

Ashton-Kirk, Criminologist

John Thomas McIntyre



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Title: Ashton-Kirk, Criminologist

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Illustrator: Ralph L. Boyer

Release Date: January 3, 2010 [EBook #30838]

Language: English

*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ASHTON-KIRK, CRIMINOLOGIST ***

Produced by Annie McGuire



HE WAS STEADFASTLY WATCHING THE GIRL

Ashton-Kirk

Criminologist

BY

John T. McIntyre

Author of "Ashton-Kirk Investigator,"

"Ashton-Kirk Secret Agent," "Ashton-Kirk

Special Detective," etc.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY

RALPH L. BOYER

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1918

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To my friend

Edward W. Mumford

INTRODUCTION

It is always a task of much difficulty to select an experience of Ashton-Kirk's from among the many which have been set down in the records under his name.

A maze of episodes in these records attracts the mind, and one finds there a train of singular adventures, any one of which would make a book. The experiences which go to make up the volume "Ashton-Kirk, Investigator" were chosen because they dealt with a rather arabesque murder, the hidden features of which were brought to light in an extraordinary way. In "Ashton-Kirk, Secret Agent," the elements seemed uniquely mixed, and shed an unusual light upon the windings of European diplomacy.

In the third volume, "Ashton-Kirk, Special Detective," the note of horror was rung shrilly, and the confident talents of this extraordinary young man were brought smartly into play. It may be that the appearance in this history of the detective's big, good-natured, strong-handed friend, Bat Scanlon, had something to do with its finding a place in this series. In the present book this engaging personality has again a part in the drama.

But aside from this influence, the episode makes a powerful appeal; the brilliancy of the criminologist's work in the case treated here would surely have compelled a place for it in any list of his experiences.



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ILLUSTRATIONS

HE WAS STEADFASTLY WATCHING THE GIRL

"EVERY CHAMBER LOADED"

HE LIFTED THE BLADE ONCE MORE

THEN THE DOOR SWUNG OPEN



CHAPTER I

THE GATHERING CLOUD

Impatiently, Ashton-Kirk threw down the last of the morning newspapers.

"Commonplace," said he. "And sordid. I am inclined to agree with De Quincey's 'Toad-in-the-Hole' that the age of great criminals has passed."

The man to whom he spoke sat opposite him in the lounging room of Scanlon's Gymnasium; a pair of puffy white hands were folded over a bloated paunch; he had a sodden air of over-feeding and over-stimulation.

"And a good job, too," spoke this gentleman. "We can get along very well without those fellows."

"I am not sure that I quite agree with that," said Ashton-Kirk. He lighted a cigar and its smoke drifted across the high ceilinged room. "Crimes are growing no fewer; and if we must have crimes I should personally prefer their perpetrators to have some little artistry."

The swollen gentleman grunted.

"You were always an odd kind of fish," said he. "But, you know, every one hasn't your love of this kind of thing."

"They have not given it the same amount of consideration, that is all. An artist in crime is, in his way, well worthy of a certain sort of admiration. Who could drive a knife in a man's back with a braver air of devilry than Benvenuto Cellini? And yet he could turn himself from the deed and devote himself to the producing of a Perseus, or to playing the flute well enough to attract the attention of a Pope. And his own countrymen, the Borgias, had as pretty a talent for assassination as they had for government."

"Very like," admitted the other. "But ain't we well rid of such bloodthirsty apes?"

Ashton-Kirk smiled.

"I wonder," said he, "if you have ever read an engaging little volume called 'A Book of Scoundrels.' No? Well, I was afraid that would be so. And you have missed a treat. However, I suppose we can't expect every one to enthuse over such things. It has been said of music that the ability to appreciate it is only second to that of being able to produce it. And this must also be true in the case of crime.

"Stevenson, now, had a magnificent appreciation for a well executed enormity. In his story 'Markheim' he gives a skilful picture of a really deft assassination; and in the 'Suicide Club' he has created what I would class as a master criminal. The Russian writers have a power in this mood that is truly wonderful. Dostoyeffsky in his 'Crime and Punishment' has conceived a most tremendous homicide—one which would have thrilled De Quincey himself."

The listener held up one pudgy hand in protest.

"Don't," he requested. "Please don't. No more. If you knew what I've gone through you wouldn't dwell on this theme."

Just then a very big man with massive shoulders and chest came in; he was about forty-five, but he looked

pink and swift and fit; and as he paused at the side of the heavy paunched one, the latter looked physically shabby in contrast.

"Hello!" Bat Scanlon, trainer, ex-wrestling champion, and border character, greeted Ashton-Kirk with a pleased look. "Glad to see you. Come in to dust off the mat with me?"

"I think I will take a turn," replied the criminologist, as he yawned, with widely stretched arms. "I've been going a bit stale lately."

Scanlon turned his glance upon the other man.

"How are you, Mr. Dennison?" he said. "Back once more, eh?"

"Believe me, it's not because I want to," returned Dennison, huskily. "It's because I have to. I'm not right, Scanlon; I can't stand anything out of the ordinary. Just a little extra tax on me, and I'm done."

Bat surveyed him, valuingly.

"No wonder," said he. "You've got a belt of felt about your waist that only a champion could wear. You must have kept your feet under the table many and many a bitter hour to win it."

"Now, confound it," said the pudgy one, exasperated, "I don't eat so much."

"Maybe not." Scanlon looked his disbelief. "But the pangs of hunger and you are not very intimate. Your most active moments are spent in a limousine or a club window." He winked humorously at Ashton-Kirk. "I'll say nothing against the limousine; it's a fine invention; but legs were made to walk on. And if you think the club window thing will ever reduce the size of your collar, you're bound to be a disappointed man."

"But I ride every day in the park," said Dennison, "and I go to the country club three times a week for my golf."

"Riding is a grand exercise—for the horse," commented the athlete. "And the people who get the most out of a golf course are paid for what they do."

"Well, a fellow's social life must be seen to," said the defective one, a fat white hand stroking an equally fat, but blue, jowl. "He's got to have a bit to eat and drink, and a trifle of leisure to look things over."

A telephone bell rang in another room, and a squeaky voice was heard answering the call.

"If you care to come in every day and work, all right," said Scanlon, carelessly, for he understood the case perfectly. "But the eating and drinking must scale down to what I think is right."

Dennison appealed to Ashton-Kirk.

"The last time he had me here, he made me toil like a day laborer, and feed like his helper," said he, gloomily. "But I've got to stand it, confound the luck. I'm too short in the neck to carry weight and stand excitement. That thing fairly floored me when I heard it this morning."

"What thing?" asked Ashton-Kirk.

Dennison looked at the speaker as though astonished that any one could be for even a moment in doubt as to his meaning.

"Why," said he, "that murder—last night."

"I guess that's one I haven't heard about," said Bat Scanlon, and Ashton-Kirk regarded the man with the paunch steadily, but said nothing.

"Not heard of that!" The man pointed an amazed finger at the discarded heap about the investigator's chair. "Why, every paper in town is just screaming about it. The police are at a standstill. The papers say they don't know what to do."

Just then a door opened; a fiery head was thrust into the room and a squeaky boy-voice called out:

"Mr. Scanlon! On the 'phone!"

When he reached the little office which opened from the lounging room, the red-haired boy further informed Bat:

"It's a lady, and she sounds like she was in a hurry."

Scanlon went to the telephone and took down the receiver.

"Scanlon speaking," said he, briefly.

There came a gasping, breathless little exclamation of relief in his ear.

"Oh, Bat, I'm glad you're there. I'm very glad!" The voice was full and vibrant; it had a rare quality of resonance that even the telephone could not stifle.

"What, Nora! Is that you?" The big athlete was plainly surprised.

"Yes, it's Nora," replied the voice. "Foolish Nora Cavanaugh, who is always in some sort of trouble. I had left word that I must not be worried by this matter, because I have my work to think of, and the constant ringing at the door-bell and telephoning was wearing me out. And just now, Bat, it occurred to me that you would be sure to have heard of this dreadful thing, and have been one of those turned away."

Scanlon's face was one of mystification and concern.

"Nora," said he, "why this rush of folks at your front door, and who were they?"

"The reporters have never stopped since early morning; and the police have been here a half dozen times."

"The police!" Bat's voice rose with a sudden sharpness that caused the red-haired boy to jump. "What do you mean by——?"

But the full, beautiful voice checked him.

"I must see you, Bat, I must see you at once," it said. "No, no, don't come here," hurriedly, as he began proposing such a venture. "There is a cab waiting at the door now. I shall be at your place in twenty minutes."

"All right, Nora; anything you say. But if you'll only let me——"

"In twenty minutes," said the rare voice. "Good-bye."

The blank which followed told him that the girl had hung up; he turned to the boy.

"Danny," said he, "there'll be a lady along in a little while. Have her come in here and let me know right away."

"Yes, sir," said Danny, obligingly.

With his brows puckered in perplexity Bat went back to the lounging room. Ashton-Kirk was looking out at the crowds passing in the street; Dennison was reading a blackly headlined story on the front page of one of the newspapers, his pudgy hands shaking and his eyes feverish.

"The worst thing of the kind I ever heard of," said he with a kind of gurgle of horror. "The very worst. The police have been bragging about their efficiency during this last administration; now let's see what they can do. Here's a case that'll try them out."

"Oh, yes," said Bat, absently. "You were talking about being upset by this thing. It was——" He paused suddenly, remembering that he had not yet heard.

"A murder," said the detective, as he threw down the newspaper. "A most brutal and devilish murder. I talked with Tom Burton last night only a few hours before this terrible thing must have happened."

"Tom Burton!" Scanlon's big, ruddy face went a little pale. "Not the 'Bounder'?"

"Yes, they did call him that," confessed the other, a little resentfully. "But that was all wrong. Burton was a good fellow when you knew him."

But Bat Scanlon was not listening; he had snatched up one of the newspapers. In staring head-lines he was reading:

MYSTERIOUSLY STRUCK DOWN

STRANGE DEED AT STANWICK!

Tom Burton, Well-Known Man About Town, the Victim.

Police Are Puzzled!

In the body of the type the hurried details of the crime were given—or as many of them as the journal had been able to gather before going to press.

Stanwick was a new suburb on a branch line; and some time after midnight a policeman, Colby by name, had been patrolling his beat, which was along Duncan Street. A girl in the dress of a nurse, and much frightened, rushed up to him, and in great agitation announced that there was a man lying dead on the floor at 620. Colby, startled and excited, accompanied the girl to the house indicated, and there found the body of Thomas Burton, a "well-known clubman," stretched out upon the floor of the sitting-room—dead—and with a frightful wound in the head.

"The house is occupied by Frank Burton, the cartoonist for the *Morning Standard*, and his sister Mary, who has been an invalid for some years. These are the son and daughter of the dead man. They say they had not, up to last night, seen their father for a long time; his visit was a surprise and not at all a welcome

one, it would appear, as they had not been upon good terms. According to the story told by young Burton, he and his sister left the room in which their father sat; when the young man returned, he found his father dead, as stated."

Paper after paper was feverishly scanned by Bat, but they merely repeated the few, bare facts. Ashton-Kirk had turned from the window and was watching the big trainer in some surprise.

"It's a pretty hard pull for a man when he's talked comfortably with a friend, and said 'good-bye' to him, and, then, the next thing he hears, is that he's been outrageously murdered." Dennison seemed unable to rid his mind of this overpowering fact. "It was then I started to go under; it was just as if somebody had struck me under the heart, and I caved right in."

Here there came a sudden bustle from the office, the closing of doors, the dragging of a chair across the floor. Then the voice of Danny came squeakingly.

"Mr. Scanlon! Wanted in the office!"

"Right," said Bat, promptly. Then, to Ashton-Kirk, he added: "Stick around for a little, will you? I may have something to tell you."

And then, with hurried steps, he vanished into the adjoining room.

CHAPTER II

BAT SCANLON IS SURPRISED

In the office, Bat Scanlon felt himself suddenly clutched by a creature who seemed at first to be all rich silks, soft furs, dazzling complexion and delicate perfume; but an instant later this impression failed; for he knew that she was all eyes—great, brown, intelligent eyes—and a voice which made one's heart tremble when she spoke.

"Oh, Bat, I'm glad you're in this big, cold city this morning," said the voice, gratefully, while the long lashes held two great perilous tears. "If you hadn't been, I don't know what I should have done."

"Danny," said Bat to the red-haired boy, "go sweep up, or something."

"Yes, sir," replied Danny, promptly, and was gone.

Mr. Scanlon then saw that his unusual visitor was settled comfortably in a big, wide-armed chair, and he took a seat opposite her.

"I don't wonder that you're feeling so," said he. "It's a sudden kind of thing, isn't it? And do you know," there was an apologetic note in his voice, "this is the first morning I missed looking over the paper for months. When you had me on the telephone a while ago I knew nothing at all about the matter."

The girl shivered a little and drew her cloak around her shoulders.

"As soon as *I* heard of it, I knew what was to happen," she said, a trifle bitterly. "Nora Cavanaugh, celebrity, was to be dragged further into the light. Nora Cavanaugh, who had just opened in a successful play—the woman whose pictures were in all the magazines—was the wife of the murdered man! Instantly the police, who would be much better employed seeking a solution of the crime, must hunt out and torment me with their questions; the newspapers must suddenly go mad with a desire to exploit my years of work and my personality as a background for a sordid crime. My press agent, my manager, are quivering with anxiety that no shred of publicity be lost. My very maid is subtly suggestive as to ways in which value could be gained from the circumstances."

"Too bad!" said Bat "It's a pretty messy kind of a job. But it's the regular thing. They are not picking specially on you." He sat looking at her for a moment in silence. Then he added: "Anyhow, in spite of all this, there is one thing you might be thankful for, isn't there?"

She drew in a long breath; her hands clasped tightly, and for a moment her eyes were closed.

"You mean that Tom Burton is dead?" she whispered.

"Yes," said the man.

Again there was a silence, and this time it was broken by the girl.

"I have never thought of him as dying," she said, and there was something like wonder in her voice. "He had gradually become settled in my mind as a sort of incubus—I felt that I was to see him always, smiling, immaculate and unscrupulous—a sort of beast with whom cleanliness took the place of a soul."

"You should have divorced him," said Bat. "It would have been the easiest way."

She shivered.

"He knew I would never do that," she answered. "He knew I was forever set against any such thing. My religion is against it; then," she gave a little gesture of loathing, "the actress and the divorce court had become associated in common jest; and I made up my mind that I would not add to its truth."

"He knew that, and he took advantage of it," said Bat.

"Was there anything that promised him a profit that Tom Burton did not take advantage of?" Her glorious eyes flashed and her head, superbly crowned with masses of bronze hair, was reared, the round, beautifully moulded chin was held high with scorn. "Was there anything, no matter how mean, that he wouldn't stoop to, so long as it enabled him to coddle his vices and go on in his idle way of life?"

Bat sat looking at the wonderfully beautiful and splendidly spirited creature; and he found himself wondering what had ever led her into a marriage with a man such as the one she had just described. And, as though in answer to his thought, she went on:

"But he had a way with him; his only study in life, so he told me once, had been women; and he knew how to get the better of them. When I first met him I was playing in a middle western city in a stock company which gave two performances a day and paid a fairly respectable salary. It was the first good engagement I'd ever had; the following of the theatre liked me and I began to be talked about; the east, and the creating of important parts did not seem so impossible as they had only a little while before.

"Maybe he heard some whisper of this; I don't know. But we became acquainted; and I was carried away by him. Never had I met a man who showed so many brilliant sides of character; he could talk about anything, and in a way which indicated a mastery of the matter. Every ambition I cherished met with his approval; everything I longed for seemed within reach when he talked. It was a species of hypnotism, Bat; nothing else explains it."

"How a fellow like that could so put it over on a woman like you, Nora, puzzles me," said Bat Scanlon, shaking his head.

"It would puzzle any right sort of a man," said the girl. "Only a woman would understand it thoroughly—or a man like Tom Burton. Well, it was while I was feeling that way about him, completely under his influence, that I married him. And in a week," here she arose, the cloak falling from her shoulders as she flung out her arms in a gesture of despair, "I knew just what I had done. The man was a cheap pretender; he'd never had an honest thought in his life; he had familiarized himself with all my little weaknesses and aspirations before he met me; all his learning was a sham; his good nature was a mask."

"Some discovery for a week old bride to make," acknowledged Bat, frowning. "Some discovery."

"He was a man who lived by his wits; it was common report that he'd been expelled from a club, somewhere, for cheating at cards. His first wife had died a long time before through his studied neglect and bad treatment. He had heard of my good salary and increasing prospects, and so had made up his mind to attach himself, after the manner of all parasites, to one who promised to be a source of income."

"Was it then that you left him?" asked the man.

"It was." She bent her head, the white hands covered her face; her bosom, deep and wonderful as that of a young Juno, rose and fell with the sobs that shook her. "I thought I should die at first. To think that I, who had prized myself so, should come to that; made the victim of such a cheap, tawdry trick! Once or twice I

actually thought of killing myself; but I suppose I am too normal for that. At any rate, within another week, I had thrown aside every tie I had, and they were not many," with a little added break in the voice, over which she was struggling for control, "and so I came east."

"But that wasn't the last you saw of Burton, though," said Bat, with a grimace of dislike.

"While I was fighting to make a fresh way for myself, he did not disturb me," said the girl. "But no sooner had I scored than he reappeared; by every device known to his kind he began to bleed me."

"You did not allow that!" cried the man, surprised.

"I did," with a gesture of meek acknowledgment. "He mastered me with his cunning. Not a thing escaped him—every weakness, every shrinking, every faltering I had, seemed known to him; he kept me in an agony of suspense; rather than be hampered and embarrassed by him at every turn I tried to get rid of him by giving him money."

"It would take near all the money in the world to drive away a coyote like that," said Bat.

"I soon found that out," said Nora Cavanaugh. "For from that time on I was haunted by him; he kept demanding of me, and I never had the moral courage to refuse him until last night."

"Last night!" Bat found himself staring at her. "Did you see him last night?"

She looked at him suddenly, and there was a startled sort of look in the wide brown eyes, a fleeting expression of fear; and at the same time her hand went to her breast in a convulsive movement.

"Yes," she said, and her voice had sunk to a whisper. "He came last night after I returned from the theatre. My maid had instructions not to admit him, but he pushed her aside and came directly to my room."

