



CHAPTER XII.

At the Foot of the Stairs
 "No, it will soon be morning, and all way of escape blocked. He is willing to swear that you agreed to permit Alva to drive you downtown, and that you actually departed together. This charge can perhaps be answered by the testimony of Krantz, if he can be got on the witness stand, as you have told me he accompanied you on a street car."

"Which is true?"
 "I accept your word, of course, but Harris does not, and I must confess he has some evidence to create suspicion."

"You say that!"
 "I must, to be perfectly honest. I will even confess there have been times when I doubted. Let me tell you—Alva was undoubtedly killed with a dagger hatpin, exactly like that one in your hat there," and I pointed to it on the dresser.

Her eyes turned that way in an expression of startled surprise. "Killed with a hatpin like that of mine?"

"Yes, there is no doubt as to the nature of the weapon. I know more about that than Harris, even."

"How are you so sure a hatpin was the weapon used? The police reports say nothing like that."

"They do not know; I do. The truth is, I was the first to discover the murder. I related to you my conversation with Harris, after all others had left the foundry. We must have been there alone for an hour. When we left we separated, believing this to be safe, and I walked down Gans street alone in the rain. Some blocks below the foundry I came upon this car, bumped up against the curb, and apparently abandoned. The rear door stood wide open, and I looked inside, and felt about, merely from curiosity. My fingers touched something lying on the floor, and when I drew it out, and looked at it in the light of a distant street-lamp, I discovered it to be a dagger hatpin, discolored with blood."

She stared at me in horror.
 "Like that one there?"

"Exactly like it. I had seen the one in your hat, and remembered."

"You thought it must be mine? That—that I had murdered him?"

"I hardly believe I thought at all. But I investigated the front seat, and found Alva's body hanging over the wheel, with a gash in the back of his coat sticky with blood. Then I knew."

"Knew what?"

"How the man had been killed. I believed then you were with him alone; I had reason to, for I overheard his invitation, and your answer. I recognized the weapon as one you had in your possession. My first thought was that it would utterly condemn you if ever found."

"And, even then, you sought to protect me? You cared enough for that?"

"I hardly know; it must have been true enough. I scarcely doubted but what it was your act—only I persuaded myself that the man must have attacked you, and that you struck in self-defense. I would not believe you guilty of deliberate murder. I meant to give you a chance; so I took the weapon away with me."

She drew a long breath.
 "No one saw you?"

"Not a soul; the street was absolutely deserted. I wiped off the blood, and hid the knife in my pocket until I reached the hotel; then I concealed it at the bottom of my valise."

"It is still there?"

"No; something led Harris to suspect I was not Daly, and he set out to investigate. He had my telephone number, and easily located both hotel and room. Waiting until I left the key, he entered, and went through the valise in search of anything he could find. He came upon the dagger hatpin, remembered that you had just such a one in your hat that night, and instantly jumped to the conclusion, as he had seen the wound, that this was the weapon of murder. He believes we were working together, and this was why I had concealed the knife."

"And you? you believed that?"

"I believed in you," I said earnestly. "At first I thought it must be you; then I saw that pin in your hat again, when I knew I had one just like it hidden at the hotel. This gave me new hope, until I returned and discovered my valise slit open, and the dagger gone. I knew of no one who would do such an act—or had occasion to—except you, in an effort to destroy evidence."

"Then later, when that was cleared up by Harris acknowledging that he was the one who got the pin, I told him about your having your own in your hat at Peron's. He only laughed, and said you were smart enough to buy another, as soon as the first was found missing; that doubtless there were plenty to be had."

"He's right; there are. At least I know of one shop on lower Broadway where they are for sale." She stopped suddenly, with a peculiar gesture.

"Why, now I think of it, Sarah Waldron has one exactly like mine; I bought it for her."

"Ivan Waldron's wife?"

"Of course; that's rather odd, isn't it?"

"It opens up a line of thought, anyway. Could you find out, do you suppose, if she has it still? What does she know about her husband?"

The girl laughed softly.
 "Know! Less even than I do, I imagine. He doesn't show up here oftener than once in six months, and Sarah gets nothing from him. She wouldn't know—why?"

"Because, after all, it might be the Russian; if it was he would have to lie to Harris, and pretend to know nothing. You heard how those two talked at Peron's. What did you make of it?"

She drew her eyes together, leaving the marks of a frown on her forehead.

