The Quest of Betty Lancey

By MAGDA F. WEST

CHAPTER V.

Everybody but Johnny Johnson followed Betty. Johnson went back to the house where now remained none but Pierre Desterle and several of the older and more courageous bachelors who had lived in the house for years.

Betty and her cohort numbered seven. Besides Larry Morris, long and lumbery, there was the gentle-eyed young Philip Hartley, Hank Smith, tall and tremendously framed, Sothern, fat, blonde and phlegmatic; Frankel, a little Jew, who was automobile editor of the "Times," and Tim Murphy, cartoonist, a great hulk of an Irishman.

The Directory Hotel, one of the most exclusive in the town, was only two blocks from LeRoy's.

"Now E24 is my room," whispered Betty. "You let me go up first. Don't let the clerk in on this even, till we find out what's what."

Five minutes later the sextette were pulled inside the door of room E24 by such an excited Betty Delancy as the "Inquirer" office had never seen.

"Look!" she instructed. "Be careful, but look right across.'

The span of the court did not exceed eighteen feet. Betty's side of the great building was all black and quiet. Not a light glimpsed in any room. The room directly across the court whose windows complimented hers had the shades thrown high, the windows opened wide and was ablaze with light.

There were two occupants in the room, a man and a woman, seated side by side at a table covered with writing paraphernalia. The man was powerfully built, regular of feature and very dark, with peculiarly white and nervous hands. The woman wore a tailored suit of dark cloth and even at that distance her remarkable resemblance to the woman they had last seen lying in the morgue was unmistakable. There was the same soft contour of chin, the same rust-brown hair, and clear ivory pallor of the skin. The slight yet perfect modelings of her figure, the slender pink-palmed hand, the curve of the forehead, were as like as is stamped from the same die.

As they watched, breathless, stupefied from surprise, the man drew a wallet from his pocket and pulled from it several papers. He ran rapidly through them and withdrawing two from the packet handed them to his companion. She reached across to receive them when a sudden gust of wind bellied the curtains into sails and sent them fluttering into the room and out again. The force of the breeze caught the papers and they were carried out into the court where they swirled, eddied and ducked, finally alighting on the fire escape that jutted not five feet from Betty's window.

The man who had run to the window, watched with eager eyes to see where the papers fell. Then he clutched his hat from the sofa and rushed from the room. The woman shrugged her shoulders and sat down again at the table. They saw her pull out the pins from her copper hair and let it fall in glory over her shoulders. Then she walked into the adjoining room as if the recovery of the lost documents was a matter of perfect indifference.

"Hank," nudged Sothern, "you're the longest. Climb out and get those papers."

"Larry isn't as long and he's less awkward," commented Frankel.

"And you're worth less than the rest of us; try it yourself, Frankel," flashed Hank.

"Betty Lancey," asked Larry, "why aren't you fragile and willowy instead of a Juno? Then we'd make a rope of the bed-clothes here for a guide and send you over."

Philip Hartley was already out of the window. While the others held caucus he had pulled the blanket from the bed, torn it in half and tied a slip knot firmly around his left leg.

"Go easy, boys," he suggested. "That'll make a fair safety."

Clambering out on the ledge he steadied himself by the top of the sash and worked slowly round to the farther end of the sill. From there he inched his way along a ridge in the wall till he could just touch the fire escape. The letters were white against the iron and just the fraction of an inch out of reach. Betty Lancey saw the difficulty.

"Pass him this hat-pin," she said. "He can fish them over with that."

Slowly, very slowly, Hartley moved the precious papers over the narrow iron shelf, impaling them on the hat-pin point. Then with cramped fingers he put them into his inner pocket and began the return crawl. He was barely within Betty's room again when they heard a loud rapping at the next door. After a short wait a woman's voice answered shrilly,

"What do you want?"