"You're right," said Bat Scanlon, glowering, "he *had* a way with him. It's a pity you hadn't a brother—or some one—all these years to take care of you. His study of women would have done him little good if he had had a man to meet."

"He wanted money," said Nora. "He was wheedling and threatening by turns; he did everything he had ever done before, and more. I don't know what gave me the resolution—perhaps it was the way he forced his presence upon me—but anyhow, I refused him."

"He went away empty handed," said Scanlon, gleefully. "Good!"

"I gave him nothing," said Nora. "And I think he saw in my attitude what the future was to be; for when he left me he wore a look I had never seen upon his face before."

"Well," and the big trainer expelled a great breath, "it won't make much difference now what he thought; he'll never bother you again."

"No," she repeated, "he'll never bother me again—never!" The beautiful voice quavered and grew faint as she said this; and the hand was still held tightly against her breast.

"What do you want me to do, Nora?" said the man. "A fellow who was brought up outside, as I have been, is not much at comforting a woman."

"Bat," said the girl, and the hand left her breast and rested upon his arm, "it has eased my heart just to hear you speak. You were always good to me—always. But to-day you have given me courage—when I

needed it so badly." There was a little pause; she came closer to him, and now both her hands were upon his arm, the two beautiful, capable hands, whose whiteness had always amazed him; the faint perfume which always clung about her was in his nostrils, and the brown eyes, so perfectly spaced, so wonderfully colored, were opened wide and regarding him steadily. "There are two things I want you to do, Bat," she said, "and they are not at all difficult. You are acquainted in the detective department, and I wish you would ask them not to bother me any more. If they do," and here he felt the two white hands flutter and heard her breath drawn in sharply, "I shall break down with fright."

"I'll fix it," the man assured her. "Leave it to me."

"Thank you, Bat; you're the best creature in the world," she said gratefully. "And, too, I want you to go to Stanwick. I would like you to see what the police are doing—everything you can. They must have found out something by this time. Ask questions and keep your eyes open. And when you have it all, come to me at once and let me know."

"Sure," said he, "I'll go right away."

"Thank you." She drew the rich cloak about her and then held out her hand. "You're a dear, good fellow, Bat; I've always known that, but now I'm surer of it than ever."

"Why, Nora, it's not hard to do things for you," said he, as he held the hand for a moment.

"And you'll hurry?" Her eyes were full of pleading. "You'll find out everything you can—but you'll hurry, won't you?"

"As soon as I've looked things over carefully," said he, "you'll hear me at your door."

"Thank you, again," she said. "And good-bye."

And as the door closed behind her, Bat Scanlon stood in the middle of the floor, his arms folded across his big chest.

"Cop stuff," said he, to himself. "What do you think of that?"

When he returned once more to the room in which he had left the others, Scanlon found Dennison buttoning up his top-coat.

"I'll be in to-morrow," said the man; "and my togs will be sent around to-day."

When he had departed, Scanlon looked at Ashton-Kirk.

"I guess you'll have to take your work-out with the big Greek," said he. "Stanwick's my next stop; and I'm going to get the first train."

"Stanwick?" Ashton-Kirk's keen eyes regarded him inquiringly.

"Funny thing, ain't it? Here I didn't know a thing about this murder, and then I get it piled in on me from two places. That was Tom Burton's wife just in to see me—Nora Cavanaugh."

"Oh, yes, to be sure. She is—or was—his wife, wasn't she?"

"She had a fine lot of excitement with her. Dennison ain't the only one who saw Burton last night. He called on Nora after the show, and wanted money, as, it seems, he always did. But she refused him and he

went away sore."

"He was an utter scamp," said Ashton-Kirk. "It's rather remarkable, though, how he managed to keep just outside the reach of the law."

"Nora's been pestered by the cops, and she wants me to have them called off," said Bat. "And she's asked me to go out to Stanwick and see what they are doing there."

"The police?"

"Yes. I don't know just what it's all about; but Nora knows, and that's enough for me."

Ashton-Kirk smiled as the big man went to a closet and took out a long coat and a soft hat.

"Miss Cavanaugh is fortunate in the control of such an obedient geni," said he, quietly. "But good luck on your trip; and while you are gone, I'll grapple with the Greek, as you suggest."



CHAPTER III

THE CLOUD GROWS DARKER

Stanwick was a "made" suburb; ten years before its site had been occupied by farms; but a keen-eyed realty man had seen promise in it and bought it up, shrewdly. The streets were wide, the walks were narrow and lined with trees that would one day spread nobly. The houses were built in rows, each independent of the other, mounted upon little terraces, fronted by guards of iron railing and prim little flower gardens. Bat Scanlon, as he regarded it, nodded knowingly.

"It's the kind of a place where the seven-twenty is the chief topic in the morning, and the five-fifteen in the afternoon," he told himself. "The habits of the rubber plant are common property; and every man in every street thinks his roses have it all over the man's next door."

Duncan Street proved much like the others; and No. 620 had all the characteristics to be expected of it. When Scanlon stopped before it he found a little group of idlers standing on the walk, each member of which stared at him with a curiosity that was active and acute.

"Hello, Kelly!" saluted Bat, as he recognized a portly policeman at the little iron gate.

"How are you, Bat?" responded the policeman, in a surprised tone. "What are you doing away out here?"

"Just thought I'd run out and take a look around," said Scanlon. He had seen to the training of the athletic team of the police department for several years, and was well known to most of the officials and many of the patrolmen. And it just happened that the man on guard at the gate, due to Bat's instructions, had been the winner of the heavyweight wrestling honors in the last inter-city tournament. "Anything new?"

"I haven't heard anything," replied Kelly. "Osborne, from headquarters, went in a few minutes ago with the coroner's assistant. The sergeant and a couple of men have been here all morning."

Bat opened the gate and went slowly up the path. The house was a bright, cheerful-looking place; the little garden was laid out in walks, the trees were carefully trimmed; and though it was still October, everything had been made ready for the winter season.

"Nice little home," commented the big man. "Shows care and thoughtfulness. No place at all for a murder."

In reply to his ring the door was opened by a second policeman. A few words brought the sergeant in charge to the door; and he shook hands with Scanlon and asked him to step in.

"Any interest in this case?" he asked, and his broad, red face displayed a great deal of that very thing. "Is your friend Ashton-Kirk along with you?"

"No," replied Bat, easily, "he's not. But from what I hear, it's the kind of a thing he'd like."

The sergeant shook his head.

"Oh, between you and me it's simple enough," said he. "The newspapers have played it up some, that's all. To my mind, the party that croaked Burton ain't out of reach by a long shot; and if they'd have left it to me I'd had him at City Hall an hour ago."

"That so!" Bat looked surprised. "I thought it was one of those things all bundled up in mystery."

He went slowly down the hall and turned in at the first door to the left, which stood partly open, and from behind which he heard voices. A burly, good-natured looking man with a derby hat in his hand was talking to a dapper, quick-eyed personage whose carefully trimmed beard and immaculately white waistcoat gave him the conventional "professional" look. Near a window was a big chair, among the pillows of which reclined a young girl with a pale, sweet face and that appearance of fragility which comes of long-continued illness; beside her stood an anxious-looking young man whose haggard countenance told of a sleepless night and a harassed mind.

Scanlon at once recognized in the big man the "well-known"—as the newspapers always put it—city detective, Osborne; and so calmly advanced and shook his hand.

"Glad to see you," spoke Osborne, affably. "Meet Dr. Shower, assistant to the coroner," indicating the white waistcoated gentleman.

"These investigations are not exactly the thing I care for," Dr. Shower told Osborne, after acknowledging the presentation, graciously. "As a matter of fact I think they are entirely within the duties of the police. We of our office shouldn't be dragged out to view dead bodies in all sorts of places; it consumes a great deal of time, and, as far as I can see, can do no possible good."

Osborne shrugged his heavy shoulders.

"Well, Doctor," spoke he, "maybe you've got it right. But when old Costigan was coroner he always insisted that a body—especially in a case like this—should not be touched until he had looked at it and asked his questions."

"Costigan was romantic," stated Dr. Shower, as he stroked his beard with a firm hand; "he had imbibed a great deal of theoretical detective nonsense, and tried to act up to it. However," with a lifting of one eyebrow, "here I am, so I might as well get to work." He looked about. "Where is the body?"

"In the room just across the hall," said Osborne.

"Just so." Dr. Shower looked at the young man and the young woman. "And these are—?"

"The son and daughter of the murdered man," answered the detective.

"To be sure." Shower smoothed his waistcoat with the same firm gesture. "Of course." Then to the young man: "Am I right in understanding that your father did not reside here?"

The young man laughed suddenly; the sound was unexpected and full of bitterness, and caused Bat Scanlon to look swiftly toward him.

"Yes, you are quite right in that," said the son. "Quite right! My father did *not* live here."

There was a feeling behind the words that was not to be mistaken; and a slight pucker appeared between the eyes of the assistant coroner which a person well acquainted with him would have told you indicated increasing interest.

"You are reported to have said to the police sergeant," stated Dr. Shower, referring to some memoranda scribbled upon the back of an envelope, "that the relationship between your father and yourself has not been an agreeable one."

"There has been no relationship between my father and myself—none whatsoever—for a number of years."

There was a gleam in the eyes of the speaker and a shaking quality in his voice which showed intense feeling; the thin hand of his sister rested upon his arm for an instant; he looked at her quickly, and then bent over while she whispered something in a tone so low that none of the others could hear a word.

"Very well, Mary," he said. "It's all right. Don't worry."

"What you say being the case," said Dr. Shower, "your father would not be likely to be a frequent visitor."

"We've lived here for five years; he was never here before. Up to last night I had not seen him for at least seven years."

"Humph!" The pucker between the assistant coroner's eyes deepened; he took a firm clutch upon his beard. "Then the visit of last night was quite unusual—unique, I might say."

"He was the last person in the world I expected to see," said the young man. "I did not get home until late. I had a cartoon to do for the sporting page and ideas were not flowing very easily; my usual train is at eleven-ten, but I was held up until the twelve-twenty-two. As I came down the street I saw a light burning in the sitting-room window; but I thought my sister was waiting for me, as she sometimes does. But when I came in and saw my father with her, I was so astonished that for a moment I could not speak."

"Just so. And now," here the hand of the questioner fell to caressing the trimmed beard, tenderly, "tell me this: Your father's visit, so late at night, and after so long an estrangement, must have had some special reason behind it. Would you mind saying what it was?"

For a moment there was silence. Bat Scanlon saw Osborne's eyes narrow as he watched the young man; he saw from the assistant coroner's attitude that this was a most important question. And, more than anything else, he saw in the pale, sweet face of the invalid girl a look of subdued terror; the fragile hands were clasped together as though she were praying. And at length young Burton spoke:

"I don't know that there was any reason for the visit. He gave me none."

Shower turned upon the invalid girl quickly.

"Did he say anything to you?"

"No," replied the girl, in a low tone. "No; he said nothing."

"What did he talk about?" asked Osborne.

"I do not know," said the girl, her voice even fainter than before. "I never understood my father. He—he always frightened me by the way he looked and the way he laughed."

She sank back, exhausted, among the pillows; her brother bent over and spoke soothingly and encouragingly to her. When she had recovered a little he turned once more to the others, and Scanlon saw a bitter anger in his face—a cold, hard fury, such as only comes of a hurt that is deep and long rankled.

"You heard what she said?" he asked. "She never understood him. How could a girl like her understand a man like that! He frightened her by the way he looked and the way he laughed! Do you know what that means? It's a thing born in her—got from her mother—a mother who lived in fear of that man for years."

And then he finally drove her to her grave. He was a monster—a human beast—he had no more remorse than——"

"Frank!" The girl's faint voice checked him. He looked down at her, the same expression in his face as Scanlon had seen there before.

"No, she doesn't know what he talked about," the young man resumed, in a lower tone, and with a quieter manner. "She never saw him in her life but what she almost died through fear of him."

With a gesture the assistant coroner seemed to put aside this phase of the matter.

"Very well," said he. "But tell us, please, what happened after you reached home last night and saw your father, so unexpectedly."

"I was angry," said the young artist "I asked him what he was doing here."

"And then what?"

"He merely jeered at me. I looked at my sister; she seemed very ill, and I understood the cause of it at once, and tried to cross toward her."

"You *tried* to cross the room," said Osborne. "What was to prevent you?"

"My father tried to!" said the young man. "It was a way he had—I remember it from a boy—a love of threatening people—a desire to mock, a kind of joy in persecution. But he had forgotten that I had grown into a man, and I threw him out of my way as soon as he stepped into it."

"Well?" asked the questioner, after a pause.

"I saw that my sister had undergone a severe strain; she has been in bad health for some years. So I took her at once to her room."

"Your father remained in the sitting-room?"

"Yes. At least I suppose so. For when I returned, perhaps a quarter of an hour later, I found him lying upon the floor, just as he is now; the blood from a wound in his head was soaking into a rug and he was quite dead."

"A quarter of an hour elapsed between your leaving the room and your return?"

"Yes."

"During that time you heard no unusual sounds?"

"No."

"What other occupants are there here, beside you two?"

"A maid, who also does the cooking. And there is a nurse who has been attending my sister for some time past."

"Bring them here," said Dr. Shower to the policeman who had been standing at the room door during the greater part of this examination. As the man departed the assistant coroner turned his glance toward the sick girl.

"How long was your father here before your brother arrived?"

"I am not sure," she replied in her low voice. "It may have been an hour—perhaps it was more."

The nurse and the maid had evidently not been far away, for the policeman now led them into the room. The maid was an exceedingly black negro girl, and obviously frightened; the nurse wore her trim uniform well; her face was calm and her eyes were level and serene; apparently long training in the hospitals had not been wasted in her case.

"What's your name?" inquired Dr. Shower, of the maid.

"Rosamond Wyat, suh," replied the girl. And, then, eagerly: "But, deedy, boss, I don't know nothing about this killing! I was back in that yeah kitchen, and——"

"Answer my questions, please," said the assistant coroner, severely. "You were present in the house last night?"

"Yes, suh. I done lef' dat man in. But that's all I know——"

"Had you ever seen him before that?"

"I declah I never did, suh! And I was mighty s'prised when he tole me he was Miss Ma'y's fathah. I never knowed she had a fathah."

"Did you hear nothing later? No loud talking—the noise, or shock of a fall?"

"No, suh."

The inquisitor now turned to the nurse.

"Now, Miss——"

"Wheeler," she said, quietly. "Susan Wheeler."

"Tell us what *you* know of this matter, if you please, Miss Wheeler."

"Miss Burton had been feeling rather better all day yesterday," said the nurse, "and as the evening went on she said I could go to bed, as she meant to wait up for her brother."

"And did you do so?"

"No, sir," replied the nurse. "Miss Burton once or twice before had overestimated her strength, and ever since then I have been careful never to be too far away. Instead of going to bed I came into this room, got a book and began to read."

Osborne coughed behind his hand; the eyes of the assistant coroner snapped with appreciation. But Bat Scanlon gave his attention to young Burton and his sister; the girl had sat up with sudden, unlooked-for strength, and was regarding the quiet young nurse with dilated eyes. The face of the brother had gone gray; he held to the heavy frame of his sister's chair, and the big trainer noted that he swayed slightly.

"And were you in this room when the man, now dead, was shown into the one across the hall?"

"I was," replied the nurse, with the calm impersonal manner of her kind. "I heard the ring and heard what he said to the maid; and, like her, I was surprised to hear that it was Miss Burton's father. However, I paid

little attention, but went on with my reading."

"Did you hear any of the conversation?"

"I heard voices—or to be more correct, I heard a voice. The father did all the talking as far as I could hear; but, as I have said, I was interested in my book."

"You don't recall any scraps of talk—a detached phrase?—anything?"

The nurse shook her head.

"The only clear impression I have is of the man's laugh; there was something irritating about it, and I wished he'd stop."

"When the younger Mr. Burton came home—what then?"

"The voices rose suddenly; but the two doors were closed and I could only catch a word here and there. But I did hear young Mr. Burton call his father a rascal and order him to leave the house. Just about then I thought of the maid and went back to the kitchen to tell her she might go to bed. But she had already gone. There were a few things I had to do in the kitchen and I remained there until I had finished them. Then I came back here."

"Well?"

"They were still talking in the sitting-room—rather loudly, I thought."

"Did you hear any sound like a struggle?"

The maid stood with her rather thin lips pressed tightly together for a moment; then she said, reluctantly:

"Yes."

"Anything more?" Dr. Shower's fingers were now twisted in the trimmed beard, eagerly.

"Miss Burton cried out. Then there was a sudden jar that made everything shake."

"Like some one falling?"

"Yes," replied the nurse, with lowered head.

"Ah!" This was a low, long-drawn exclamation and came from Osborne; and it was followed by a deep silence during which the rapid ticking of a small clock upon a writing table seemed to suddenly swell into an overwhelming volume of sound.

It was the sick girl who spoke first. She threw out her frail, white hands in a gesture of protection toward her brother.

"Frank!" she cried. "Do you hear?"

The young man, ashen of face, and with eyes wide open, had been staring at the nurse. But at the sound of his sister's voice he roused himself, and said hurriedly:

"All right, Mary. All right, my dear!" Then to the assistant coroner he added: "Very likely what Miss Wheeler says is true. There was a struggle, though not much of a one, and perhaps my sister was

frightened and did cry out."

"But what of the sudden jar—'as though some one had fallen'?" asked Osborne.

"It must have been when my father struck the wall as I pushed him aside," said the young man as he passed one hand across his face. "That is the only way I can account for it."

"What more was there, Miss Wheeler?"

"A few moments later, Mr. Burton took his sister up-stairs to her room. I expected to be called, but was not. In a little while Mr. Burton came down once more and I heard him go into the sitting-room. There was a pause after this; then he called my name. I went out at once. He was standing in the hall, with the sitting-room door partly closed, and his hand upon the knob. It was then he told me what had happened—that some one had struck down his father, and that he was afraid he was dead, and that I must call in the police."

"You did not see the body?"

"Yes, sir; as I said, the sitting-room door was partly open. I saw the body, plainly."

The assistant coroner asked a number of other questions, but nothing of value was brought out.

"Very well," said the questioner finally, to the two women. "That will be all for the time being. Thank you." And then, as they left the room, he added to Osborne, "And now, let us have a look in the next room."