"That they had planned together to rob Alva; that Waldron was to be hidden somewhere outside, and was to wait for Harris to signal him that the money had been paid over."

"Exactly; Harris failed to learn that the money changed hands, and consequently did not signal. But Waldron, nevertheless, was outside waiting; had no doubt spotted Alva's machine, and was ready to act. The one thing we do not know is—did Alva start home alone; or did one of the men accompany him? If the latter supposition is true then that fellow must have committed the murder, with Waldron a possible accomplice after the crime. If not true, then the only other solution is that Alva picked Waldron up for companionship. Were they acquainted at all?"

"I think so, but am not sure; you said Waldron first reported this chance to Harris."

"So he did; then it is quite possible the two knew each other. That would make it easy for the Russian to ask a ride. Whoever struck the blow was in the rear seat. This theory fits in all right with his actions toward Harris."

What do you mean to do?"

"Shadow Waldron; he is sure to expose himself sooner or later. We must get away from here, out of the hands of these fellows. Could you find your way to the stairs in the dark?"

"Yes. I have been here often."

"Then I am going to turn out this light before opening the door."

She led the way confidently enough, moving silently along the wall, I keeping close so as to touch her. A few steps brought us forth into the hall at the head of a flight of stairs leading downward. My fingers gripped the banisters, while she stood aside to let me pass.

"You better go ahead now; the next flight is directly beyond this, and ends at the street door."

"You will follow?"

"Of course; I shall keep right behind you."

We went down step by step, not a stair creaking, or a sound louder than our own breathing. I reached the last step, warned by the novel post, and felt ahead with one groping foot to assure myself of the level beyond. Her fingers grasped my sleeve, and

lips almost at my ear, whispered a barely audible warning.

"Look to the right! What is that?"

It was a dull, red glow, a mere pinprick in the black curtain, yet it seemed to change in brilliancy, like an evil eye winking at us out of the dark. There was something uncanny about the thing, yielding me no suggestion as to what it could be, yet frightening by its baleful gleam at such a time and place. Then there was borne to my nostrils the faint odor of tobacco smoke; it must be a man sitting there smoking; what we saw was the red tip of his cigar.

Could we slip by unheard? I doubted it, yet whatever happened, one of us, at least, must escape from the house before any alarm was sounded. There was but one chance left—for her to slip silently down that other flight of stairs to the street door, while I remained behind to protect her flight. If there was no alarm, no notice taken of her passage, possibly I might venture to follow without being overheard; but she must go first, her step was light, and she was more sure of the way. Besides, I could block pursuit, by a fight if necessary, and thus give her ample time in which to unchain and open that front door. Once without, these fellows would never follow. I put my lips close against the girl's ear.

"It is a guard there smoking. Don't try to answer, but do exactly as I say. One of us, at least, must get out; you stand the better chance, with my remaining behind to hold these fellows back if there should be any alarm. If there is not, I'll follow. Do you understand?—answer with your hand."

I felt the firm pressure of her fingers in quick response.

"The fellow evidently hasn't heard anything yet—you better go."

I felt her creep past me without a sound, her hand slipping from my grasp as her foot touched the level floor of the hall. She was invisible, no longer even a shadow in the black gloom. Then suddenly from somewhere a chain clanked faintly; the ear could not determine from what direction the sound came, yet it was clear enough to be heard plainly. The man stood still, evidently listening; I lost sight of the red glow, as though he had removed the cigar from between his lips, and slowly straightened myself up, braced for any emergency. She had reached the outside door, and was preparing to open it. For an instant nothing happened. Then the sharp, resounding click of a heavy lock echoed up from beneath, like the tap of a hammer.

The fellow snapped on the electricity, flooding the large hall, and uttering a gruff oath, started forward. We met face to face. There was nothing else for it but to fight it out. If I ran the act would only expose her before she could distance pursuit; besides that first glimpse had revealed my antagonist, and I was glad—it was "Gentleman George"! He knew me almost at the same instant, spitting out a curse as he reached back for his gun.

"You, hey! How the h— did you get down here?"

But I was quicker, the move ready, gripping the wrist, and twisting the arm back until the torture caused him to drop the weapon, as we struggled back across the width of the hall. We were both weaponless, relying only on the efficiency of bare hands, but he turned into a savage, a dangerous fighter who cared only to disable his opponent in any way possible. It was like battling with a wild cat, infuriated, crazed with hate and fear. And for the moment the fellow had me, driving me back against the rail, helpless before the fierceness of his assault.