The calmly suave tones of a well-ordered hotel employe replied, "Sorry to disturb you, madam, but the gentleman just above you has dropped by accident some very important papers. They have alighted on the fire escape attached to your window, and we cannot reach them except through this room."

"Can't you go from the room above," argued the woman's voice. "The idea of getting me up at this hour because some imbecile hasn't brains enough to keep his letters from blowing out of the window. If he'd been asleep as he should have been at this time he wouldn't have lost them. Indeed, I'll not open that door. Go up a flight, or down one."

"Oh, madame, I assure you," broke in the clerk again.

"What's the row, Mary?" growled a sleepy masculine voice. The woman on the inside and the clerk on the outside began a simultaneous explanation. In the middle of it all the sleepy voice gave a return growl and ordered:

"Unlock that door, Mary, and get back into bed."

There was the grating of the bolt, the lifting of a window, and then a cry of horror.

"They are gone! They're not here! Somebody has stolen them. I know they lit here. I was so careful to watch."

"Nobody in the hotel got them. Nobody round here's got a light," announced the clerk.

"Glad they're gone," sounded the voice known only to the watchers as "Mary." "Who in the name of sense would frolic round on a fire escape at half past three in the morning picking up papers? Now, Mr. Clerk, take your man, and go away with him, please. Probably he'll find what he wants in the court."

"Frankel, you follow them," suggested Harry Morris. Frankel, waiting till he heard the door close, slipped down the hall after the two men, Sothern with him.

Betty pulled down the shade, closed and locked the window. Then she locked the door, looked under the bed, tried the handles of the doors to the adjoining rooms and spoke breathlessly.

"Now, Hartley!"

As if to guard him from unseen attack, the boys clustered round him. He drew forth the papers. One was an unmounted photograph that might have been that of Cerisse Wayne or of the woman in the room across the court. The other was a letter in the identical writing that the envelopes found in Cerisse Wayne's room had borne, and was dated only a week previous.

"My Dear Cerisse—Check goes by to-night's mail. Hope you will find it sufficient. Be very careful. Think we are being watched. A slight mistake would spoil all, and the struggle of years go for naught. Life for me would be death itself. H."

"I'm going to run across, see that woman and chat with her while the man is gone," said Betty, rumpling up her soft brown hair, dull and satiny as a pecan shell. She threw off her collar and belt, and pulled her shirtwaist out from beneath her skirt. Then she kicked off her shoes, and in this simulated negligee ran softly over the velvet-sodded hall and around through the corridor.

"Let me see," she calculated. "I am the one, two, three, yes, I'm the eighth door. That would make those doors eight and nine from the corner on this side."

Betty told off the doors with care. Sure that she was unobserved, she rapped distinctly several times. There was no response, so she knocked vigorously. This time the door flew wide with such celerity that Betty paled in earnest.

"Oh, pardon me!" she faltered. "But I was alone and sick, and I saw your light and thought maybe you could help me. Have you any ammonia? I am so faint—I might send downstairs, but I am so unused to hotels, you know."

The young women rather stiffly motioned to Betty to enter. Her thick hair was in two long braids; she had changed her tailored suit for a clinging negligee of oriental patterned stuff, and a girdle of mammoth diamonds held it close at the waist. Betty had never seen such grace in a woman before and her eyes were the most wonderful the girl had ever gazed upon. They shone so brightly that their color was indistinguishable. They were twin wells of unfathomable brilliancy, softness and power.

The woman stepped into the bedroom beyond, and Betty, from her seat on the couch, heard her call to the clerk.

"This is E44," phoned the double of Mrs. Wayne. "Kindly send your housekeeper here. A young girl, evidently a guest of the house, has become ill, and appealed to me for aid. I cannot have her in my suite. She seems afraid to stop alone, so will you send a woman to look after her?"

Betty hurried to the door, stealthily opened it and skulked down the hall. As she rounded the corner something soft was thrown over her head, and fastened tightly around her neck. She felt the impact of a great furry body close to hers.

