; and here is the witness, John Flint."

The man was brought in as Nick spoke. He seemed to be somewhat alarmed.

"What's wanted?" he said.

"Only a little formality," said Nick. "As you do not wish to appear in court, we desire to take your sworn testimony at this time."

The sweat stood out on Flint's forehead, but when the proper arrangements had been made, he took the oath and told his story.

"And now, Dr. Jarvis," said Nick, "it is my very agreeable duty to recommend that you be discharged from custody."

"What!" cried Jarvis and Deever in the same breath.

"Superintendent Byrnes, I appeal to you," Deever exclaimed.

The face of the superintendent was perfectly calm.

"The case is in Mr. Colton's hands," he said, simply.

"What did you mean, you villain," cried Deever, turning to Nick, "by talking about an arrest?"

"I will keep my promise," said Nick. "I will keep it doubly. There is yet one minute of the hour. I arrest you, John Flint, for perjury, and you, Lawrence Deever, for the subornation of perjury."

CHAPTER IX.

THE OTHER SIDE OF A "PLAIN CASE."

As may readily be supposed, the emotions excited in the various persons present differed widely.

But of the two who rejoiced, it is hard to say that Chick was second to Dr. Jarvis. The smile which settled down upon Chick's face was beautiful to behold. He was the image of satisfaction.

"I had it right," he said, and hugged himself.

The doctor in the meanwhile sat in a sort of delightful trance. Just what had happened he could not have told anybody, but he perceived that he had sailed out of all his difficulties.

Flint and Deever, of course, protested loudly, but the superintendent promptly "shut them up."

"Don't you dare to say a word, either of you, till I hear the inside of this whole case," said he.

"It is one of the finest examples of the dangers of circumstantial evidence that I ever saw," said Nick. "No jury that ever sat in the box would hesitate a moment to convict Dr. Jarvis, yet he is entirely innocent.

"The principal confusion, in my own mind, was a result of the doctor's belief in his own guilt. That is why he bribed me, believing me to be Cleary. By the way, here is your five thousand dollars, doctor."

He handed the package of bills to the astonished physician, who could only gasp, "You? you?"

"Yes; I played Cleary," said Nick. "That affair and your attempt to elude Chick amount to no more in the case than that they indicate your own belief in your guilt.

"Now, what is against that belief? In the first place, you would never have disposed of the body by burial. Having that acid, unknown to chemists, in which flesh dissolves like water, you would have used it.

"Your sleep-walking adventure proved to me what you would have done under similar conditions, if awake.

"Having seen that, I had only to be present at the digging up of the body to have a fairly reliable theory of your innocence. Why should you, possessing that acid and that furnace, mutilate a man's face and head with a spade? You had far better means of preventing an identification.

"But the body was buried in the garden. The question is, by whom? To answer that we pass on to the story of the bringing of the body through the vacant lot, and hoisting it over the wall.

"The testimony of Prescott I regard as reliable. Chick's investigations satisfy me as to the man's character and motives. Then we acquit the doctor at once."

"This is nonsense," cried Deever. "I will not be silent any longer."

"Yes, you will," said Byrnes, in a voice that secured obedience.

"It acquits the doctor, I say," continued Nick. "He could never have lifted that body to the top of the wall. There's a physical impossibility in the way of a belief that he is guilty."

"It takes a very strong man to raise a dead body weighing one hundred and seventy-five pounds above his head in the manner described by Prescott. We shall have to work down to that strong man before the case is proven."

Nick looked significantly at Lawrence Deever. That look was understood.

"You're a liar and a scoundrel," screamed Deever, beside himself with rage.

He sprang upon Nick.

Nobody raised a finger to interfere.

The superintendent and Chick calmly awaited the inevitable issue. Flint dared not go to the assistance of his patron.

It was all over in a few seconds.

Deever lay upon the floor, fettered, and Nick stood over him.

"The strong man in the case has been found," said Nick. "I'm willing to admit that you gave me hard work, Deever."

"So it was he that buried the body?" asked Byrnes.

"Yes; I suspected it at once," responded Nick. "It was his deliberate intention to throw the crime upon Dr. Jarvis."

"He stole the doctor's cap and dressing-gown on Monday night, and then returned them when the job was done. But they showed the signs of hard usage."

"You remember, doctor, that I carefully examined them. It was plain that a much larger man than the doctor had worn them."

"The seams in the back and around the arms were strained, and some of them had burst. This was only a hint, of course, but it fitted the remainder of the case."

"The strongest indication, however, was the way Deever secured testimony. I had only to hint that I wanted to cover a point, and he immediately went out and secured the witness."

"But most of them told the truth," said the superintendent.

"Yes," Nick admitted, "there he was wonderfully helped by fate. It happened that he was seen at just the right moments, when he was playing the part of Dr. Jarvis."

"If he hadn't been so impatient it would even have been unnecessary for him to produce this man Flint. Chick secured real witnesses who were much better."