Some one was coming. I could hear a voice, and flying steps on the stairs; then a woman's scream somewhere above. I broke away, getting a grip on his throat, and feeling my feet firm on the floor. He could see what I couldn't, and found voice in spite of my throttling.

"It's that d-d skunk, Severn, get out. Hit him, Ivan! Smash in, I've got the guy—quick now!"

I whirled with him, ducking my own head behind his shoulder, gaining as I did so one blurred glimpse of Waldron as he swung full at me with what looked like the leg of a chair. Harris caught the full force of the blow just over his eyes and the power of it, added to the swirl of my arms, sent him hurtling along the rounded rail, headlong down the stairs. Waldron stood paralyzed, stunned, his hands still on the club, his eyes following that flying figure. With all my strength I drove a fist flat to his face, and as he reeled, stumbling backward, endeavoring to retain his feet, I sprang past, and raced down the steps. The body lay at the bottom motionless, huddled up in such fashion as to block the door. Without a doubt but that the man was dead, I thrust the form to one side, leaped through the opening, and crashed the door behind me.

I turned to the left, afraid of the bright lights, and the street-cars, and plunged into the depths of the alley. I may have gone a mile, twisting and turning before I came to what evidently was a small hotel. Here I encountered a cab, an old horse cab, the driver half asleep inside. An odd-time caddy was not liable to care who his fare might be so long as he was well paid. Encouraged by this reflection, I stepped over to the curb.

"Engaged, my man?"

He came to life in an instant, tumbling out of his comfortable quarters to face me.

"No sir, I never heard you comin', sir. Bin a bit quiet about here to-night."



Without a Doubt but That the Man Was Dead.

He stopped, as though just noticing my appearance under the dim street lights.

"Yer bin hurt, sir?" he asked solicitously. "Yer coat's all tore, and there's some blood on yer face."

"A small fight, that's all, in a saloon over west. Any place around here where I could wash up?"

"Sure; right in yere; there ain't nobody 'round to bother. I'll show you."

He opened a little side-door, and I followed down a narrow hallway to a small washroom, flung off my coat, and filled a basin with water. The caddy turned up the light, and watched me curiously. He was evidently delighted to have some one to companion with at this weird hour of the morning.

"They got yer one good 'un, anyhow," he remarked. "Feller what struck yer must've had a ring on ter make that gash."

"There were two of them," I answered, spluttering through the water I was using liberally. "I may have hurt one of the fellows, so you keep still—will you?"

"Me! Shucks, I don't talk about my fares none. That a 5't business. I picked one up night before last down by the west-side docks, he'd been in some kind of a fracas—anyhow, he was sure scared half ter death. Looked like a foreigner, an' was draggin' a grip 'long with him. Got off at Jersey ferry, I reckon."

"When was that?" I was using the towel by this time, eying the loquacious speaker over the edge.

"Night afore last, 'bout midnight; I'd had a fare down that way, an' was drivin' back empty, when he hollered to me to stop. Gosh, the feller tumbled in like there was a ghost after him, an' sed I was ter drive like h—l."

"Had a grip with him, did he?"

"Yep; black, 'bout medium size. The fellow wasn't overly big himself, an' it was quite a lug for him; it bumped against his legs when he toted it. I wouldn't a thought nothin' more 'bout it, only I got 'hol' of a paper, an' read how there was a guy crooked that same night over in Jersey. It sorter made me think o' this feller, just because he was so d-d scared. It was sorter funny where he had me set him down, too after midnight that way."

"Where was that?"

"Colmar buildin' on Broad street. Wa'n't a darn light from top to bottom. He didn't let me pull up there—not by a d-n sight. I had ter let him out a block away, around the corner. But somehow I sorter wanted ter know just where the bloke went, so I slipped off the box, an' took a peek. He turned in there, where it was blacker than a stack o' black cats, an' that's the last I seen of him. S'pose he was the duck who did that job, sir?"

"He might have been, of course. Did you report it to the police?"

"Lord, no; if us fellers told the cops half we know they wouldn't get no sleep at all. I ain't sed nothin' to nobody. Ready to go now, sir?"

(To Be Continued.)

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self-defense. I would not believe you guilty of deliberate murder. I meant to give you a chance; so I took the weapon away with me."
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 "Not a soul; the street was absolutely deserted. I wiped off the blood, and hid the knife in my pocket until I reached the hotel; then I concealed it at the bottom of my valise."