And then Betty Lancey knew nothing more. She lay in a dead faint.

CHAPTER VI.

Up at the Desterle house Johnny Johnson was alternately pulling his front hair and pinching his palms to keep awake. Johnny, with his usual audacity, had ensconced himself for the night in the death chamber. Two Associated Press men were with him; two reporters from others papers and three detectives. The Associated Press Men wanted to smoke, but Johnny rebelled against either illumination or smoking.

"If there's anybody comin' back here," he contended; "if he or she smells smoke or sees lights, there'll be no comin'."

"Considering the ashes and cigarette stubs that we found on the floor," suggested the first Associated Press Man, "the only way to invoke the ghost of Cerisse Wayne would be through smoke."

"What do we want of her ghost," sneered Johnny. "This is no seance. What we want is the fellow who made the ghost."

The bivouac was nerve-racking. The old house apparently had a bounteous rodent population and the little beasts scampered back and forth in the walls with spooky gambols. Every window in the house rattled, and the pall of emptiness that always hangs heavily in a deserted human habitation rested—a dead weight—in the air.

Two blocks distant the elevated trains rumbled dully by, and the morning parade of the milk wagons had not yet begun—to touch the visions of the night with the realities of the day.

"This is too much for me," cried one of the detectives. "Let get out and take a breath."

The little group, all except Johnny, arose with alacrity. He stopped alone in the old house, and tried to keep his eyes open and, failing, wondered why he didn't advertise the newspaper business as a cure for insomnia and accrue cash thereby, when—

"What's that?" asked Johnny of himself. He heard with joyous ears a scraping and sliding in the closet opposite, where he had picked up the gold and amethyst garter. It sounded as if the baseboard were being forcibly removed, or, rather, as if someone were endeavoring to slide it back, and as if the board were sticking in an unaccustomed and stubborn fashion.

Johnny looked for a convenient corner in which to duck. He couldn't fit into the drawers of the chiffonier or the bureau, and the bed, stripped of all its coverings, even of the mattress and pillows, was flat against the wall. On a chance Johnny crawled beneath it, with one eye fixed steadily upon the closet door.

He had not long to wait. Stealthily the door opened, and through the crack came a gleam of a pocket electric flashlight. The man who was holding the light whirled it hastily around the room, scanning it closely as if to make sure he was unobserved.

"Oh," groaned Johnny, and slunk closer into the corner, rolling himself still more tightly into a ball, and pulling his coat up over his fiery head. The intruder walked over to the bureau drawers and began to search hurriedly. They were empty, and at this discovery in each successive drawer the man flung them shut with a gesture of disappointment.

The voices of Johnny's returning companions echoed through the corridors and their footsteps sounded on the stairway. The intruder put out his light and started for the closet. The dawn was now so far advanced that as he passed the window Johnny distinguished his features clearly. He must have been at least fifty years of age, a rather stockily built man, of good appearance, with a tired face and dark hair, thickly streaked with gray. He hurried into the closet and shut the door behind him, and Johnny heard again the struggle to slide the panel into place.

"Who called, son?" asked the fat detective, jocularly, as he entered the room. "Did they leave cards for the hull of us? Say, where is that bricktop, anyway?"

Johnny, with considerable wriggling and squirming, came out from beneath the bed.

"Funny how thundering much easier it is to get under a bed than out from underneath it," he commented, rubbing the dust from his knees.

"You didn't get chased there, did you, now?" came the question. "Were you seeing things, or what?"

"I saw enough," retorted Johnny. "Guess I saw more than you did, and it didn't cost anything for the vision, either. Here, Farley, let's have a light; where's that pocket contraption of yours?"

Farley brought it out, and Johnny, glorying in the importance of knowing something that the others did not, and reveling in the curiosity and impatience of his fellows, strode majestically into the closet. When Johnny had anything tucked away in his cranium that he was crazy to tell as other people were to hear, he puffed out to the dimensions of the fabled frog. That was the time when Johnny was really funny, and more provocative of risibility than any of his ever-ridiculous yarns.