The two went out into the hall; promptly, Mr. Scanlon followed. The sitting-room door was exactly opposite, and they entered silently. Through the shutters a dim light was admitted, and fell across the floor; almost in the center of this a huddled form lay in a twisted, sidelong fashion; the head rested upon a rug, one end of which was thick and hard with blood; a white cloth covered the dead man's face.

"Just as he dropped when hit," said the police sergeant, who was in the room. "Nobody has stirred him an inch."

Osborne's practiced eye went about the apartment.

"Is everything else as it was?" he asked.

"Not a thing touched," the sergeant assured him. "I got here an hour after it happened, and I made it a point to see that there was no tramping in and out. The room's been under guard ever since."

Osborne nodded his approval of this, and then turned toward the assistant coroner, who had knelt beside the body and was now lifting the cloth.

"What's it look like?" he asked, bending over.

"A frightful blow," said Dr. Shower. "And it was a strong arm that struck it." Then, with suddenly increased interest, he peered still closer at the terrible wound in the side of the head. "Hello," said he, "this is rather unusual in shape." He looked up at the sergeant who was passing his hand behind a row of books upon a shelf. "What sort of a weapon was used?" he asked.

The police sergeant turned a look at the questioner over his shoulder.

"We haven't been able to find any," said he, "and we've looked everywhere. I've been over this room a dozen times myself, and I'm going over it again. It wasn't done with the kind of a thing a man would carry in his pockets—I'm sure of that."

"Right," said Osborne, who had also closely examined the wound by this time. "The cut's too wide for a blackjack, or what the English call a 'life-preserver'; and it's too deep. It was made with something with a sharp edge—something wide and heavy."

"Are you quite sure of that?" The voice was that of Frank Burton, and looking in the direction of the door, they saw that the young man had entered the room. "Is it not possible that the wound was caused by a regulation weapon of some sort after all; is the shape of the cut an infallible test as to the character of the instrument used?"

There was an anxious eagerness in the voice; the gray pallor of the face, and the feverish eyes were those of a man whose nerves were clamoring, but whose roused mind refused to give them rest.

"Such is the case in the great majority of instances," said Dr. Shower, firmly. "We are seldom led astray."

"There has been no weapon found," persisted young Burton; "and that being the case do you not think it possible——"

But here a sudden exclamation from Osborne, who had gone to one of the windows and stood looking out, interrupted the speaker. In spite of his bigness the detective was in excellent training; with a spring he went through the window which opened upon a walk fringed with autumn-brown bushes; and in another moment he was back in the room.

"Don't be too sure about no weapon being found," said he, triumph in his face and voice. "What would you call this?"

As he spoke he held up a heavy brass candlestick; it had a solid base of metal, and the edge of this was darkly clotted with blood.



CHAPTER IV

ASHTON-KIRK MAKES ONE VISIT, AND PLANS ANOTHER

Ashton-Kirk sat cross-legged upon a sofa, the amber bit of his Coblenz pipe between his teeth, and the wreaths of smoke curling above his head. About him were scattered bound volumes of police papers; and upon his knees rested a huge book, canvas covered and seeming full of carefully spaced entries done in a copper plate hand.

"I knew the 'Boulder' had gone along without much friction with the police," said the investigator; "but I'll admit that I'm a bit surprised at the completeness of the thing."

A dapper young man who stood at a filing case, going over a thick inset of cards, laughed a little.

"I'll venture to say that there is not a police blotter in any large city in the country that holds the name of Tom Burton," said he. "But there are dozens of other names—poor devils, rounded up in some risky operation of which the 'Boulder' was the instigator."

Ashton-Kirk nodded.

"One might call that 'dogging it,'" said he, "or it might be viewed as exceedingly clever work. It altogether depends upon the point of view. To maintain such an attitude in the background over a long period of time calls for a rigorous self-repression. Burton was evidently a criminal of some parts."

"Well, looking at it from that side, I suppose it's so," said the dapper young man. "But I've been accustomed to seeing Burton and his kind as a sort of dregs, and I was just a little surprised when you began to look him up."

Ashton-Kirk smiled and drew a long draft of smoke from the big pipe.

"It is, very likely, time wasted," he said; "for it's a hundred to one that nothing——"

Here there came a long "blurr-r-r" from the lower part of the house, and the investigator stopped short.

"I rather think," added he, "that I'll reduce the odds. For, unless I am much mistaken, that is Bat Scanlon's touch at the door-bell."

A few moments later, Stumph, Ashton-Kirk's man servant, entered the study, gravely.

"Mr. Scanlon, sir," he said.

The big form of Scanlon filled the doorway and then advanced into the room.

"Didn't expect to see you again to-day," said he. "But there's a little matter came up that I thought I'd get your advice on before I went any further."

"Good," said the investigator, briskly. Then to the grave-faced servant: "Stumph, get these books away. And Fuller," to the dapper young man, "I'd like to have transcripts of those Treasury Department papers at once."

"Very well," said Fuller.

When the investigator and his caller were alone, the former offered the other some cigarettes.

"These are Porto Ricos of unusual flavor," he said. "Sent me by a planter for whom I chanced at one time to do a small service."

He put aside the Coblenz, and with Scanlon lighted one of the cigarettes. The full rich aroma of the island herb drifted through the room like a heavy incense; and under its influence the troubled look which Scanlon's face had worn lightened a trifle.

"I guess I'm a little up in the air," admitted he, finally. "It's always that way with me when things begin to break wrong in anything I'm interested in. Just when I need all my nerve and judgment, I get as anxious as an old lady who's been sold the wrong kind of tea."

"You have no monopoly on the condition," smiled Ashton-Kirk. "It comes to all of us, and in just the way you've described." His singular eyes were studying the big man's face, and in their depths was a sort of calm expectancy. "The personal equation has many queer results. But what is the cause of your present upheaval?"

Bat shook the ash from the cigarette into a pewter bowl at his elbow.

"It's this murder," he said. "You know I went to Stanwick to-day to look things over as per request."

"Have you made your report to Mrs. Burton?"

"Now, look!" exclaimed the big man. "Don't call her that! She was Burton's wife for one week, and that's the extent of her use of the name."

"Very well," nodded Ashton-Kirk. "Cavanaugh is a good old name, and is sounded just as easily."

"Yes, I called on her after I got back," said Bat. "But I had only a few minutes to talk to her; it was at the theatre, for she had a rehearsal to-day, you see."

"Was there anything new to tell her?"

Here Bat related to the investigator the details of what he had seen and heard at the Burton home; Ashton-Kirk listened attentively; now and then a pointed question came through the little clouds and rings of smoke with which he had surrounded himself, but, save for this, he made no interruption until Bat had finished.

"Dr. Shower, eh?" said he, after a little pause. "I'm rather well acquainted with his method, and the fact that he's been given charge of the coroner's examination isn't a very hopeful sign. He's a sort of pedant, who has come to think that the mixture of medical learning and knowledge of police conventions which he possesses makes him a paragon of efficiency."

"I noticed that he had a confident kind of a way with him," said Bat.

"Confidence is an excellent thing," spoke Ashton-Kirk. "A man does not go far without it. But the sort kept in stock by Dr. Shower is rather a hindrance. When he has once arrived at a conclusion, he shuts his eyes and stops his ears to everything else. Osborne, now, is different; while he's a plodding kind of a fellow with very little imagination, he's shrewd enough to accept advantages wherever he finds them." The speaker added another cloud to those already hovering about him. "Miss Cavanaugh was satisfied with what you told her, I suppose?"

But Bat shook his head, and a good part of the old troubled look returned.

"She wasn't. As a matter of fact I could see that it worried her. When I left her she was fidgeting; and if Nora does that, something's wrong. But the worst didn't happen until about a half hour ago. I was back at my place, and the 'phone bell rang. When I went to it I found it was Nora calling. And she was all excited once more."

"Ah!" said Ashton-Kirk, expectantly, "excited!"

"She started off by asking me to forgive her, and saying she must be a great bother to me. But something had happened—something that had scared her. As she came home from the theatre she heard the newsboys calling their papers on the street corners. She couldn't quite make out what they were saying, so she had the car stop and her driver get one of the papers. Then she got the facts of the matter. Young Frank Burton has been arrested for his father's murder."

"So!" said Ashton-Kirk. "I expected to hear that had happened. For, from what you've told me, the police have a fair tissue of evidence."

"That's about what I told Nora. But it bowled her over completely. Her voice began to shake and I knew she was crying."

"'But he didn't do it,' she says. 'He didn't do it. He's innocent—I know he is.'"

"I tried to reason with her," proceeded Bat. "But she wouldn't listen. She kept repeating that he was innocent—that he had suffered enough at that man's hands while he was alive, and that he mustn't go on suffering now that the father was dead."

"Well?" asked Ashton-Kirk, as the other paused; "what then?"

"Then," said Scanlon, "she was on my neck to get him out of the thing. I *must* do it! I *must* not let them harm him! And all that kind of thing. She seems to think that I've got a heavy drag with the police, and all there is for me to do is to snap my fingers and they'll sit up and perform. I tried to persuade her that this was a dream; but I couldn't convince her. And the result was that I had to promise to see her right away." Bat looked dolefully at his friend. "I'm on my way there now," he said, "and I thought I'd stop in and ask what I'd better do."

Ashton-Kirk arose and took a turn up and down the room; then throwing away the cigarette end, he paused in front of his friend and asked:

"What would you say if I suggested that I go with you?"

"Fine!" Scanlon jumped up, an expression of relief upon his face. "The very thing! Get your hat. My cab is still at the door. I couldn't have asked for anything better than that."

Within five minutes the two were on the street—a street lined with fine wide houses of a bygone time, but which was now a bedlam of throaty voices, a whirling current of alien people, a miasma of stale smells. The taxi soon whirled them out of this section and into another, equally old, but still clinging to its ancient state. The houses were square fronted and solid looking, built of black-headed brick and trimmed with white stone; there were marble carriage blocks and hitching-posts at the curb.

"I wonder how long before this will begin to go," said the investigator, as they alighted. "There is scarcely an old residential street left unmarred in the big cities of the east."

"That is Nora's house—there with the scaffolding at the side. Take care you don't step in that mortar. These fellows seem to slap their stuff around and don't give a hang."

"I had no idea Miss Cavanaugh lived in this section," said Ashton-Kirk, after Scanlon had rung the bell, and they stood waiting on the steps.

"Why, you see, she's different. Naturally, she's a housekeeper. The big hotel or the glittering apartment house doesn't appeal to her. She gets all that when she's on the road."

A trim maid admitted them and showed them into a room hung with beautiful tapestry and excellently selected paintings. In a few moments there came a light hasty step and Nora stood framed in the doorway. She wore a sort of soft, gauzy robe-like thing which clung to her magnificently strong, yet completely youthful figure, causing her more than ever to resemble a young Juno. The gleaming bronze hair was gathered in a great coil at the back of her head; her wonderfully modeled arms were bare; the right was clasped about with a heavy bracelet of what seemed raw, red gold.

"Bat!" she said, gladly, and then stopped short at sight of a stranger.

"This is Mr. Ashton-Kirk," said Scanlon, presenting his companion. "You've heard me speak of him, I think."

Nora Cavanaugh held out her hand with that frankness which is always so fascinating in a beautiful woman.

"I am very glad to see you," she said. "And I recall very well what I heard of you. It was that queer affair of the Campes, and the strange dangers which haunted the hills about their country place." Her eyes were fixed steadily upon Ashton-Kirk as she spoke; the smile of welcome was still in them; but behind this there was something else—a something which evidently interested Ashton-Kirk intensely.

"I've been telling Kirk of the thing at Stanwick," spoke Scanlon, as they all three sat down at a west window, through which the lowering sun was throwing its crimsoning touch. "He's a little interested and thought he'd like to hear what you had to say."

The smile went completely out of Nora's eyes; the sombre thing at the back of them came at once to the surface; and Ashton-Kirk saw her hand, as she lifted it to her face, tremble.

"The police are fools!" she declared. "Frank Burton is innocent. It is shameful to attribute any crime to him—but to accuse him of the murder of his father"—here a shudder ran through her—"it's horrible!"

"He'll have to carefully explain a number of things, though, before the authorities change their minds," said Scanlon. "Not only have they certain definite facts on him; but they have the notion that he's not told them everything."

"He is innocent," protested Nora.

"Maybe so!" Bat shrugged his shoulders. "But I had a chance to look him over to-day, and while I liked his appearance, I agree with the cops that he was holding back on them."

The girl rose and stood facing them.

"It may be that he is," she said, and there was a break in the rare voice. "But why fix upon this so readily as a sign of guilt? Consider the circumstances. He is the son of a man whose life was a continuous shame;

there very likely was not a day that did not bring some fresh knowledge of wrong-doing to the boy—some mean thing beneath contempt, which made him shrink and quiver. And now there comes another thing—a last and horrible one! It may be," and the beautiful arms lifted in a gesture of despair, "that in this there was additional shame. Can you wonder, then, that he hesitated?"

Bat Scanlon did not reply, contenting himself with merely nodding his head. This side of the thing had not occurred to him; but now that she had pointed it out, it seemed quite reasonable. Ashton-Kirk fixed his singular dark eyes upon the beautiful woman who stood so appealingly before them.

"Scanlon mentioned to me a while ago," spoke the investigator, "that you were interested in doing what you could to help this young man. I make it a point never to judge the merits of a case until I have examined it at close range. However, I will say this: From a distance, this matter begins to show promise; so much, indeed, that I feel I must know more about it."

She looked at him, her hands twining together, nervously; but she did not speak, and he went on:

"What you say about the police is largely true. They *are* superficial, and the arrest of young Burton may not be at all warranted by the facts. As it happens, Miss Cavanaugh," easily, "there are no very pressing matters to engage me just now; and since you are so interested, suppose I look into it, and see if I can gather up any stray threads missed by the police."

Bat Scanlon brought his palms together in great satisfaction; but, to his astonishment, when he looked at Nora he saw hesitancy plainly written in her beautiful face; indeed, there was more than hesitancy; refusal of the offer trembled upon her lips. But this was only for an instant; a sudden rush of excitement seemed to possess her, and she held out her hand to Ashton-Kirk, warmly.

"This is good of you," she said, "and I thank you a thousand times. If you can, in any way, make it clear to Frank Burton's friends—to every one—that he is not guilty, you'll do the best deed of your life; and," here the great brown eyes opened widely, "you will be helping me more than I can say."

"Very well," said the investigator. Going to a window, he stood with his back to them looking at the sky, now blotched red and gold in the waning rays of the sun. He was motionless for a moment or two and then he turned, briskly.

"It's a pity there are not a few hours more of daylight," said he. "For my experience has shown me that most cases, in which there is any doubt, do not stand delay. A few hours sometimes dims what otherwise would be hopeful clues; traces which, had they been taken up in time, might have led directly to the criminal, are rendered cold and useless."

"Couldn't something be done out at Stanwick to-night?" asked Bat, anxiously.

But the criminologist shook his head.

"It would be impossible," said he. "Night always puts any sort of intelligent examination out of the question. But," and he looked at Nora with an alertness of manner which showed how his keen mind was already taking hold, "the time between now and daylight need not be altogether lost."

"What can we do?" she asked, eagerly.

"Sometimes even the smallest scrap of information is of great value," said he. "The movements—the conversation of a suspect—or a victim—immediately before the crime, has more than once provided the

thing necessary to a successful solution."

"Why, yes, that would be true, of course." But the eagerness had gone out of her manner suddenly; her hands seemed to flutter at her breast. "Small, seemingly unimportant things, even in my work, add greatly to a result."

The keen eyes of Ashton-Kirk never left her face.

"About what time was it last night that your husband came here?" he asked.

"It must have been between eleven-thirty and twelve o'clock," she replied, slowly. "I had just got home from the theatre."

"He demanded money, I believe?"

"Yes; that was always the cause of his visits."

"Will you tell me, as nearly as you can remember, what passed?"

"When I came in," said Nora, "I went directly to my own rooms. My maid followed me a few moments later, but just then there was a ring at the bell. The lateness of the hour gave me a feeling of uneasiness—it were as though I subconsciously realized who was at the door. When the maid answered the ring he pushed her aside, and I heard his feet running up the stairs. The impulse arose in me to lock my door; at any other time I think I would have done so; but just then I felt aroused—I was bitterly angry; that he should force himself upon me in such a way made me desire to face him—to tell him what I thought in very plain words."

"This was not your usual state of mind when he visited you?"

"No." She bent her proud head humbly. "When I first learned his true character, I left him in just that spirit; but when I had won my way by hard work, and he began persecuting me, I thought it better to give him the money he asked and avoid his poisonous falsehoods."

"You were afraid of him?"

"Not of him—but of my public—of the world in general. He threatened me with the divorce court. Divorce, with its humiliations, its confessions of failure, its publicity, had always appalled me. The sneer 'another actress being divorced' made me a coward. He knew that; he had found it out, somehow; his great talent was in bringing weaknesses to the surface. He detailed the charges he would bring against me; every one of them was a lie, but they were so ingenious, so plausible, so unutterably slimy that I couldn't bear up against them. It was in that way he broke my spirit."

"There was a hound for you!" said Bat Scanlon. "That is, if I'm not injuring the hound family by the comparison."

"But last night," said Nora Cavanaugh, "I had lost all this fear of him and his threats. I don't know why. It wasn't really because he had forced his way into my room, for he had done that before. It must have been that this was a sort of culmination—the breaking point. At any rate, I refused his demands! I answered his sneers in a way which I saw took him aback; he resumed his old threat of the divorce court, but I defied him. Then, after about half an hour, he went away."

"That was all?"

"Yes."

The girl stood in such a position that the waning daylight fell full upon her beautiful face. Ashton-Kirk said, quietly:

"Thank you." Then as she was about to turn toward Scanlon he added: "Pardon me; you have had a little accident, I notice."

Her hand went to her brow, and her eyes, startled and big, looked at him swiftly.

"I hadn't noticed it," he went on, quietly, "until you pushed your hair back a moment ago. It must have been very painful."

"Oh, yes—yes!" She hurriedly drew down some strands of the heavy bronze hair over an ugly, dark bruise near the temple. "I had forgotten. Yes, it was very painful, indeed, when it happened. You see," and she laughed in a breathless, nervous sort of way, "my maid left the door of a dressing cabinet open in my room at the theatre, and as I bent over I struck against it."