"And there we come to the point where we are sure about Deever. Prescott and Miss Allen told the truth. Flint, prompted by Deever, told exactly the same story."

"Therefore, Deever must have known precisely what the facts were. Investigation convinces me that he could have known them in only one way—by being himself the person who performed the acts described."

"Do you mean to accuse me of murdering my brother?" demanded Deever.

"Certainly not," said Nick. "Do you remember the question I asked you on the first day of the investigation? I asked, 'Who has been murdered?'"

"Well?"

"I answer that question now. Nobody has been murdered. Your brother is alive. There is nothing the matter with him, except a scalp wound. The body found was a substitute which you procured. It was you who made the wounds with the spade."

"This is all bare assertion," cried Deever, who, in irons, sat upon the floor with his back against a chair. "You cannot prove what you say."

"Let me first explain how the trick was done," said Nick, coolly. "Your brother, after he had somewhat recovered from the effects of the blow he had received, went to your house."

"He wished you to help him get revenge upon Dr. Jarvis. You had your own grudge against him on account of your unsuccessful suit for his daughter."

"You saw the chance of a deeper revenge than your brother had any idea of. You then planned this whole conspiracy. He was to go away forever. You were to remain, and make this charge against the doctor."

"It is an infernal lie," shrieked Deever. "Where is my brother? I demand that you produce him."

"Your brother is now hidden in your house at Nyack. It was vacant. You told him to go there, until you could make arrangements to get him safely away. As to the body, you bought it of a grave-robber."

"How do you pretend to know that?" asked Deever, scornfully.

"As to the body, I can produce the man who sold it. As to your brother, I know where he has gone, because no other course was practicable; and because I have had word that he is there."

"I defy you to prove it," cried Deever. "I am willing to let the question of my guilt or innocence rest on that event. He is not there."

There was a peculiar light of triumph in Deever's eyes as he spoke. It did not escape Nick's observation.

The shrewd detective saw at a glance that Deever believed his brother to have already escaped.

Could it be possible? In any event, Nick would not evade the other's challenge.

He felt that his reputation was at stake, but he did not hesitate.

"If I do not produce him in twenty-four hours," said Nick, "I will withdraw my charge against you."

CHAPTER X.

NICK'S REPUTATION AT STAKE.

As Nick made the bold assertion of his power to produce Patrick Deever alive, both Chick and the superintendent looked at him with something as near doubt as anybody who knew Nick Carter could feel in any of his statements.

They both saw that Deever felt sure of his brother's escape, and they could not help seeing that there was many chances in favor of it.

But Nick was undismayed. He put his trust in Patsy's fidelity.

"I shall hold you and Flint under arrest," said Superintendent Byrnes to Deever. "Dr. Jarvis, you may go when you wish."

Nick, Chick and Dr. Jarvis left the room, after the last-named had expressed his thanks to those concerned in his deliverance.

Nick went at once to Nyack. It was very late when he reached there.

He made his way to the house of Lawrence Deever, which stood some distance from the centre of the town.

There was no sign of Patsy about the place. The house seemed to be deserted.

Nick easily effected an entrance. He searched the house thoroughly.

There were signs of the recent presence of Patrick Deever. He had done some rude cooking. The remnants of the food which he had prepared were visible.

But the man himself was not to be found. The method of his exit, however, Nick discovered.

A window in the end of the house, farthest from the street, was wide open, and beneath it, with the aid of his lantern, Nick found the foot-prints of a man who had leaped from the window.

Unquestionably that man was Patrick Deever.

The footprints could be traced a little way. They led toward a hedge which separated the property from a large, vacant tract south of it.

Nick could see where some person had recently broken through this hedge. And here he made a more important discovery, which gladdened his eyes.

Beside the hedge were Deever's foot-prints, and another's. The second must be Patsy's.

Passing through, Nick saw a wide field with a grove at its end. The foot-prints were very faint, but it seemed that Deever had started in the direction of that grove.

Nick hurried thither. He searched through the little clump of trees with the utmost minuteness, till at last, on the farther side, in a bit of soft ground, he found the foot-prints.

They still led in the direction of the river. Following such faint clues as he could find, Nick continued the search till dawn broke.

"Uncle Jimmy" Redwood has boats to let in Nyack. He has a boat-house on the river bank from which a flight of steps leads down to a long "float" extending into the river.

His boats are moored to that float, or anchored near the end of it. He has several fine, fast cat-boats, of which he is very proud.

Uncle Jimmy was overhauling his boats about six o'clock on the morning after the events just described, when a man, whom he had never seen before, came somewhat hurriedly down the steps, and said he wished to hire a cat-boat.

"I want the fastest boat in the fleet," he said.

Uncle Jimmy looked the stranger over carefully. There was a bandage around his head. Uncle Jimmy suspected that something was wrong, but that, after all, might not be any of his business.

"Get the Clio ready for this man," Uncle Jimmy shouted to an assistant at the far end of the float.