Entering the closet he scanned its calcimined sides closely, running his slender, long-nailed fingers carefully down the wall. Then he hit the baseboard. The group around watched in tense silence.

"Oh, John, cut it out and open up," snarled Gorin. Gorin was one of Johnny's best friends.

(To be continued.)

"How do you keep your razor sharp?" "Easy enough. I hide it where my wife can't find it."—Cleveland Plain Dealer.

"How Tillie's clothes hang about her! Why, they don't fit at all." "But think how much worse she would look if they did."—Life.

Miss Kidder—S'sh! Carrie has dyed her hair black. Don't tell anybody. Miss Askitt—Is it a secret? Miss Kidder—Yes; she wants to keep it dark. —Boston Globe.

"What part of the railway train do you regard as the most dangerous?" inquired the nervous man. "The dining car," answered the dyspeptic.—Washington Star.

"I'll be ready in a minute," she said to her husband. "You needn't hurry, now," he called up some time later. "I find that I shall have to shave again."—Detroit Free Press.

"I thought you said you told your wife everything you did." "I do." "It's mighty strange. She hasn't said a word to my wife about the $10 you borrowed from me."—Washington Star.

Patience—They say she got all her furniture on the installment plan? Patrice—She did. She has had four husbands, and she got a little furniture with each one.—Yonkers Statesman.

She—Don't you think woman's suffrage would be a fine thing? He—I know I could always persuade my wife to vote as I wanted by telling her I intended voting the other way.—Boston Globe.

"Why can't that prima donna sing more than twice a week?" "I don't know," answered the impresario, "unless it's because she tired out her vocal cords arguing with me about salary." —Washington Star.

Maud—So he had the cheek to ask my age, did he? Well, what did you tell him? Ethel—I told him I didn't know positively, but I thought you were twenty-four on your thirtieth birthday.—Boston Transcript.

"Now, your conduct during the trial may have considerable effect on the jury." "Ah, quite so," responded the ultra-swell defendant. "And should I appear interested or just mildly bored?"—Kansas City Journal.

"You say you have quit smoking?" "Yes, never going to smoke again." "Then why don't you throw away those cigars?" "Never, I threw away a box of good cigars the last time I quit smoking, and it taught me a lesson."

"The way to run this country," said the egotist, "is to put thoroughly wise, capable, alert, and honest men in control of affairs." "Yes," answered Miss Cayenne, "but what are we going to do? There's only one of you."—Washington Star.

Cholly—The deuce, old chap; I cawnt go to the party. I have no collah button. Reggie—Go across the street and buy some, deah fellow. Cholly—But I caawnt. Nobody has my measurements except my tailah, dontcherknow.—Life.

Mr. Dubbs (with a newspaper)—It tells here, my dear, how a progressive New York woman makes her social calls by telephone. Mrs. Dubbs—Progressive. Huh! She's probably like me—not a decent thing to wear.—Boston Transcript.

In a written examination on astronomy one of the questions was, "What happens when there is an eclipse of the moon?" A student with rather a good knack of getting out of a difficulty wrote: "A great many people come out to look at it."

"What's that party kicking about?" said one New Yorker. "Oh, he's one of those guys who are lucky and don't know it," replied the other. "He came here on a round-trip ticket from Philadelphia and lost the return coupon." —Washington Evening Star.

"I'm sure," said the interviewer, "the public would be interested to know the secret of your success." "Well, young man," replied the captain of industry, "the secret of my success has been my ability to keep it a secret."—Sacred Heart Review.

"I'd hate to be a millionaire." "Gosh! Why?" "Well, millionaires are always getting letters threatening them with all sorts of horrible fates unless they immediately pay the writers large sums of money." "That's nothing. I get just such letters on the first of every month."—Cleveland Leader.