He murmured something sympathetically; and then looked at Scanlon, who obediently arose.

"In the morning," said Ashton-Kirk, "we'll take the first train for Stanwick; and by this time to-morrow evening we may have some news of importance for you."

"I hope so," she answered, "I sincerely hope so."

The maid entered in reply to a ring, and brought their hats and coats.

"It may be that you or your people, here in the house, can be of help to us," said Ashton-Kirk, evenly. "I should like to feel that I can count on that at any time."

"To be sure," Nora turned to the maid. "Anna, Mr. Ashton-Kirk is doing me a great service. Anything he asks must be done."

"Yes, Miss Cavanaugh," said the maid.

Then the two men bid the charming actress good-bye; when they had climbed into the cab and rolled away, the investigator lay back against the hard leather padding and closed his eyes. Scanlon looked at the keen outline of the face with interest. It was an altogether modern countenance, in perfect tune with the time; but, for all that, there was something almost mystic in it. It may have been that the mind which weighed and valued so many things, unnoticed by the crowd, had given something of the same touch to the face as the pondering of the secrets of life is said to give to the oriental anchorites.

But after a little, the investigator sat upright.

"When does Miss Cavanaugh have a *matinée*?" he asked.

"Not until Saturday," replied Scanlon.

A look of annoyance came into the face of Ashton-Kirk.

"Too bad," said he. "Then we shall have to arrange something." He reflected for a moment, snapping his fingers impatiently, as though for an idea. Then his countenance suddenly lighted up. "I have it! Young Burton is in the county prison awaiting action of the Grand Jury. What more natural thing than that she

should visit him there to offer sympathy and encouragement—say between two and five to-morrow afternoon."

"You mean——" and Bat looked at him, only dimly grasping what was behind the words.

"That I depend upon you to suggest this to her," said the other. "It's the sort of thing she'll do, once it's in her mind."

"But," asked the astonished big man, "what's it for?"

"I want to pay another visit to her house," said Ashton-Kirk, coolly, "when she is not there."



CHAPTER V

THE HOUND AND THE SCENT

The next morning at a trifle past nine, Bat Scanlon once more presented himself in Ashton-Kirk's study. He found the investigator attired in a well-fitting suit of rough, gray material; a light stick and a cap lay upon a table, while their owner, his hands deep in his trousers pockets, paced the floor.

"I've been through a half dozen newspapers since breakfast," said he. "The reporters and the city editors have had a great deal to say about what they call the 'Stanwick Mystery'; but they have unearthed nothing that's at all suggestive."

"Not a thing," verified Bat. "At least, nothing that I haven't seen or heard myself—except that the sick girl—Mary Burton—has taken to her bed."

"That's bad," said his friend. "But, you see, the arrest of her brother was sure to have some such effect."

"Well, it's turned a little trick for me, anyway," said Bat. "The girl being suddenly taken down has got to Nora; and she called me this morning to talk about it. She's going down there this afternoon. It was her own idea. And so I won't have to do any 'under cover' stuff with her."

"Good," said the investigator. "It's always much better to have a thing come about naturally, if possible."

A big motor car waited for them at the door; it carried them swiftly out of the city proper into the suburb of Stanwick, and finally drew up in front of 620 Duncan Street.

The same policeman stood at the gate who had guarded it the day before.

"Hello, back again!" he saluted at sight of Scanlon.

"Yes; thought another look would do no harm," returned Bat. "Any one inside?"

"Osborne's there," replied the policeman. "But no one else—outside the family."

"Were you present when young Burton was arrested?" asked Ashton-Kirk.

"A little," grinned the policeman, "seeing as I was the party who brought him out to the wagon."

"Did he have anything to say when accused?"

"Not much. He didn't seem surprised, though. Osborne says to him: 'We'll have to hold you in this case till we get further evidence.' And he says: 'I didn't do it. If I had thought of it, maybe I would. But I didn't do it.'"

The investigator and Bat Scanlon walked up the path; as they reached the door, it was opened for them, and they saw the burly form of Osborne standing in the hall.

"How are you?" greeted the headquarters man, good-humoredly. "Saw you from the window, and felt so honored that I'm letting you in myself." He shook Ashton-Kirk by the hand, warmly enough. "Kind of a surprise to see you down here."

The two men entered and the door closed behind them; then they made their way into the sitting-room,

following Osborne. The body of the murdered man was no longer there; the rug stiffened with blood was gone; the room was now quiet and conventional—a peaceful calm filled it.

Ashton-Kirk's keen glance went about; he talked steadily to Osborne all the while, but Bat Scanlon observed that not a single detail of the apartment escaped him. The headquarters man wore a look of frank curiosity as he, too, watched the investigator, and saw him fixing the position of things in his mind.

"Just where did the body lie when the policeman arrived on the night of the crime?" he asked.

"Right here," and Osborne indicated the spot "The head was here. The wound was made with a candlestick—quite a heavy one; and the blow was meant to stop the victim for good."

"Any further marks on him besides the one on the head?"

"No," said Osborne. "We looked for something of that kind, but there was none."

Ashton-Kirk went to a window overlooking the stretch of green sod at the side of the house.

"I understand you found the candlestick just under this?"

"Yes. The window was a little open; and I guess, after he'd finished the job, the murderer wanted to get rid of the weapon. So he dropped it outside."

"Nothing to be had here," said Ashton-Kirk, after a few moments' study of the sitting-room. "At least not just now."

He threw up the window and stepped out, followed by Scanlon; standing upon the paved walk the investigator looked about. The Burton house, like the others on Duncan Street, sat fairly in the center of a plot of ground perhaps two hundred feet square. Along the division fence between that and the next house was a stretch of smooth sod, with grass, still green. At one place upon this was a sort of rose arbor, the browned, hardy shoots of a perennial twining thickly around it.

"There have been a half dozen policemen walking about here," said Ashton-Kirk, pointing to the soft earth under the window. "And that is fatal to any sort of close work, even had there been anything in the first place."

However, in spite of this, he went over every yard of the space about the house; at the rose arbor he paused.

"Directly in line with the sitting-room window," he said. "No doubt young Burton placed it with that in mind; the invalid sister would love to see the roses in early summer."

He walked behind the structure, and then Bat Scanlon saw him pause suddenly and bend over, rigid with eagerness.

"What is it?" asked the big man.

For answer the criminologist pointed to the ground; sharply indented in the sod were the marks of a small, high heeled shoe; and Scanlon stood staring at them perplexed.

"What do they signify?" asked he. "There are likely to be footprints all over the place—male and female. I'll venture to say that half the residents of the street have been prowling about in this space since the murder was done."

"That is a possibility always to be guarded against," said Ashton-Kirk, quietly. "But there has been a policeman on guard all the time, so, you see, the chances are greatly reduced." He studied the narrow imprints with great care; they were firmly pressed into the damp sod, the high heels making a decided puncture. "The night before last was a bright one," he added, finally, as he straightened up and looked at Scanlon. "At about the time the murder was committed the moon hung about there, full and unobstructed, if you remember. Now, suppose you, for some secret reason, entered the grounds at that time. The whole space on this side was flooded with light; and yet you desired to get a view of what was going on in the sitting-room; at the same time you were most anxious not to be seen. What would you be most likely to do?"

Scanlon looked around and considered.

"About the only thing to do in a case like that," said he, "would be to take cover behind this rose arbor."

"Right!" approved the investigator. "And now, consider: once behind it, the only place from which you could fully overlook the window desired would be here," indicating a certain spot; "the vine has 'made wood' too heavily at all the other points to permit of uninterrupted vision. And right here, you will notice these footprints are the most often repeated; they are also deeper, showing that the woman, whoever she was, stood here for some little time."

Scanlon was impressed; but at the same time there was a dubious look in his eye.

"A woman *did* stand there," he agreed; "and maybe she was looking in at the window. But what do you draw from that?"

Ashton-Kirk smiled.

"Nothing—as yet. We'll just note the fact, old chap, and pass on to the next. Later we'll put the two together, and see if any meaning is to be had from the combination."

He was silent after that, moving here and there over the ground, his head bent and his attention fixed. Scanlon chuckled as he watched him, and marveled at the similarity between the movements of his friend and those of a thoroughbred hound.

"And almost with his nose to the ground," observed Bat. "He's so fixed in what he's doing that the European war could move into the next county, and he'd never know it."

Once more the investigator came to a stop; from beneath the division fence where the grass was rather long, he picked a shining object which at once brought Bat Scanlon to his side.

"A revolver!" exclaimed the big man, amazed.



"EVERY CHAMBER LOADED"

"With every chamber loaded," said the investigator. "It's a Smith and Wesson; it's of a small calibre, commonly called a 'ladies' revolver."

"Funny how it got there, ain't it?" said Bat. "For it couldn't have had anything to do with the killing of the 'Bounder,' seeing that he passed out through being bumped with a candlestick."

"Nevertheless," said Ashton-Kirk, as he slipped the weapon into his pocket, "the thing being here, and at this time, is rather interesting."

He proceeded with his inspection of the ground, striking off toward the front of the house as though following a trail. Bat lost sight of him for a few moments; then, as he, too, reached the front of the house, he saw the other standing, his hands in his pockets, a puzzled look on his face.

"Well," said Scanlon, "what now?"

"Suppose we have a look at the other side of the building," replied the other.

Here the police had also done some going to and fro; the broad foot of Osborne was distinctly marked everywhere.

"And here is the sergeant's," said Ashton-Kirk, pointing. "The policeman's shoe is not to be mistaken, and Sergeant Nailor always wears soles that have been pegged."

Under one of the windows the investigator came to a halt. It was a window smaller than any of the others and much higher in the wall. Beneath it was a cellar opening with an iron grating.

"Look there," said the investigator, as he pointed to this latter.

Bat Scanlon looked, and saw a little ridge of mud upon one of the bars.

"From some one's foot," declared he. "It scraped off on the grating when they climbed up on it, maybe to reach the window."

Ashton-Kirk studied the particles clinging to the bar with much interest, an eager look in his eyes.

"It may be a coincidence," said he, "but I'm inclined to think not."

"What may be a coincidence?" asked Scanlon, as the other carefully scraped the particles from the grating into a compartment of a paper fold. But Ashton-Kirk made no reply except:

"Give me a 'boost' up to that window."

The big man obediently did so; on the ledge were the marks of fingers in the dust which damp had caused to stick there.

"And newly done," said Ashton-Kirk, as he dropped to the ground, a glint in his eye. "Very little dust has attached itself since they were made."

He began searching the surface of the ground under the window; finally he took a strong lens from his pocket and with increased interest resumed the inspection.

"Very likely one of the cops did this," said Scanlon. "Wanted to see if the window was fast."

Ashton-Kirk got up from his stooping position and slipped the lens back into his pocket.

"They would have tried the window from the inside in that case," said he. "It would have been easier to get at." He stood for a moment, reflecting; then he continued: "There seems to be very little more to be hoped for. Let us speak to Osborne before we go."

The big headquarters man was in the room across the hall from the one in which the crime had been committed.

"Well, all through?" he asked, genially, and with the manner of one whose position is assured.

"Yes, I think so," said Ashton-Kirk.

"We covered it all pretty well outside there," nodded Osborne, complacently, "and we got nothing from it. Depend on it, this thing was an inside job. The party that did it belonged right here in the house."

"Too bad," mused Ashton-Kirk, as he looked about the comfortable, homelike room. "Too bad! That will mean that another home is wrecked; and this one seems decidedly worth keeping together—nice etching and rugs and some very good bits of old brass." He took up a candlestick from the end of a shelf. "Here is a real old Colonial candlestick which must weigh at least five pounds."

Osborne looked at the piece, grimly.

"If Tom Burton were alive," said he, "he might be able to tell you something about the weight of such

things. It was with just such another he was killed."

"Oh, indeed!" Ashton-Kirk replaced the candlestick upon the shelf and dusted his fingers with a handkerchief. "Well, we'll be running along, Osborne." They shook hands with the detective. "Sorry we hadn't any better luck."

"So am I," said Osborne, still complacently. "But it breaks that way sometimes. We can't turn up new stuff where it doesn't exist."

"True," said Ashton-Kirk, as he descended from the porch to the paved walk. "That's very true. But thank you just the same. And good-bye."

And so with Scanlon at his side, he set off at a smart pace toward the railroad station.



CHAPTER VI

ASHTON-KIRK ASKS QUESTIONS

Ashton-Kirk dismissed his car in front of a restaurant in the center of the city; he and his friend had luncheon in a quiet corner, then lighted cigars and smoked while they sipped their coffee.

"This is the second little matter I've had to put up to you," said Bat Scanlon. "I hope it won't grow into a habit."

"If it has any of the entertaining qualities of the other case," smiled the investigator, "I shall be greatly beholden to you."

Bat shook his head, and watched a cloud of white, thin smoke vanish in the air.

"That hardly seems likely," said he. "Stanwick ain't the place for mystery that Warwick Furnace was; and on the face of it, anyway, 620 Duncan Street can't touch Castle Schwartzberg for thrills. Beside that, the Campe affair^[1] just sizzled with stuff, while this one, like as not, is finished already."

Ashton-Kirk smiled, and drew slowly at his cigar; this latter had a spicy tang, a flavor which suggested hot suns and heavy dews; the taste was rich, and the effect heady.

"Here is a cigar," said he, "which has all the flavor and shock of a richer looking and more suggestive leaf." He indicated the rather negative wrapper, and went on: "As you see, it hasn't any of that lush darkness which one usually associates with potent tobacco. And all because the wrapper was grown in Pennsylvania; for a casual inspection tells nothing of the tropical growth within."

"All of which is meant to mean——?" and Bat Scanlon looked at his friend inquiringly.

"That one must not be too hasty in judging a thing by its externals. The Campe case was surrounded by a sort of natural melodrama; the gloomy hills, which appear to have impressed Miss Cavanaugh, the huge bulk of Schwartzberg Castle, the unaccountable messages, and unknown agencies all led one to expect something unusual. In this present affair, however, the stage settings are not nearly so sensational; and yet," here the singular eyes of the investigator were fixed upon Scanlon intently, "who knows? Unlooked-for results may not be lacking."

"Why—do you mean to say——?" Scanlon began the question in a voice pitched in the key of sudden surprise; but the other stopped him before he could finish.

"As I said a while ago, at Stanwick," remarked Ashton-Kirk, "it is not yet time to declare anything. Just now we are picking up what facts and suggestions we can; later we'll try fitting them together." He drew out his watch and looked at it. "Two-thirty," he said. "Miss Cavanaugh must have started for Stanwick before this; so suppose we go now for our call."

Scanlon made a wry face as he arose.

"I don't like calling," spoke he, "and I especially don't like this one. When I was deputy marshall out in the Gunnison country I once made a call at the house of a gentleman who had locked himself up with a barrel of ammunition and a half dozen Winchesters, and bid defiance to the law. It was no soft job, but I'd rather do it again, than this."

"I think you are a little thin-skinned in the matter," spoke Ashton-Kirk. "Miss Cavanaugh is extremely anxious to go further into this case, and has asked our help. As I see it we can greatly increase our chances of success by this visit; and we'll also save her the anxiety of seeing us prowling around."

It was about a half hour's walk to Nora Cavanaugh's house; and when they rang the bell the same trim maid opened the door.

"Is Miss Cavanaugh at home?" inquired Ashton-Kirk.

"No, sir," replied the maid. "She went out about a half hour ago."

"I'm sorry," said the investigator, a look of vexation upon his face. "However, I suppose, though, it makes no difference. You recall what Miss Cavanaugh said to you when we were here yesterday."

"Oh, yes, sir; very well."

"Excellent!" said Ashton-Kirk. "And, now, we'd like to ask you a few questions, if you please."

The girl admitted them to a bright old reception room; the investigator laid his hat and stick upon a table.

"It was you who admitted Mr. Burton the last time he was here, was it not?"

"I opened the door for him, yes, sir. And he pushed by me."

"I see. How long had it been since his previous visit?"

"I'm not sure; but some time."

"What sort of a temper was he in?"

"He was always disagreeable, sir; but he was real nasty that night. He pushed me aside as if I was nothing at all."

The black eyes of the maid flashed at the recollection.

"I suppose you attend Miss Cavanaugh at the theatre as well as at home?"

"Oh, yes; she has no other maid."

Ashton-Kirk smiled and shook his finger at the girl.

"Then it was you who left the door of a cabinet open in the dressing-room and so caused that little accident."

"An accident!" The girl looked at him surprisedly. "I don't think I know just what you mean."

"Oh, well, never mind," said the investigator, carelessly. "A little mistake of mine, no doubt."

There was a vague sort of trouble in the face of Bat Scanlon; he smoothed his chin with one big hand, and shifted his weight uneasily from one foot to the other.

"And now," said Ashton-Kirk, to the maid, "when Burton pushed past you that night, where did he go?"

"He went to Miss Cavanaugh's rooms, sir."

"And just *how* did he go? Take us to the rooms just as he went."

The girl led the way into the hall once more.

"When he passed me," she said, "he ran up those stairs," pointing. "At first I didn't know what to do, but I followed him. He went into Miss Cavanaugh's room"—they had reached the second floor by this time, and the girl pointed to a door—"without ever knocking."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, sir; except that about fifteen minutes later he left the house."

"Very well. And now, if we may, we'd like to see the inside of Miss Cavanaugh's rooms."

The trim little maid seemed surprised at this; however, she had her instructions, and so did not hesitate. She opened the door, stood aside for them to enter, and then followed them in. It was Nora's dressing-room, a place of soft colors, of cool aloofness, and as Bat Scanlon breathed the air of it, with its delicate suggestion of scent, he had a feeling that he was venturing too far; he felt that his act was almost profanation. Through an open door at one end he caught a glimpse of a white bed; but it was only a glimpse, for after that he kept his head turned resolutely in another direction.

But not so with Ashton-Kirk; only one idea held his mind; his singular eyes studied the room with the eagerness of an ancient scholar poring over his scrolls.

"Miss Cavanaugh wears some handsome diamonds in the play in which she is now appearing," said he, suddenly, to the maid.

"Oh, yes, sir; beautiful. And real ones, too."

Ashton-Kirk smiled.