"Ay, ay, sir," said the man.

The Clio was lying with her nose against the float, and there was nothing to do but hoist her sail.

However, the stranger seemed impatient of even this delay.

When the sail was up, he jumped into the boat, and prepared to get under way.

But Uncle Jimmy's assistant had hold of the "painter," or rope, by which the Clio had been fastened to the wharf.

"Avast there!" he said. "Mr. Redwood don't let his boats go out that way."

"What do you mean?" demanded the stranger with the bandaged head.

"He won't let you go out alone. How does he know that you will bring the boat back?"

"Nonsense. I want to go by myself."

"He wants to take her out himself," called the assistant to Uncle Jimmy, who stood near the end of the float talking with another tarry old salt.

"He can't, and that settles it," said Uncle Jimmy.

"Shall I go with him?" asked the assistant, who held the Clio's painter.

"No; let Dick, here, go."

Dick, thus delegated to the duty of skipper, rolled down the float with the gait of an old sailor, and got aboard the Clio.

The stranger with the sore head grumbled, but he could not help himself. He insisted, however, on taking the helm as the Clio moved out from the float.

She was scarcely a hundred yards away when a young man, panting with haste, rushed down the stairs from the boat-house. The reader would have known Patsy by his activity, despite his disguise.

"I want a boat," he cried out.

"Quite a run o' business for so early in the morning," said Uncle Jimmy, calmly. "What sort o' boat do you want?"

"I want one that can overhaul the one that just left the float."

"I ain't got it," said Uncle Jimmy. "The Curlew is about even with her, but they ain't one o' them that can outsail her."

"Then give me the Curlew, and do it in a hurry," cried Patsy.

"By whose orders, I'd like to know?"

Patsy was in no mood for trifling. He showed Uncle Jimmy in less than two seconds that obedience would pay well.

The Curlew also was hauled in to the float, and Patsy was aboard of her and clear of his moorings before anybody could stop him, or even get in with him.

A brisk southerly wind was blowing in from the sea.

By the course which the Clio was taking Patsy guessed that it was the intention of her occupants to "beat" down the river against the wind.

Meanwhile, in the Clio, the man with the bandaged head was in a fever of excitement. He crowded the boat for all she could stand, but he seemed, on the whole, to be a clever boatman.

The old salt watched him critically for a few minutes, and then seemed to be satisfied.

Presently he began to notice the anxious glances which the man at the helm cast over his shoulder at the pursuing boat.

"You seem to be anxious to outrun that feller," he said at last.

Patrick Deever, for it was he, nodded his head and set his teeth. The old sailor looked long and earnestly at their pursuer.

"Wall, ye ain't doin' of it," he said, at last.

"Is she gaining?" asked Deever, nervously.

"She be," said the tar, calmly.

"I thought this was the fastest of Redwood's boats."

"So she be," was the answer; "but the Curlew's overhauling her this time."

"What's the matter?"

"The other feller's the best sailor, that's what's the matter. I don't know who he is, but he's a skipper from away back."

For some minutes Deever kept silent. From time to time he glanced astern.

There was no doubt about it; the Curlew was gaining.

"Can you get any more speed out of her?" he said at last, in desperation.

"Reckon I kin," said the tar. "Shall I take her?"

"Yes, and if you outrun them I'll give you a hundred dollars."

"All right."

The grizzled seaman took the helm. In ten minutes it began to look blue for Patsy and his chief. The Clio had reasserted her superiority. She was slowly dropping the Curlew astern.

When they tacked on the other side of the river the Clio had doubled her lead. In an hour the Curlew was half a mile behind.

"Where are ye bound?" asked the old tar.

"There's a vessel anchored in the harbor. I'll show you where. You're to put me aboard and keep still about it. The hundred is yours, and as much more to go with it."

They were nearly abreast the Battery, when suddenly the police-boat was seen heading toward them.

"That's the 'Patrol,'" said Deever. "Give her a wide berth."

Instead of complying, the boatman put his helm over, and stood straight toward the tug.

"Here!" cried Deever; "what does this mean?"

"It means," said the boatman, "that you're my prisoner, Patrick Deever. I am Nick Carter."

Ten minutes later they were both aboard the police-boat, and in another hour Nick had redeemed his pledge to produce Patrick Deever alive before the superintendent.

"I'd have had him, anyway," said Patsy, afterward. "He turned on me in the woods up there in Nyack and knocked me down, and tied me."

"He thought I was done, but I wasn't. I was just going for a tug when you ran him aboard the police-boat."

"At any rate," he said in conclusion, "it's some satisfaction to know that it was you, and not he, that outsailed me."

The two Deevers were punished in due course for conspiracy, and Flint for perjury.

"On the whole," said Superintendent Byrnes to Nick, "I think that was about the prettiest work I ever saw. The most puzzling thing in the world, I've noticed, is apt to be a perfectly plain case."

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