"Why," asked the judge, "do you think your husband is dead? You say you haven't heard from him for more than a year. Do you consider that reasonable proof that he has passed out of existence?" "Yes, your honor. If he was still alive he'd be askin' me to send him money."—Chicago Record-Herald.

HAD LUCK ON THE WAY.

The English Thief That Dropped In to See His Lawyer.

Here is a story of a genuine instance of the kind of business which fell to the lot of a once notorious London "thieves' counsel." One day a thickset man, with a cropped poll of unmistakable Newgate cut, slunk into this counsel's room, when the following dialogue took place:

"Morning, sir," said the man, touching his forelock.

"Morning," said the counsel. "What do you want?"

"Well, sir, I'm sorry to say, sir, our little Ben, sir, has 'ad a misfortin. Fust offense, sir, only a wipe."

"Well, well!" interrupted the counsel. "Get on"—

"So, sir, we thought as you'd 'ad all the family business we'd like you to defend him, sir."

"All right," said the counsel; "see my clerk"—

"Yes, sir," continued the thief, "but I thought I'd like to make sure you'd attend yourself, sir. We're anxious cos it's little Ben, our youngest kid."

"Oh, that will be all right! Give Simmons the fee."

"Well, sir," continued the man, shifting about uncomfortably, "I was going to arst you, sir, to take a little less. You see, sir"—wheedingly—"It's little Ben—his first misfortin"—

"No, no!" said the counsel impatiently. "Clear out!"

"But, sir, you've had all our business. Well, sir, if you won't you won't, so I'll pay you now, sir." And as he doled out the guineas, "I may as well tell you, sir, you wouldn't 'a' got the counters if I hadn't had a little bit of luck on the way."—From "The Recollections of a K. C.," by Thomas Edward Crispe.

How to Prevent Colds.

The easiest way to catch cold is when one is overheated. One should never sit down after exercise in the open only in summer weather. The most familiar causes of taking cold are sitting in a draught, wearing insufficient clothing, insufficiently protected feet and ill-ventilated rooms. Colds occur most frequently in the spring or fall when the temperature is moderately low, subject to sudden changes, when there is notable dampness of the atmosphere and high winds.

Catarrh has intimate relation with colds. Recurring colds in the head conduce to further colds. Those gradually localize themselves further down, giving rise in succession to sore throat, bronchitis and then fixes itself upon the lung, when the treatment is so often ineffectual, whereas at first the treatment is a simple matter. Catarrh does not necessarily lead to consumption, but when the resistance of the lungs is diminished the germs of consumption find a favorable soil for their development.

Most important is the clothing, which should be sufficient for warmth and comfort. Avoid the coddling of any one part or leaving any one portion unduly exposed. The place to wear a chest protector is on the soles of the feet. The nature of the fabric to be worn next to the skin is a thoroughly porous one, like linen mesh, and regulate the outer garments according to the weather. The feet at all times should be kept warm and dry.

Ruskin's Grave.

Ten years ago John Ruskin passed peacefully away at Coniston. A grave in Westminster Abbey was immediately offered by the dean, but was refused out of respect for Ruskin's frequently expressed wish that he might be buried wherever he chanced to die, says the Westminster Gazette. He was laid to rest in Coniston churchyard on Jan. 25. In poets' corner there is a medallion of him by Onslow Ford, immediately above the bust of Sir Walter Scott. In his native Camberwell the master's memory is perpetuated by the bestowal of his name upon the finely wooded park on Denmark hill, within a stone's throw of his old home.

His Opportunity.

"How did you manage to go through every house on that block in broad daylight without being detected?" asked one burglar.

"Very easily," replied the other. "I selected a time when a moving van drove up to a vacant dwelling. I worked while the neighbors were hanging out of the front windows to criticise the furniture."—Washington Star.

You never hear of a man whose income does not exceed a dollar a day being operated on for appendicitis.

Successful physicians are lucky guessers.