"And the more real they are, the more reason why she shouldn't permit them to lie about like that," said he, pointing to a stand, upon which rested a handsome jewel case. "And more especially when I see a scaffolding just outside the window which would make entrance for a thief rather easy."

"It's perfectly all right," she said; "there's no danger, sir." She opened the jewel case, showing it to be empty. "Miss Cavanaugh has put all her jewels in a bank vault."

"That must have been recently," said the investigator, his brows a trifle raised.

"Only yesterday. She made up her mind about it very suddenly."

A look which Bat Scanlon could not interpret shot across Ashton-Kirk's face; a tune was upon his lips as he prowled, hands deep in his trousers pockets, up and down the room, his keen eyes missing nothing. At length he paused and looked at the maid once more.

"I have always admired the manner in which Miss Cavanaugh has her hair arranged," said he. "Do you do that?"

"Usually, sir," said the maid. "But," with a little shadow upon her face, "I don't think *she* cares for my work, sir. She has refused to have me touch her hair for the last few mornings."

"Too bad," said the investigator. "Too bad!"

Once more he began walking about the room. At a window he halted and looked out; the scaffolding erected by the workmen, who had apparently been engaged in "pointing" the wall, ran sheer to the roof. Scanlon went to the investigator's side, and also looked out.

"Quite a job to hang one of these things," said the big man. "As few materials as you can do with, and all the strength you can get."

Ashton-Kirk, without a word of warning, climbed out upon the foot-planks under the window and then to Scanlon's amazement, he dropped upon his knees.

"Evening prayer or something, I suppose," said the big trainer. "But why the hurry? It's some hours till sundown."

The investigator picked at some particles of mortar adhering to the planks with the blade of a knife.

"The idea of cements and mortars always fascinated me," said he; "their cold persistency, their determination to outdo nature, their ability to join things foreign to each other, is admirable. There is quite a literature on the subject, and many men have given a great deal of study to the improvement of these most necessary agents."

Beside the knife blade he also had resort to the pocket lens which Scanlon had seen him use at Stanwick; then after he had slipped a fragment of the hardened mortar into a fold of his pocketbook, he reëntered the room. And as he did so, Bat Scanlon once more saw the look in his face which he had seen a few moments before, and which he had failed to interpret.

"What next?" said the big man, rather helplessly, for the expression was as mystifying now as before.

"That will be all, I think," said the investigator, cheerfully. "Thank you," to the maid, as she led the way down the stairs. And as she opened the street door for them, he added: "Please say to Miss Cavanaugh that we are extremely obliged to her; and that our call has been far from wasted, even though we were unfortunate enough to come when she was out."



CHAPTER VII

SOME NEW DEVELOPMENTS

Ashton-Kirk filled a finely colored meerschaum from the jar of Greek tobacco on the table; the pipe was a large one; upon the stem was a charging boar, exceptionally well done; and the curving bit was hard, gray bone.

"That combination always struck me as an exciting smoke," observed Bat Scanlon, from the opposite side of the table. "The tobacco, like most things from the Balkans, is a little unsettled; and the wild porker means battle with every bristle."

"It was no ordinary carver who gave this old chap his warlike look," said Ashton-Kirk, as he tapped the boar's bristling back with one finger. "No less a person than Pasquale Guiccioli is responsible for him."

"That so?" said Scanlon. "It seems like small work for a sculptor of his displacement."

"It was merely curiosity. He wanted to test this sort of clay as a medium, I suppose. And with a man like Guiccioli, even a whim must result in something like a masterpiece. It was just about the time of that turmoil about the Florentine bronzes; and a bad light was thrown on the old man by persons interested in spoiling his career. I had the good fortune to come at the truth of the matter; and the sculptor, in an outburst of Italian fervor, declared that I might name any of his possessions as a reward."

"And you picked the pipe, eh?" Scanlon drew at his cigar, and nodded approval. But his eyes went from the meerschaum to a sheet of white letter paper upon the table which contained some fragments of hardened mortar gathered in two little heaps. "If you are ready," added he, "I'd like to hear why you are so interested in this stuff, and what it has to do with the Stanwick murder."

The investigator paced up and down the room; the smoke from the pipe lifted about him in small eddies as he moved.

"Two places may be associated mentally," said Ashton-Kirk, "and yet, physically, they may be as far apart as the poles. At the beginning of this affair, Nora Cavanaugh's house and 620 Duncan Street were brought together in my mind only because the murdered man had visited both on the night of his death. But," and Ashton-Kirk laughed, "mortar is a most adhesive substance; and it is holding them together quite firmly."

"I don't get you," affirmed Bat, a line of doubt across his forehead. "Make it a little plainer, will you?"

"At Stanwick you did not follow me over the ground very closely, except a few times when I specially claimed your attention. Just before I found the revolver under the fence, I saw a second footprint in the sod—a cautious footprint—or perhaps 'toeprint' would be better. It was that of a man, and he had gone tiptoeing lightly around with long steps and in a most erratic manner."

"Why didn't you mention it?" asked Bat Scanlon, somewhat hurt.

"The prints were few; they were also light and dim; and I was not at all sure that they meant anything. However, at the other side of the house I saw them again, but after a few yards I lost them."

"Huh!" said Bat Scanlon.

"But just in the neighborhood of the spot in which they disappeared," continued the investigator, "I noted

something else. My lens showed me the impress in the sod of something like a woven fabric. My first thought was that some one had been walking about in his stockings. But a closer inspection told me that the outline was much too rigid for that. And then I realized what had happened. The man who had been tiptoeing so quietly about had stopped at that point and drawn a pair of woolen 'creepers' over his shoes."

"No!" Bat started up in sudden excitement. "That's a good point. It shows that this fellow, whatever else he was, was no amateur. The creeper thing is a regular burglar stunt."

Ashton-Kirk nodded.

"I think you are right," said he. "At any rate it was this gentleman who tried to lift himself up to the window, and in so doing left that interesting little ridge of earth on the cellar grating."

"Yes, of course," said Scanlon. "That *would* be him, sure."

"To the unaided eye," proceeded Ashton-Kirk, "the scrapings seemed but fragments of soil; but the lens showed me something more. Mixed with the earth were some whitish particles—these," and he indicated one of the little heaps of crumbled lime. "Association," and the investigator looked at his friend steadily, "is one of the commonest faculties of the mind. And as soon as I realized what the particles were, an idea took shape."

"An idea," said Bat, with a feeling of uneasiness growing upon him. "What sort of an idea?"

"True coincidence," said Ashton-Kirk, "is so infrequent an occurrence that I seldom consider it. The presence of the lime upon the cellar grating had no value, of course; but, as you know, a poker player will sometimes retain cards in his hand which are worth nothing in themselves, on the chance that he may draw certain others. And, once these *are* drawn, the heretofore valueless cards become of superlative importance."

There was a pause; Bat Scanlon knew the weight of this illustration, and sat in nervous expectation of what was to follow. "I had this idea in mind when I stepped on the scaffolding outside Miss Cavanaugh's window," proceeded Ashton-Kirk. "The maid said the workmen had not been on the job for some days, and so my search was not difficult. There were a great many footprints, unquestionably of the mechanics; but on top of these, plain and undisturbed, were the impressions of the 'creepers' which I had seen in the sod at 620 Duncan Street."

"You are sure?" said Bat Scanlon, in a flat, throaty voice. "There's no mistake?"

"Not any," replied the investigator, quietly.

Scanlon dropped the end of his cigar into a pewter bowl upon the table; then he lighted another and lay back in his chair, his brows drawn together in a heavy frown.

"All right," said he. "We'll let it go at that. There was a yegg of some kind scouting around Nora's house; and the same lad also took some observations of the place at Stanwick. We have that all settled. And now what does it mean?"

Ashton-Kirk smiled.

"I don't know," said he. "But suppose we try to find out." He took the telephone receiver from the hook and asked for police headquarters. In a few moments he had the person required.

"Hello, Devlin," said he; "this is Ashton-Kirk."

"Oh, how are you?" came the big voice of Captain Devlin, of the detective staff. "Osborne was just talking about you. Said you'd got kind of a rap across the knuckles on that Stanwick job."

"We must all expect setbacks now and then," replied the investigator, smoothly. "I get mine with more or less regularity."

The captain of detectives laughed loudly; his mirth came over the wire in booming flares of pleasure.

"That's so," said he, "we all get it." There was an instant's pause, then he added: "Anything I can do for you?"

"I wanted to ask about any cracksmen who might be in town at this time," said the investigator.

"There's a few," replied Devlin. "What's the name of the party you want?"

"I have no name. But I can give you some details of description. He's cautious in his habits—goes about his work carefully. He's small and has large feet."

"That won't fit any one I know," said the other. "There is no regular burglar hereabouts just now who is what you'd call small. But the other two counts—being cautious and having big feet—would fit Big Slim."

"Ah!" Scanlon saw Ashton-Kirk's eyes snap. "Big Slim! I take it that he is a tall man, lightly built."

"That's right," answered Devlin. "A regular slat."

"Have you any idea where he could be found?"

"He's often seen at Duke Sheehan's, on Claridge Street. That's a kind of hang-up for him." Then, with a note of interest in his voice, the captain of detectives added: "Got anything on him?"

"I don't know," replied Ashton-Kirk. "I'll be able to tell better in a day or two."

After a few general remarks he hung up the receiver, turned toward Scanlon and told him of what Devlin had said.

But Bat continued to look puzzled.

"You asked for a cautious crook who was small and had big feet. Where did you get all that?"

"The fact that he wore 'creepers' showed that he wasn't a man to take unnecessary chances. The impressions on the sod at Stanwick were quite faint; that indicated a light man, and so I thought of him as being small. However, a tall man of frail build would make about the same sort of a footprint; and in his case the large size of the feet is more easily accounted for."

"I get you," said Bat. He arose to his feet, the fresh cigar held between his teeth, and walked up and down the room. Ashton-Kirk leaned against a corner of the table, and watched him with observant eyes. And, finally, as the big man continued to tramp up and down in silence, the investigator said, quietly:

"There are some things in this whole matter which make you uneasy. I've seen that from the first. You've even feared to uncover little things which might be truths because you did not know just where they would lead."

Scanlon paused and regarded his friend with troubled eyes.

"You are right," said he. "From the very first I've been as nervous as a roomful of old maids with dinner ten minutes late. It had a queer look, somehow; and as I've seen more of it, the queerness don't get any less."

"Just at this point," spoke the investigator, "we reach a sort of crisis. Certain things must be faced. What you have been fearing and what I have been realizing with increasing clearness with every step we took must now be considered openly and freely."

Bat cleared his throat, huskily.

"You mean Nora Cavanaugh," he said.

"I mean Nora Cavanaugh," replied the other, evenly.

Scanlon resumed his pacing.

"I can't deny it," said he. "She's keeping something back. I saw that—or rather, I felt it—from the start. I don't understand why she's doing it, and I can't imagine what it is. But she ain't told all she knows; and she don't mean to tell it." At Ashton-Kirk's side the man paused and laid a hand upon his arm. "And now that we're on this subject," said he, "and talking plain, what did you get from the marks on her temple?"

"She said it was an accident, due to her maid's carelessness. The maid, when questioned, showed clearly that she knew nothing of it. That convinced me that Miss Cavanaugh desired to hide the cause of the bruise. Her refusal to permit the girl to touch her hair on the morning after the murder makes it plain that she had some reason for desiring the mark to remain unseen."

"I'm on that she didn't get the mark as she said," said Scanlon. "But how *did* she get it?"

"That is another thing which it is impossible to make sure of at this time," replied Ashton-Kirk. "But, merely as a suggestion, mind you, I recall that the 'Boulder' visited her on the night it happened."

"He struck her, you mean!" Bat's hands clenched and his great shoulders heaved. "The infernal cur! that would be just like him!"

"Another suggestion which I'd like to make," spoke Ashton-Kirk, "is one which may or may not be significant. The maid said Miss Cavanaugh put her jewels in a bank vault the morning after his visit."

Bat Scanlon stiffened up; an exclamation upon his lips; one fist smacked into an open palm as he cried:

"You've hit it! She just came in from the theatre, and she was wearing the diamonds. When she refused him money he grabbed them; she resisted and he struck her!"

"You may be correct," said the investigator. He was keen, calm, impersonal; it was as though the entire matter were a game, the intricate possibilities of which were just being uncovered. But Scanlon was much excited; the more the thing grew and took shape in his mind, the more agitated he became. "And if you are right," proceeded Ashton-Kirk, "we can perhaps guess as to what followed."

Something like a shudder ran through Scanlon's big frame.

"I know what you mean," he said. "That thing has been lying like a shadow across my mind from the beginning. Nora Cavanaugh is a woman of spirit; the man who struck her would risk——"

But the other interrupted him.

"We'll not think of shadows," said he, quietly. "They will land us nowhere. What we are going to do is light the lamps along the road this thing leads us; in that way only can we get a good look at the facts."

"Facts!" Bat put one strong hand on Ashton-Kirk's shoulder. "As I feel now, facts are about the last things I want to deal with. Suppose the police found this out—that the rascal of a husband had visited Nora to get money from her, that he had struck her and taken her jewels, and that she had——"

But Ashton-Kirk slapped him upon the back.

"Don't wear out your nerves conjuring up things which maybe never have, or never will, happen," said he. "You'll have use for them, and at once. For there is some snappy work to be done, and I want your help."

"Right," responded Scanlon, with an instinctive grasping at his old habit of manner and thought. "What can I do?"

"I'll be engaged in another phase of the thing for a couple of days, and in the meantime I'd like to have you go to Duke Sheehan's place and look out for the gentleman Devlin calls Big Slim. If possible, get acquainted with him, and find out anything of value he may have."

"Good enough," said Bat. "An acquaintance with that guy is one of the things I'd framed up for the near future. I'm interested in why he was promenading around on the scaffold at Nora's window, and why he shifted his attention to Stanwick in such a hurry." Bat looked at his hat which lay upon the table, and then to Ashton-Kirk once more. "Any particular time you'd like me to take up this job?" inquired he.

"The sooner the better," was the prompt reply.

"That means now," said the big man, as he took up the hat. "First I'll go back to my shop and dress for the occasion, then I'll drift into Sheehan's just as natural as you please and see what's to be seen."



CHAPTER VIII

SCANLON MAKES A NEW ACQUAINTANCE

"Duke" Sheehan's place was on Claridge Street, near to a prominent avenue. It glittered hideously with gold-leafed signs; canopies of flagrantly stained glass hung over each door and window. At the entrance the thick breath of the place met one like a wall—it smelled heavily of dregs, both of drink and humanity. The walls shone with mirrors; the brilliant lights were reflected on the polished bar. The floor was closely set with colored tile; and upon this the Duke's patrons spat freely, and spilled the foam from their beer.

Bat Scanlon, in a rough but well-fitting suit of clothes, and a cloth cap pulled down over his head, lounged at the bar and took in the place and its possibilities.

"It's the kind of a dump much sought after by the youth from the rural sections when he wants to see life," commented the big man, mentally. "There is one thing to be said for this choice, and that is: he won't have to go far to be trimmed; there's a helping hand on every side."

A hollow-chested man who stood, with whistling breath, next to Scanlon, now said:

"What'll you have, bo? I'm doing this."

Bat looked apologetic.

"Excuse me," he said. "I'm on the wagon and holding tight. Booze ain't good for a game like I'm playing."

The hollow-chested man laughed, wanly.

"I don't know your game," said he, "but maybe you're right at that. It beats the dickens how things break, for if it wasn't for the souse, I'd 'a' croaked long ago." He nodded to the barkeeper, who supplied him with a dirty looking bottle and a wet glass. "Have a cigar?" he asked Bat.

"Sure," responded Bat, agreeably. "There's no rule against that."

He lighted the cigar, which burned badly and threw out a yellowish smoke. The hollow-chested man saw the disfavor in Bat's look, and grinned.

"Burns like a salad, don't it? I never smoke myself. I've got a cough, and the doc's against it."

As though to prove his statement he coughed persistently for a full minute; then with a breath whistling thinly in his throat, he poured the strong liquor through it.

"Yes, sir," gasped he, holding to the bar with weak hands, "if it wasn't for the old stuff I'd passed in my last check before now. It keeps me going. Great goods!" Then with a look of commiseration at Bat, he added: "But maybe it's just as well you're off it."

"Me and it don't hook up right," Bat confided to him. "It gets my hand out. I can't stand it the way fellows like you do."

The hollow-chested man surveyed the speaker's big form and a look of gratification came into his face.

"I guess that's so," said he. "I'm kind of under weight, but I'm a pretty tough guy, for all. If it wasn't for the

cough, I'd be holding my own. And, say, on the square, I think the old juice is putting the cough away. I do, for a fact. And if it does, and I can get some sleep at night, maybe I'll come through, anyway."

"Sure," said Bat, sociably. "Sure thing."

The eyes of the big athlete searched the place as they had done a dozen times since he entered. But there was no one present who answered to the description he'd had of the burglar, Big Slim.

"The doc ain't strong for the stuff," proceeded the hollow-chested man. "He's been knocking to get me to shut it off. But he don't understand my constitution like I do."

Here there was a sudden hubbub of voices at the other end of the bar; through the confusion a voice declared, excitedly:

"I'm gonna' beat him up! That goes, do you hear? I'm gonna' flatten the big stiff. He made a monkey outa me, and he ain't gonna' get away with it."

A half dozen voices protested against this at one time. "Duke" Sheehan, in his shirt sleeves and diamonds, leaned over the bar.

"Don't be a nut now," remonstrated he. "A guy in your line, Push, wants to do all his fighting in the ring. If he don't he'll get a bad name."

All the voices began to sound once more, and Bat Scanlon glanced at the man at his side.

"It looks like trouble of some kind," said he.

The hollow-chested man, who had ordered another drink out of the dirty little bottle, nodded.

"That big fellow that 'Duke' Sheehan's talking to is Push Allen, the fighter. He comes all the way from K. C. thinking he was matched with a guy; but when he gets here he finds his manager ain't put up the dough to make the thing good. And so he's stung."

"That's bad behavior," said Scanlon. "Very bad. Mr. Allen will pick his managers better next time."

"This guy ain't no regular manager," said the hollow-chested man. "He's a fellow that's knocking around, doing job work." Here the speaker laughed his wan laugh. "They call him Big Slim."

"Oh," said Scanlon, "I see."

Without further ado he dropped the evil smelling cigar, and moved toward the place where an excited knot of men were gathered, gesticulating and expostulating, about the aggrieved pugilist. The latter was a burly fellow with wide shoulders, a small round head and a protruding jaw; his eyes were inflamed with drink and he was glowering savagely at those about him.

"Fourth rate," was Bat Scanlon's mental appraisal of the fellow. "An ugly fighter and, I'll gamble, a foul one."

"I was working along nice in the west," spoke Allen. "Doing fine. And then this boob gets me to come here—on a sure thing, he says. Do you take me for some kind of a dope?" he demanded, angrily, of those about him. "Do you want me to stand for a thing like that?"

Again the hubbub arose; and while it was going on Bat felt a touch on his arm. He looked around and

found the hollow-chested man beside him.

"Gee!" said this gentleman, excitedly, "ain't it fierce? There's Big Slim now."

Bat looked toward the place indicated and saw a very tall and very frail-looking man, with shifty, deep-set eyes and a furtive manner. His arms were almost monstrously long, and the hands at the end of them were big and bony; his narrow shoulders were stooped.

A barkeeper beckoned to him almost frantically; Scanlon saw the burglar loom angularly toward the bar, and heard him ask in a thin voice:

"What's the trouble?"

"Allen's back there," said the barkeeper, with a jerk of the thumb toward the crowd surrounding the pugilist. "He's going to lay you out."

Bat saw the deep-set, light-colored eyes shift toward the group like those of a leopard; and the glint in them was equally evil.

"Lay me out?" said the thin voice, coldly. "I guess not."

Big Slim leaned against the bar and pulled the fingers of one big bony hand until the joints cracked; evidently the barkeeper did not like this as a sign, for he at once waved the proprietor to the spot.

"Suppose you take a walk, Slim," requested Sheehan. The "Duke's" checked waistcoat came well down over his swollen stomach, his moustache was of the walrus type, and he always seemed acutely aware of the splendor of his rings and pins. "Allen's letting off steam, and I don't want him to see you."

"I'm not going to dodge Allen," stated the burglar. "I told him how the thing happened; and he ain't got no cause for excitement."

Duke Sheehan put his thumbs in the armholes of the elaborate waistcoat.

"All right," said he, nonchalantly. "Just as you like. But I don't want to see you going around with your hoops loosened, that's all."

As Bat Scanlon listened, the wording of Ashton-Kirk's request passed through his mind.

"Go to 'Duke' Sheehan's place," the investigator had said, "and look out for the gentleman called Big Slim. If possible, get acquainted with him, and find out anything of value he might have."

"If I had been making chances," thought Bat, "I couldn't have made a better one than this. If the slim one is get-at-able at all, now is the time."

So he moved along the bar until he was at the burglar's side.

"Friend," said he, "I like to see a guy with insides. The man who says 'I stick right here no matter what the other fellow's got,' is the kind I warm to."

The shifty, deep-set eyes glinted wickedly.

"I'll separate his ribs for him!" said he. "If he bothers with——"

"Now, here, none of that!" cried the saloon-keeper, startled out of his easy humor. "No knife or gun stuff,

Slim, do you hear?"

But it is doubtful if Big Slim did hear; for just then the infuriated fighting man caught sight of him, swept aside the throng and advanced.

"So here you are, eh?" Allen's little head was thrust forward and his jaw protruded wickedly. "Well, what have you got to say for yourself before I knock your block off?"

The intimates of the pugilist had been prolific of words while hostilities were still in the distance; but they knew the ugly nature of the man and now held their peace. But Bat Scanlon, his mind firmly furnished with a plan of action, slowly moved into the space between Allen and the object of his anger.

"Speaking of knocking heads off," said he, "let me put you up in something that always goes with that little performance." He laid a hand on the broad chest of the pugilist. "Always pick your man," said he, "and for your own sake never let him carry less beef than yourself."

"Get out of the road," growled Push Allen, viciously.

"This fellow," and Bat nodded calmly toward Big Slim, "is a good forty pounds less than you. Now, I happen to be a friend of his, and——"

But before he could speak another word, the pugilist aimed a furious blow at him. Bat stooped under it easily.

"——and," continued he, "I won't see you, or anybody else——"

Again came a terrific drive from Allen; but Bat put it aside deftly, and as he stepped forward, his power of body forced the other back.

"——put anything over on him," finished Scanlon.

"You won't, eh?" Push Allen glared like a tiger. "Well, let's see if you can stop me from putting over something on you."

Like a mad beast he rushed at the big athlete, his arms swinging in smashing blows. But not one of them landed; with an agility that made the spectators open their eyes, Bat side-stepped, and ducked, a confident smile upon his lips; then with incredible ease he stepped in and landed a clean, snappy hook which tumbled the pugilist over in a surprised heap.

A smothered shout went up; Duke Sheehan came from behind his bar as several men lifted the rather dazed fighting man to his feet.

"Now, look," spoke Sheehan, "this goes! Any saloon I keep is never intended for a battle-ground. So draw the curtain on that stuff of yours, Allen. It'll get me into trouble."

The pugilist made not very strenuous efforts to put aside those who had gathered about him.

"Where is that guy?" demanded he. "Where is he? I'll fix him for that!"

The insincerity of the voice caught Sheehan's attention; he smiled satirically and winked at Big Slim.

"Get him out of here," ordered the saloon-keeper, briefly. "I don't want the cops here. Get him out and pile him up somewhere till he's sober."

Allen made no very violent protests at being taken out, and after he'd gone he resumed his place behind the bar. Looking with much interest at Scanlon, he said:

"What are you going to have, big fellow?"

Bat waved a hand.

"Not any, thanks. But if you'll pass over a cigarette I'll see what I can do with that."

A box of cigarettes was thrown before him on the polished bar, and as he lighted one of them, Sheehan leaned toward him.

"That was nice work," spoke he. "Pretty clean. Ever done much of it?"

"It used to be my meal-ticket," said the big athlete. "Long time ago, though."

Big Slim extended one of his bony hands.

"I'm much obliged," said he. "That was a good turn you done me."

"That's all right," said Bat, offhandedly. "You ain't got the weight to mix it with him, and I saw you was going to pull a gun or something. No use to let yourself get in bad, you know."

Sheehan lingered a little, talking to the two, but when he finally went away to attend to a party of "spenders" who had just come in, Big Slim said:

"Been in this burg long?"

"Not very. Ain't doing very well, either. They told me money here was as loose as dust, but I don't see any of it flying around me."

The burglar cracked his long, bony fingers.

"It's something fierce when it begins to break bad, ain't it?" philosophized he. "I thought I had a good thing when I got that big cheese, Allen, to come on here; a nice, easy match with a fellow who couldn't fight enough to keep himself warm, and with a ton of money behind him."

"Tough luck," sympathized Bat.

"Sometimes," went on Big Slim, "the kale is easy to get; I've seen it come in clouds for weeks at a time. And it never looked easier than it did when I made the arrangements for Allen. I hadn't above two bits to my name, but I knew where I could shake down five thousand just by moving my hand."

"Nice and soft," admired Bat. "How'd it work?"

"It didn't," stated the burglar. "Missed fire from the jump. I never seen anything like it. The stuff was as good as in my hand, and then—pop!—it all went overboard."

"Gosh, that gets your nerve, don't it!" said Bat, exasperated. "I've had little things turn over for me like that."

"If you want to make sure of a thing," said Big Slim, "never get into a game that a woman's in. You never can tell what they'll do." Once more he cracked his finger joints with remarkable distinctness. "It was an easy five thousand—in sparks that would have peddled at sight."

"Sparks!" said Bat, softly. "Hah! Now you're talking. Nothing better!"

"I had them framed for a month," said the burglar. "Some of them was as big as that," indicating the nail of a little finger. "I lost out on the deal, bo; but that's not all," with a wink and a shake of the head; "more's to follow; and this time I'll get mine. You can bet when I start out——"

But here he stopped suddenly, and Bat saw the green eyes shift in their sidelong look, and felt himself being examined suspiciously.

"He's just remembered that he don't know who I am," was Scanlon's mental comment. "And the caution that Kirk spoke of comes to the top in a hurry."

However, Bat made no sign that he noticed the change in the other's manner; he even yawned a little as he said:

"Too bad! But we've got to expect it now and then."

"What's your monicker?" asked Big Slim, "and where are you stopping?"

"Name's Scanlon," said Bat, truthfully. "And that just reminds me that I've got to hunt up a home for the night, before it's too late."

"Flying light?" asked the burglar.

"A little that way."

"I know a place where they don't tax you too much," said the man. "I'm stopping there myself."

"Fine!" said Bat. "When you have the mind, lead me to it."

"All right," said Big Slim. "I don't think the 'Duke's' wild for me sticking around just now, seeing that Allen might come back; so I'd better blow. If you're ready, I am."

"Right behind you," said Bat, cheerfully. And then, without more ado, the two passed out into the night.



CHAPTER IX

A PLACE OF FEAR

Big Slim lived at Bohlmer's. This was a little hotel in a huddled section of the city, and had the Swiss coat of arms on a sign at the door.

"I always pick out little islands where I'll be quiet, and where no one comes poking around," said the lank burglar. "The swift places are the kind to pass up."

There was a little sanded office, with prints of the Rhine Castles, of the Alps, of mountain folk with their goats. Old Bohlmer with his bald head and big spectacles sat behind a high desk peering at a much thumbed scrap of music, and blowing the notes upon a flute.

"Friend of mine," announced Big Slim, indicating Scanlon. "Wants a room."

"So!" Bohlmer put down the flute and looked at the big athlete over the rims of his spectacles. "Yah, I suppose I haf one yet." He arose and opened a small register. "Your name you will put inside here," he directed.

Scanlon did as requested; then the proprietor toiled, in a short-breathed fashion, up the stairs before them, unlocked a door and stood aside for Scanlon to enter. The room was small and slimly furnished; but it was clean and had two windows peering upon what looked, in the dimness, like a courtyard.

"If you do not der stable mind," suggested Bohlmer, "der ventilation is goot, by der windows."

"Nice," said Bat "This will do me—great."

When the proprietor had gone, Big Slim shuffled about the room, his hands in his pockets.

"The Dutchman's real," said he, to Bat. "I've known him for some time, and he's in on more than anybody would think."

The athlete threw some cigarettes upon the table and drew up two chairs.

"Sit down," said he, with a ready air of ownership. "Let's get better acquainted."

"Not now," replied Big Slim. "Some other time, maybe, I'll open a can of experience with you; but to-night," and he leered knowingly, "I've got a little business."

"All right," said Bat. "I'll see you to-morrow, then."

"Sure," said the lank burglar. "I don't want to lose sight of you, pal, for I owe you one."

"Oh, that's all right," said Scanlon, as he shook hands with the other at the room door. "It was only a little try-out for a freight car like me."

Scanlon stood in the doorway and watched the angular, stoop-shouldered figure go down the hall; there was something so slinking, so furtively deadly in the burglar's motions that Bat felt a prickly sensation run up and down his spine.

"That's the kind of a fellow that would snuff out your light and never lose an hour's sleep over it," said the

big athlete to himself. "A wolf! A prowling wolf! But, just as Kirk thought, he's got something inside that lean head of his that I ought to know about, and I mean to know it."

Big Slim turned a sharp angle and disappeared from view; but Scanlon stood looking down the hall, and thinking. The corridor was low ceilinged and narrow; the lights were dim and the doors ran in an unbroken line on either side, each with a black number upon it.

"Nice," pronounced Bat, "every thing clean and orderly. The old Swiss is there with the soap and dust brush. I'll hand it to him for that. But——"

He paused and a wrinkle appeared between his eyes. Yes, the place was much better than he had expected—that is, as far as he could see. But sometimes there were things not to be seen; if you were aware of them at all, you *felt* them. And as Bat Scanlon stood looking down the dim hall with its two rows of expressionless doors, he was aware of a peculiar something from which his mind drew back. Rising from an invisible source, much as a miasma arises from a marsh, there came a subtle quality—an impression of evil; it seemed to creep by and around him; silently, insidiously, poisonously.

The big man stepped into his room and quietly closed the door. Then, grimly, he slipped a huge Colt's revolver from a holster hooked under the left armhole of his vest; with a snap he threw it open, and the ejector threw the black, oily, murderous looking cartridges upon the table with a rattle. Bat inspected and tested the working parts of the weapon; satisfied that all was right, he replaced the cartridges with practiced fingers.

"I only had that feeling once before in my life," said he, "and that was the night in Dacy's place at Holdover when the four 'breeds' were waiting for me in the dark room." He put the Colt back in its holster, and stood ruminating. "What was it the burglar fellow said about the skipper of this outfit? 'He's in on more than anybody would think.' Well, I'd better watch myself," and Bat smiled, though his eyes narrowed at the same time; "for when a bald-headed old simp with a flute is on the cross, he's sure to be the limit. The surprise kind of crook always is."

He walked the floor for a few moments, then he shot the bolt on the door and stretched himself across the low iron cot, with the light turned off. Bat Scanlon's mind was not a particularly imaginative one; but at the same time it possessed one of the attributes of the imaginative type: and that was the mental antennæ which felt things while they were still in the distance. As he lay there upon the hard bed in the closet-like room, he kept sensing something, but could get no clear idea of its shape.

"That's where Kirk pins on the medal," spoke Bat. "These things never come to him done up in fogs; they are always pretty clear pictures and have a definite meaning."

However, vague as the premonition was, Bat was confident of one thing; that was: whatever shape the thing took, it would have something to do with the affair at Stanwick.

"Maybe I believe it because I've got a mind full of the Stanwick thing," Scanlon told himself; "a fellow does fool himself that way sometimes. But this time ain't one of them. Before I get out of this phony hotel I'm going to get another little jolt."

Another jolt! Bat whistled between his teeth in dismay. Were there not jolts enough in the thing already? One by one, as he lay there, he marshaled his impressions in his mind, in the order in which they had occurred. When Nora first called him on the telephone there had unquestionably been a note of fear in her voice. In her dread of the police, as afterward shown, he fancied he recalled something more than the

shrinking of a sensitive nature. And her eagerness to know what was going forward at Stanwick was—well, it was curious.

And to Stanwick he had gone. He saw the ugly evidence of a brutal crime; he saw a sick girl, very much attached to her brother, who quivered with dread at what had happened, and who, so he fancied, was even in a deeper state of fear at what might yet come to pass. Also he had watched and listened to a harassed young man who seemed to be groping his way amidst the bitter resentments of years, the frightful actualities of the moment, and a disconcerting sense of impending disaster.

"And that same young fellow's in bad," said the big man, to the darkness of the little room. "The cops always make it tough for the man they pick out to bear the weight of a crime. They try and twist everything to point his way."

And after this came the evident interest of Ashton-Kirk in the matter.

"I don't know but what he was interested even before that," thought Bat. "He saw something I didn't see—which ain't hard to do, for I'm a dub at that kind of a thing."

He remembered that Nora was even more agitated when he saw her again than she had been the first time. Young Burton was innocent! He must be freed! She *knew* he didn't do it! She *knew*!

"How did she?" Bat asked himself. "That's strong talk."

And, then, there was the bruise upon her forehead. Nora had deceived them about that. There were the footprints behind the rose arbor, there was the small revolver, there were the marks of the "creepers" in the yard at Stanwick and upon the scaffold outside Nora's window. And, then, there was also the apparently sudden resolution upon the girl's part to place her jewels in a place of security.

"People don't get these sudden notions for no reason at all," mused Bat. "And Nora had her own reasons for doing that. But," and there was a little tightening of his mind, an unpleasant straining which made him want to draw back from the thought, "she didn't want to tell anything about it. I believe in Nora. Nothing could drive me from that; but she is holding back on us; she knows things that she won't tell."

At some of these things Bat could guess; some others Ashton-Kirk's hints had partly covered. But the background, the reason for it all, puzzled him. He pondered deeply for a long time, but not a ray of light appeared through the mists that obscured the matter.

"But this burglar fellow's got something I want to know!" Bat sat up, and his forceful hands shut tightly. "And maybe it's just the thing we need. Maybe it's just the——"

He stopped. When he had turned off his single gas jet a half hour before, all had been dark outside. Now there was a flare of light from below. He arose and looked out. A wall loomed across the courtyard; and in the previous darkness he had thought it blank. But now he saw there were windows in it; and two of them, on the ground floor, were illuminated.

"Huh!" said Bat, as he stood looking down. "There's old Bohlmier, and exercising his old flute again."

The bald dome of the old Swiss shone under the gas light; the scrap of thumbed music was propped up against a bottle, and he was blowing gravely into his instrument, his fingers moving up and down and along the keys with methodical precision.

"Just like an old-fashioned picture," said Bat, the quaint characteristics of the composition in the frame of

the window appealing to him. "I wonder if I've not been a little hasty with these notions of mine about this place. That old lad looks as harmless as——"

But he stopped! For the composition below had suddenly changed. Some one had evidently knocked at the door of the room in which old Bohlmer sat. One hand had reached, in a clawing motion, at the music; the flute was held pinned to the table in a bony, convulsive grip by the other; the bald head was thrust forward and seemed to wave gently to and fro like that of a snake. The big athlete drew in his breath, hissing.

"The bets are off!" said he, between his teeth. "That old rat's got it in him! I'll bet his veins run ice water; and if you gave him the chance to knife a man, you'd be doing him a favor."

The Swiss had apparently spoken to whomever had knocked, and now, although still invisible to Bat, had entered the room. Bohlmer leaned back in his chair, his hands clasped before him; but from the motions of the shiny poll, Bat knew he was speaking.

"That room must be somewhere behind the office," Bat told himself. "Maybe a private den of the old fellow's."

Here Bohlmer suddenly pushed back his chair and stood up. With head thrust forward once more he seemed to stab a question at his visitor, a question apparently of vast importance. Evidently this was answered to the liking of the Swiss; eagerly, triumphantly, inquiringly, one hand went up and hung pointing across the room to a point behind the other.

"The door's there," said Bat, intuitively getting the meaning of the gesture. "And on the other side of it is some one, or something the old man's been expecting to see."

Then there followed a period of earnest talk between the hotel-keeper and the unseen visitor. It was carried on in a low tone; Bat recognized this fact by the attitudes and gestures of the old Swiss who finally, with almost trembling hands, pulled open a drawer in the table at which he had been seated. From this he took something which he patted, almost fondly. But a hand came across the table—the hand of the unknown—a big bony hand, and pushed it aside.

"It's Big Slim!" exclaimed Bat, with fresh interest. "And old smooth top is up to something he don't like."

The tall burglar now came into view; he sat upon the corner of the table and bent his head toward the Swiss, gesturing angularly. With no good humor, the hotel-keeper pulled open the table drawer once more and replaced the thing he had taken out; the bald head wagged in protest; every motion he made suggested a man convinced against his will. Deep in his inner consciousness, Bat Scanlon had a stirring of unrest. He recalled the words of Big Slim while they were still at Sheehan's:

"I lost out on that deal, bo; but that's not all. More's to follow; and this time I'll get mine."

And then the business of which he had spoken when he left Bat in the hall only a short time before.

"I wonder if it could have anything to do with the other matter," Bat questioned himself. "I wonder if what they are talking about is——" He stopped. At the window next that through which he saw the men, he caught a stir. A shadow—a woman's shadow—moved stealthily across the wall toward the two, whose backs were turned; the hands were outstretched as though reaching for something. Then the woman herself appeared in the full flare of the light, and paused at a small stand; a revolver lay there, and it was for this she was reaching. As she took it up, she turned her head; and for the first time Bat had a full view of her face. It was Nora Cavanaugh!

CHAPTER X

THROUGH THE WINDOW

For a moment Bat Scanlon stood as one petrified; there was Nora, beautiful Nora Cavanaugh, the yellow light in the meshes of the glorious bronze hair, the splendid figure held tense and quivering, the revolver in her hand and her face turned toward the two men. Then he exhaled a long breath, and wiped the drops of perspiration from his face.

"It's Nora, all right," he whispered. "It's Nora! But what in the name of the seven staggering Siwashes is she doing here? What does she——?" he paused abruptly, his eyes still upon her. With the revolver held tight she crept stealthily toward Big Slim and the Swiss. The breath drew hard in Bat's throat as he proceeded. "But why bother to ask what she's doing? If I ever saw a person's meaning spelled out in full by the actions, here is the time. Those two guys at the table have only another second or two, and then they are due for the surprise of their lives."

But just when it seemed as though the girl could reach out her hand and touch either of the two, she stopped. To Bat's surprise she sank down upon her knees, turned her head sideways, and was motionless.

"What's that?" demanded Bat, whisperingly, his eyes wide open. "What's she doing?"

But even while the words were still in his mouth he sensed the meaning of the thing; shifting his position to the other window he saw that the illuminated windows below belonged to different rooms; there was a wall between Nora and the two men, and it was at this she was kneeling, one ear held to it, listening.

"Ah!" said Bat. "That's it, eh? Good! Things are not to go off with the excited bang I expected. I'll have at least a couple of minutes to get myself in hand."

His first thought was of the big Colt which hung under his arm; a touch assured him that it was still there and free. His next was as to the lay of the land; to reach the main floor was simple enough; but how to get to the rooms in which were Nora and the two men was another matter. As he weighed the situation anxiously, an idea occurred to him. While looking along the hall a while before he had seen a small red light burning.

"Why, of course," he said. "A fire-escape. Just the thing. It's sure to lead down into this courtyard; and from there it's only a step and a smash, and I'm in and asking them about this little matter."

Quietly he opened the door and stepped into the hall. The red light burned over a window some dozen feet away; he lifted the sash and in a moment was out upon the platform. Below, all was darkness, save for the light which came from the two windows he had been watching; and down into this shadowy gulf went Bat with careful steps.

The courtyard was paved with the uneven stones of another day, and gingerly Bat picked his way across it toward the light. This was thrown out in two wide shafts, which met and merged in the first dozen feet of their projection.

"I must hang around on the edge," Bat reflected. "If I dip into the light they'll see me before I'm ready to have them do so."

Craftily he approached the window through which he had seen Nora, and looked in. She was still there,

but was now erect, talking with some one whom Bat could not see. She stood with her back to the window, her hands behind her; the revolver was still held in one of them, and while she was in this position, she placed it upon the stand.

"Clever work," said Bat, as he watched and saw the manœuvre successfully accomplished. "Disarming in the face of the enemy, and the said enemy never the wiser. But I wonder why the armament is not now necessary, and was so much so five minutes ago?"

He shifted a little, taking a chance of being seen in the streaming window lights. The person to whom Nora was talking was Big Slim. The burglar leaned upon the tall back of a chair with his elbows; his hands propped his chin, and he was steadfastly watching the girl and listening to what she said. And the Nora whom Bat now saw was greatly changed from the cautiously moving, fearfully listening creature of only a little while before.

"She's laughing," said Scanlon, amazed. "Laughing!"

She was; with her splendid head thrown back, her teeth shining white as milk. And then, as she spoke to the lank desperado before her, there were little ripples of amusement in her face; her hands gestured as though in mockery. But all this won no reflection in the cadaverous mask of the burglar; his shifty, green-colored eyes were as hard as stone, and as pitiless. He changed his position and began to speak; his utterances seemed slow and emotionless. His whole manner was of disbelief; time and again he seemed to strike at the same point; and Bat finally realized that he was charging the girl with something. But she stood before him, the look of amusement still in her face, her beautiful teeth gleaming when she laughed.

Finally with a sweep of his hand, Big Slim overset the chair, and with rigid anger in his hollow face moved toward her. The big Colt left its holster and appeared in Scanlon's hand. In the lanky gentleman's career as a housebreaker he had, doubtless, had many narrow shaves; but never had he stood so close to death as he did at that moment. And it was the girl who saved him.

With a gesture of amused contempt, she waved him back; turning, she took a wrap from a chair and threw it about her. Then with another motion—one of command—she stood facing him.

"She's telling him to open the door," said Bat "And," amazedly, "by George, he's doing it!"

For the tall figure of Big Slim disappeared into a part of the room outside Bat's vision. And now for the first time since he had seen her shadow crossing the wall, Nora Cavanaugh hesitated. For a flashing instant the watcher got a full view of her face as it was held away from the burglar. The laughter was gone; in its place was fear—pale, dumb fear; the hands which fumbled with the wrap were purposeless, with no direction. And then she, too, disappeared out of the range of the watcher's vision.

Disregarding all thought of possible detection, Scanlon now approached the window in the full glare of the light. He saw a door in the room standing open, and through this Nora was passing. Then the burglar pulled it shut and the place was a blank. Bat considered for only an instant as to what was best to do. His strong fingers gripped at the sash, and to his satisfaction and gratification it slid upward; with a pull he had lifted his heavy body upon the sill and was in the room. His steps were soft and long as he moved toward the door through which the two had just gone; his hand was reaching out for the knob when he saw it turning slowly. He shrank away intuitively, and against the wall, while the door opened with him behind it. He heard a hesitating sort of breathing, and then a step within the room. Around the edge of the door Bat could see the gas branch as it projected from the wall; a hand appeared and turned off the light, then the footsteps sounded once more, leaving the room, and the door closed as softly as it had opened.

Bat waited for a few moments, and then, under his hand, the door opened, and he looked out. There was a short and rather wide hall, and at the far end was a door which instantly suggested itself as the one leading to the street. And that was not all. At the door, holding it open about an inch, was old Bohlmier, and he was furtively peering out.

"He was the party who turned off the light," said Bat, as he drew the door to and stood waiting.

In a little while there was a faint click which told that the street door had been closed; then Bat heard the old Swiss enter the room adjoining—the one in which the athlete had seen him from above. With careful steps Scanlon went down the short hall, and slipped back the lock. Peering out he saw a narrow street, and a taxi standing at the curb. In this was Nora Cavanaugh, and beside it stood Big Slim. Scanlon saw Nora perfectly, for the street light shone full upon her; once more she was smiling, once more her head was thrown back in amusement. The attitude of the burglar was threatening, his big bony hands clutched the door frame of the cab, and his shoulders were rounded doggedly.

"Laugh!" Bat heard him say, "laugh all you like. But as long as you do the rest of it, I don't care. So, get busy, and I'll be waiting to hear from you."

With this he stepped back and the girl signaled the driver. The cab started away and Big Slim turned toward the door. Swiftly Bat left it, and was back in the room from which he had entered the hall; dropping quietly out of the window, he crossed the courtyard and scaled the fire-escape. Then, once more in his own room, he sat upon the edge of the bed.

"Well," said he, "the new one is here. I felt sure it was coming; but," and he gripped the edge of the iron cot hard, "I never expected it to be anything like this."

CHAPTER XI

DENNISON TALKS ONCE MORE

By noon next day, Bat Scanlon had gotten into communication with Ashton-Kirk; the two had lunch in the quiet depths of a rathskeller, where they ate and talked, and afterward smoked, to the drone of some stringed instruments.

Scanlon told of his experiences of the previous night, and the criminologist listened with the keenest interest.

"So," said he, at length, "our friend, Big Slim, proves to be a person of some parts. I must meet him. And the Swiss!" Here Ashton-Kirk uttered a little clicking sound, expressive of great admiration. "If criminal he be, he is of the superlative sort. As you have just remarked, when that kind *are* crooked, their angles are of the deadliest. It will be my good fortune, perhaps, when meeting the burglar, to encounter this gentleman also."

"But Nora," questioned Bat, coming to the point which was of most interest to him, "what of her? What about her being in that place?"

Ashton-Kirk bent his brows, and one well kept hand smoothed the shaven chin.

"You say," and there was an inquiring glint in his eyes, "she was rather on friendly terms with the burglar."

"Why," replied Bat, reluctantly, "I wouldn't say friendly, exactly. She was laughing and did seem very much at her ease while she talked to him, I'll admit that. But what of the other things? What of the creeping across the room with the gun in her hand—of her listening at the wall? And what of the look of fear I saw on her face when that fellow opened the door for her to go out?"

Ashton-Kirk nodded.

"Of course," said he. "We must not overlook anything." Glancing at his watch, and apparently dismissing this particular point from his mind, he added: "It's now two-thirty, and I want to run around to the Polo Club. Will you come along?"

Mr. Scanlon was willing, and so they made their way from the rathskeller into the sunlight. The Polo Club occupied a magnificent modern building in a prominent location. They passed in at a door which was opened by a man in uniform, ostentatious in its soberness; at the end of a room, rich in rugs and paintings, they encountered another man, stout and impassive.

"Is Mr. Dennison here, do you know, Hocking?" asked Ashton-Kirk.

"Yes, sir, in the smoking-room," replied the man, impassively, but with certainty.

In the smoking-room they came upon Dennison, purple of jowl, with his white fat hands folded across his paunch, smoking a cigarette and looking out at a window.

"Oh, how are you?" lifting his eyes, but never stirring. "How do, Scanlon?"

"Quite comfortable here of an afternoon," said Ashton-Kirk as he dropped into a chair at the other side of the window. "I had no idea."

"How could you have?" complained Dennison; "you drop in only once or twice in a year, and then only of a night, and when old Hungerford is in town."

Ashton-Kirk smiled as he thought of those rare nights with Hungerford over the chess board—nights when he matched himself against an intelligence almost mystical, and out of each contact with which he emerged, drenched with new understanding.

"I suppose that's so," he admitted. "But I should get here oftener." He looked interestedly at the other, and added: "Get over your little jolt of the other night all right?"

"I'm pretty shaky." Dennison looked at Bat who had possessed himself of an easy chair. "I don't know if Scanlon knows anything about how I'm doing or not. He's giving me confounded little attention. Never in, it seems, when I get there, and one of his understrappers must put me through."

"It all depends on yourself at this point in the race," spoke Scanlon, easily. "In a week or so *I'll* be ready to take you on. I'll be able to see what I'm doing then."

"Oh, I say, I'm not so beastly fleshy as all that!" protested Dennison, indignantly.

"Don't pay any attention to him," said Ashton-Kirk, smiling. "A thing such as you went through would be likely to upset any one."

"Of course it would," agreed Dennison, eagerly. "Tom Burton and myself were pretty intimate, and to find out suddenly that he'd gone down like that! Of course it would upset any one."

"You knew Burton for a long time, did you?"

"Not so very; maybe for seven or eight years. I met him at Danforth's place one night when he was playing roulette in big luck. That was about a year before he married Nora Cavanaugh, the actress." Dennison lighted a flat Turkish cigarette and inhaled a deep draught of smoke. "I was kind of surprised to hear about him being married, for he'd always talked against that state. He said it got a man into a great lot of trouble."

"Where was it you saw him on the night of his taking off?" asked the investigator.

"Why, at Danforth's. Things were a little dull," as though feeling an explanation of his presence in the gambling-house were necessary, "and I thought I'd drop around and get a little excitement out of the game if I could. Burton was there and had just been cleaned out; he was in an impatient sort of humor and was damning things at a tolerable speed. Nothing vicious, you know, but just enough to show his ginger."

"Had you much of a conversation with him?"

"Yes; quite a long one." Dennison puffed at his cigarette, quite pleased that he had an interested audience for his, for the time, favorite topic. "You see, when Tom was in hard luck, he was a great fellow for going back and calling up a lot of disagreeable things that had happened to him. Maybe that doesn't sound very cheerful, but it wasn't so bad to listen to. Burton had a past that was a bit different, you see. While I'm sure he was a first-class sport in all essential things, still he had mingled with a lot of people such as one seldom hears of outside novels. His comments upon his family were also rather frequent. Usually, if a fellow dislikes his family, he keeps it to himself, but Burton, when he was in the dumps, talked about it. His son, Frank, who draws the sporting cartoons for the *Standard* came in for an especially strong dressing down that night. It seems he makes a remarkable salary—for he's devilish clever, I think—and

yet, when his father was broke, and called on him at odd times, over the telephone, for a little tide to carry him over the bar, he always turned him down flat. Tom regarded this as rank ingratitude. He was the boy's father, he said, and was entitled to certain consideration and respect. He boiled over the thing and said he meant to square the account some day."

"Burton as the wronged father is funny," observed Scanlon. "Why didn't he have a little quivery music, and some paper snow flakes to fall on him? That would have increased the effect."

"Maybe he wasn't altogether wrong," said Dennison, as though feeling bound to defend his friend. "A son has certain duties toward his father, I believe. But Burton couldn't expect much of that sort of thing from his children; for it seems they weren't trained right. You know their mother must have been a queer sort; set in her ways, and always complaining. She had the country school teacher's idea of life, and what part of it should be lived; and Burton never hit it with her properly. She brought up her children with the same views as her own; their father was always pointed out as the kind of person they must avoid. And with that sort of thing sounded in their ears continually, of course their attitudes, as they became older, were to be expected."

"Well, from all accounts," said Scanlon, "they have a pretty good argument on their side—neglect and all that. Burton wasn't your idea of a family man, was he?"

"Well, no, not exactly," confessed Dennison. "But then, I don't put myself up as a judge of such things. However, I've got a notion it would be hard to live with a silent, religious wife, a son you knew hated you, and a daughter who had—er—well—spells."

Ashton-Kirk bent his head forward a trifle and a look of interest glinted in his keen eyes.

"Spells?" asked he. "What do you mean?"

Dennison smiled broadly.

"That's an expression I got from an old colored man who used to work for my father years ago. Queer how such things stick to one, isn't it? But I don't just know how to describe what Burton told me about his daughter in any other way. She wasn't an epileptic. That's a thing one goes down under; and *her* case was just the reverse. She was, as a rule, propped up in a chair, as weak as a kitten; but when these things took her, she grew immensely strong and sort of wild."

"I see," said Ashton-Kirk. And Scanlon, as he watched, saw him, so to speak, store the fact carefully away in his memory. "Can you remember anything else Burton talked about that night?"

"Why, yes, to be sure." Dennison looked at the still figure of the investigator through the light rifts of smoke. "You seem to have a fair-sized interest in the matter," he added.

Ashton-Kirk nodded.

"Yes," he replied. "There is more to it than the police have shown; and I'm interested in the son's predicament."

"Nasty mess for him," agreed Dennison, pursing up his thick lips. "Terrible kick up, that's a fact. Glad I'm not in it." He smoked for a moment or two and then proceeded. "What was on Tom's mind most of all that night was the condition of his pocketbook. According to his statement it was pretty flat. He'd come into Danforth's with about fifty dollars—all he had—hoping for a little luck at the wheel; but even that slipped

away from him."

"Did he have anything in mind, do you know, that would get him out of his difficulties?"

"I suggested that he try his son once more," said Dennison. "But he didn't seem to take kindly to the notion. After a while he began to hint at some little matter—I couldn't quite get its nature." Ashton-Kirk's eyes narrowed as Dennison proceeded: "And he seemed to have some confidence in its turning out well."

"You say you couldn't *quite* get its nature." Ashton-Kirk was still regarding the man steadily. "Am I to take from that that you *did* understand a part of it?"

Dennison stirred uneasily.

"Why, yes," he replied. "I think I did. As I said a while ago, I've always believed him to be a sport who was strictly on the level—though I'll admit there are a lot of men I know who think just the other way around. But, though I do believe it, I'll agree, as I said before, he'd been a little different and had mixed with a queer lot of characters. Well, from what he dropped, the matter he had in hand that night had one of these people somewhere in the background."

"You got no details?"

"Not any. Part of the time he talked *at* me—not *to* me, at all. He was regretting certain things; how he'd given up opportunities of profit so as to hold a place for himself in the society he moved in. He argued that if a man could bet on the turn of a card, or a wheel, in a place like Danforth's—which is an illegal establishment—why could he not do certain other things, which were also merely illegal, without losing caste. He had a habit of arguing this way when he was broke; but I never took him quite seriously. As a matter of fact, I never was sure as to what he meant; once or twice I asked, but he always turned the matter off, and began to talk about something else.

"He was always close about details or confidences in things like that," proceeded Dennison. "I've sometimes thought this reticence is what made the talk about him. But he was very angry that night; he stormed up and down," and here Dennison gestured with his cigarette, with the manner of one who is determined to hold back nothing. "And he did drop something, after a little, something, I'll admit, that made me wonder what was up."

"Have you any objections to telling what that was?" asked Ashton-Kirk, smoothly.

"No, of course not." Dennison looked exceedingly virtuous. "If it'll do any good, it ought to be known. I think I told you, last time we met, that when Tom Burton left me that night he said he was going to see a man on some business—something that would bring a profit. Remember? Well, he didn't mention the man's name; but without realizing it, right in the middle of the talk he let out the nature of his occupation."

"What was that?" asked Scanlon.

"The man was a burglar."

CHAPTER XII

A DOUBLE SHADOW

This was the extent of Dennison's knowledge except the detail he called after them as they were leaving the room a little later.

"I say," he cried, rising in sudden recollection, "do you know any sort of a place that goes by the name of 'Gaffney's'?"

"No," replied the investigator over his shoulder. "Why?"

"I think that's where Burton was to meet the party—the one I just mentioned, you know. It just came to me."

On the street the big athlete said to Ashton-Kirk:

"Burton knew Big Slim, and had a little job framed up with him, eh? Well, that knocks me over, for sure."

"It's odd," said Ashton-Kirk, "how things seem to fall into place." Scanlon saw the light of speculation in the singular eyes, but made no comment. A little later the investigator went on: "That you should have this rather extraordinary experience of yours with Big Slim, and now—"

He paused, deep in thought; and as he did not resume, Bat said:

"Nora knows this crook; now we find that the Bounder knew him too; and they both have had dealings of some sort with him."

But Ashton-Kirk was deep in thought, and made no reply. They continued to walk on, the squares lengthening into miles; on the outskirts he suddenly stopped.

"Hello!" said he, looking about, rather surprisedly. "We're here, are we?"

"I thought I wouldn't disturb you, seeing that you seemed to be thrashing it out," said Scanlon.

The criminologist looked at his watch.

"There's a subway station only a little way from here," said he. "Let's get back. There's one or two things I want to do."

They boarded the train and as they neared the middle of the city the investigator said:

"I get off at the next station. If you don't mind, look up Big Slim once again and see what more you can learn from him. If there is anything, call me at eleven to-morrow; if I'm not there, leave word where you can be reached by wire."

"Right," said Mr. Scanlon.

Ashton-Kirk dropped off at the next station and vanished in the crowd; Bat held his place for several stations further; then he, too, alighted. Walking a few blocks, he came to the meaner sections; the buildings looked huddled and slovenly; dirty alleys ran between them; the smells were many and offensive. Leisurely he walked along a street crowded with low auction rooms, cheap variety places and

establishments which provided a curious medley of food which a patron might consume while he stood up and listened to the nerve-tearing din of an automatic piano.

Away amidst a horde of other signs, the big athlete noted one bearing the Swiss coat of arms.

"Friend Bohlmier's hotel," Bat said to himself. "I may as well stop in and look around. Maybe the slim one is stirring."

The hotel, now that he saw it in daylight, was rather neat looking outside; the window glass shone; there was clean paint upon the doors and other woodwork; through the windows of the office plants were to be seen, growing greenly, in pots. The building was upon a corner; just around this, upon a rather more quiet street than the main one, was the door at which Nora's cab had stood the night before. And as Bat slowly took in the sinister aspects of the neighborhood, he marveled at what he had seen.

"A girl like Nora coming alone to a place like this in the night, and in this section of the city!" he exclaimed, mentally. "It's got me winging, I'll admit that."

With careless manner he strolled into the little sanded office. The Rhine Castles, in the prints upon the wall, still reared ruggedly from their hilltops; the Alpine goatherds looked exceedingly romantic and self-conscious as they posed against the backgrounds of their herds. The place was empty, however; and as Bat paused he heard a peculiarly hard and sliding sound. It was not a large sound; indeed it was quite small, but there was a slippery, deft regularity to it which caused the big athlete to catch and hold it, turning it over in his mind to come at its meaning. But in a few moments it stopped; there was a movement of feet upon the sanded floor, a chair was pushed back and a bald head appeared above the top of a screen.

"Ach!" said the voice of old Bohlmier. "It is you?"

"Yes," replied Bat, as he moved toward the screen. "Just thought I'd come in and see if my friend was around."

"Not yet," said the Swiss. "Not yet. He is neffer about much till the night dime. Eh?" Chuckling quaintly, the head disappeared and Scanlon reached the edge of the screen.

It was a cozily secluded corner, with a window facing upon the inner courtyard; geraniums stood in painted pots on shelves across the window; a rack of music was at one side; against the wall was an extemporized bookcase of stained wood which held an array of German books, worn, but prim and tight in their bindings. On a table lay a flat stone; and a small shining oil can stood near it. Bohlmier was now seated, a knife in his hand—a huge knife, with the blade ground and re-ground until it had arrived at a murderous narrowness; and he now held it up, looking placidly along its glimmering length through his rimmed spectacles.

"No," said he, and the shining bald head wagged in a sort of bland humor, "your friend does not care much for der day dimes." And then shifting a steady childlike stare upon the big man, he asked: "You haf nod known him long, is it?"

"Not very," replied Bat. "Only a short time."

Bohlmier nodded. Then he laid the thin blade against the stone upon the table, kissing it gently along its full length of edge. The man's breath seemed to hiss softly as the steel slipped across the stone; and as it turned deftly and came back, the hiss changed to a blissful, watery gurgling, thin and long drawn in. A

prickling ran across Scanlon's scalp; he had the sensation of warm flesh being cleverly and slowly laid open with a razor-like blade which had sand upon its edge.



HE LIFTED THE BLADE ONCE MORE

There was a cherubic smile upon the face of the old Swiss as he lifted the blade once more and ran his thumb down its length.

"Hah!" he said, "it is goot. I vill do no more."

Carefully, he wiped the knife and stone with a cloth and laid them aside. After this he polished his big spectacles and surveyed Bat minutely.

"You are a stranger in der city, I belief," stated he.

"I don't know much about it," replied Bat, and for this he eased his conscience with the reflection that few men did.

"It's a fine blace," said Bohlmier. "Der gelt is plenty, if a man der nerve haf." Here a canary in a small cage, hung high among the plants, began a long thrill, liquid and full. The Swiss smiled with pleased surprise. "Ah, rasgal!" admonished he, shaking one fond finger. "Is id not asleeb? Is dis der hour for enchoyments? Right away, now, der head under der ving, or to scold I vill begin."

The bird, as though understanding, ceased its song; then the man turned to Bat once more.

"Our friendt vill tell you some dings," said he. "He is an enterprising man. It vill pay you to listen."

A little later Scanlon wandered into a large room, leading off from the office; the floor was sanded here, also; between two windows was a colored print in which William Tell refused to salute the symbol of tyranny, before a background of Alpine hills. There were heavy benches along the walls and some chairs scattered about, with a few bare, but thoroughly scrubbed tables upon which lay newspapers. The men who sat and smoked, or talked, or read in this room were peculiarly of a kind. Their dress was almost exactly similar, the stage of wear being the only difference. Each of them smoked a cigarette, nervously; each wore a cap which came well down to the ears and shoes which "humped" up suddenly at the toes. They had the furtive manners which become habitual in the shaded section of a big city; their eyes were quick and cold and always inquiring.

Bat took a seat at a window, and also lighted a cigarette.

"My make-up is fair," thought he, complacently, "and now, with the cigarette going, no one would doubt that I had been working under cover for years."

He read a newspaper and smoked for the better part of an hour; the light had dimmed and the old Swiss had turned on the gas; then Big Slim, narrow shouldered and stooping, came into the room with his peculiar slinking gait.

"Hello!" greeted Scanlon, as he got up. "I've just been wondering if I was going to see you."

"Was out with a friend of mine looking over some new work," said the burglar, with a grin. "You gotta keep after business if you expect to get any of it."

"Had anything to eat?" asked Bat.

"Not yet. Let's go around to Joey Loo's."

The two left the hotel, and passed through a tangle of narrow, forlorn looking streets; then they turned into a cellar opening, with dirty wooden steps and a glass-paneled door upon which was painted some Chinese characters in brilliant red. The warm, moist breath of oriental cookery was thick around them as they sat down at one of the small tables, and Scanlon looked about. Some patrons of both sexes were already there; the women were dejected, or hard; here and there were seen a few who were merely vacant. The men were of the meagre, pallid type, nervous of action and furtive of eye. Stoical Chinamen, with soft-falling feet, carried food about.

"Great chow in this dump," said Big Slim. "I spotted it one night when I was edging away from a 'bull.' The Chinks can cook, and that's more than you can say of a lot of the other folks who take it into their heads to run eating places."

A fat Chinaman with a smiling face and a greasy blouse came up to them, and the burglar began pointing out to Bat the high points of the cuisine. When they had given their orders Big Slim rolled a cigarette and leaned back in his chair. A newspaper which lay upon the table caught his eye and he grinned derisively.

"Gee," said he, "the cops are the solidest chunks of ivory I ever seen. Some of the things you read about them doing are screams."

"What now?" asked Bat, the gleam in the green eyes of the other interesting him.

Big Slim chuckled, and his shifty look went from Scanlon to the region round about them, and then back again.

"There was a fellow shoved off the other night—out in the suburbs—maybe you saw something about it? Well, the bulls made an awful mess of that. I never seen them fall down so hard before—and believe me, that's saying something."

"That was the Burton case, wasn't it? I've been following it a little," said Bat.

Big Slim took a deep draught from the cigarette and then flung it away. Slowly he exhaled the smoke; and then sat looking at his companion, and cracking the joints of his bony fingers.

"That guy Burton was a slick one," said he, admiringly. "You gotta hand him that."

"You knew him, did you?" said Bat.

"A little. He done the swell mobs. Society people and gambling were other things he worked at. And it's been whispered more than once that he was handy with a pen."

"Nice work," said Bat. "But dangerous."

"About the best things he pulled were his get-aways," said Big Slim. "The cops never got anything on him, and he'd been fooling with the edge of the law for years. His son did not inherit any of the 'Bounder's' talent; for here he is waiting on the grand jury, charged with pushing the old man over the edge." The burglar chuckled, highly entertained. "The cops are a fine gang when you start 'em right," said he. "And when they do get a thing, you got to put it where they'll almost fall over it."

The fat Chinaman brought the food ordered, and set it before them with a comfortable air of appreciation.

"Good!" stated he. "Vel' fine."

When he had departed and they began to test his statement, Bat spoke carelessly:

"Is it your idea that young Burton didn't have a hand in this thing?"

Big Slim blew at the steam ascending from a dish of rice.

"Sure not," said he. "I seen that guy lots of times; he's as soft as mush. You couldn't get him to bump anybody that way on a bet."

"Funny!" said Bat. "Who could have done it?"

Big Slim shook his head with the air of one who could talk eloquently if he would. For a time they ate their food in silence; then the burglar resumed:

"You know what I told you last night about the phony fighter, Allen? How I expected to turn a trick that'd get me a roll, and be able to put it up for him in that match?"

"Yes," said Bat, interested.

"I've been doing work all over the United States for a good many years," stated the burglar, "and I've run into some funny jobs. But this one had them all faded. You could start a thousand times and never fall like I did that time."

"Tough!" Bat nodded sagely. "A fellow remembers those things."

"I'll remember that one, all right," promised the other. "Don't let that worry you."

"Diamonds, I think you said." The big athlete looked appreciative, and labored with the Asiatic cookery.

"Some of them were as big as that," and Big Slim grouped some grains of rice upon the edge of his plate. "Not bad, eh?"

"Extra special," replied the big athlete, promptly. "Diamonds like that are only to be mentioned with great respect."

"It was one of the easiest kind of tricks to turn," said the burglar. "A woman had 'em—but I think I told you that. She wore 'em every night—and I framed the whole thing so that it couldn't fail. She lives up town, and gets home about the same time every night. There was a scaffolding up the side of the house—right under her window."

Bat laughed and reached for a salt shaker with a great assumption of carelessness.

"It might have been built for you, eh?" said he. "Easy is right."

"I slipped up the scaffolding before she got home," said Big Slim, drifting, perhaps, unconsciously into the narrative. "And I was outside when she came into the room. She pulled down the blind, and then I moved over right under the window. The blind wasn't all the way down; so I laid flat on the boards, and could see into the room."

Bat made an indefinite sort of noise down in his throat; perhaps the burglar fancied it indicated interest; at any rate he went on:

"She stood for a while, thinking. Then she begins to take off the diamonds. There was a box there, to put them in—all open and ready.

"'Fine,' thinks I, to myself. 'When they are all gathered up nice and safe, that's when I'll reach for them—then I'll be sure to have them all.'

"She was still taking them off—out of her hair, from her breast, from around her neck; then suddenly she stopped and stood still, as though she'd heard something and was listening. And then the door opens and in walks a man, all smiling and smooth, and takes off his hat."

"I see—a man she knows?"

"Her husband," said Big Slim. "Her husband that she don't live with, and believe me, she wasn't any way tickled to see him. I couldn't hear much, but every now and then I got a word or so, and was able to string the thing together. He was broke, and wanted money. She wouldn't give up. He threatened her; but she called him, strong. Then he hits her and grabs the diamonds, and was off."

"And you were left!" said Bat, displaying a grin which cost him some effort.

"Left flat!" The lank burglar pulled at his fingers until the joints cracked. "He took the whole lay-out right from under my nose."

"What did you do then?" asked Bat.

"For a couple of seconds I hung fire," said Big Slim. "I had it in my mind to jump into the room, follow, and lay him out. But a better plan came to me. Why not skim down the scaffold, and get the lad as he left the house with the stuff?"

"Good!" said Bat. "That's it!"

"That's what I done," said the burglar, "and as I was slipping down, I framed it for the guy. I wouldn't hold him up in front of the house; there were too many lights and too many chances to take. I'd wait till I got him in a street that was darker, and had more get-aways."

"What about the woman?" asked Bat. "Was she hurt much?"

"No," replied Big Slim. "While I was thinking what I'd do—after the fellow blew with the diamonds, I was still looking into the room. She held her hand to her face for a moment as if it'd hurt her pretty bad; then she took it away, and"—here the speaker grinned widely—"well, maybe it was a good thing for friend husband that he wasn't there just then. She'd a look on her face that was equal to anything."

"Humph!" said Bat. "I don't wonder."

"And she didn't take it all out in looks," said Big Slim, with the grin still upon his cadaverous face. "I seen her burst right out wild; she pulled open a drawer and took out something—I couldn't see just what it was, but I caught a shine from it and I'd bet my head it was a gun. She put it in her breast; then she grabs up her wraps and things and tears out of the room."

"After him!" Bat stared at the other, a feeling of weakness creeping over him.

"Like a shot. When I got to the bottom of the scaffold I stayed in the shadows till he came out; when he got a little distance away, I was just going to follow, when the door opened again and she came out."

"And she dogged him," said Bat. "You are sure of that, are you?"

"Sure?" Big Slim chuckled as he looked at Bat, his head nodding affirmatively. "I should say I am. It was a double shadow. There she goes, down the street after him; and there I am, after her, just as nice as you please."



CHAPTER XIII

SOMETHING UNEXPECTED

The food at Joey Loo's lost its savor for Bat Scanlon. He felt cold, and his mind was sodden; a weight seemed to oppress his chest. The picture limned by the desperado was as plain to him as though it had been done in fire.

He saw the callous, ruthless Bounder, all smiles and sneers, strike Nora and snatch her jewels. He also saw the beautiful, high-strung and high-spirited creature, her senses drowned in resentment, snatch up a weapon and rush after him, all the wrong she had ever suffered at his hands flaming up in her mind.

"And so she followed him; and this hyena followed her," was Scanlon's thought. "And in the end they all brought up at Stanwick."

Why Nora and Big Slim had gone to the suburb was easy to understand; they had followed the Bounder. But why had that gentleman gone there? What had taken him there—a place he had never visited before—and so late in the night? That he *had* gone there had been only too tragically proven; and the footprints found by Ashton-Kirk gave mute testimony as to the other two. And then there was that shining thing the burglar saw Nora place in her bosom. With a sickening readiness, this associated itself with the glittering little weapon which the investigator had picked up on the lawn.

Bat blundered on with his food, for all these things were huddling up in his mind in a frantic mass. And, then, as if the tangle were not already bad enough, there came the remembrance of the scene he had observed through the windows at Bohlmier's hotel.

"I don't know what that was about any more than the rest," Bat told himself. "But there was something between it and the things this fellow has just been telling me. If I knew what they were——"

He looked at Big Slim and found the green eyes of the burglar regarding him curiously.

"You don't bat very high in the eating league, do you?" said the man. "Or maybe you ain't crazy about the Chink brand of grub."

"I'm kind of off it," said Bat. "But don't let me stop the good work for you. I'll have a few drags at a cigarette and we can talk just the same."

He waited for a few moments, hoping the desperado would resume where he left off. But when Big Slim once more began to talk, he did so in a reflective vein, removed from the direct course of the story.

"Things do take funny twists," said he. "Funny twists! One minute you think you've got 'em, and the next they're dipping in behind the scenery."

"I've noticed peculiarities like that myself," confessed Bat. "The good things I've seen coming my way would stock a novel with incident. But the number that broke right for me ain't been so many as to cause me to worry. They have a habit of heading off before they get to the plate, just as you say."

"To have a quart of diamonds all but wrapped up for you—and then to miss them—that's rough."

"I should say it was," agreed Bat. "But," rather carelessly, "how did it turn out? Did the girl get 'em back?"

Big Slim finished with the food and pushed back his plate. Then he took out a tobacco pouch and a packet of papers and rolled himself a cigarette. Blowing a long stream of smoke into the wet air of the cellar, he said:

"I've let you in on this a little because I think you're a good fellow, and I wanted to show you that I didn't throw Allen down cold. See? But this job ain't over yet, and I don't talk much about things that ain't done—for I've seen too many of them spilled that way." He took another long draught of smoke down into his lungs and exhaled it. "I figure on coming out right on this thing; do you get me? But I ain't saying anything more."

Bat weighed the matter carefully. He saw a sort of settled expression on the thin lips of the burglar, and this told him there was little to be hoped for by questioning.

"And I may get him suspicious of me," reflected the big man. "It doesn't take much to get these phony guys putting their ears up and listening for alarms. And if that once happens here my chance is gone."

So he said nothing more on the subject, though all the time he was burning to do so. The talk drifted into other channels, and in the course of a half hour Big Slim, looking at the clock, said:

"I'm sorry, bo, but I'll have to pull my freight. I'm going to see if I can't put some things right to-night."

Bat arose with him, a feeling of quick expectancy beating in his mind.

"To-night," he repeated to himself. "Put some things right? Well, that means only one thing to me."

They left Joey Loo's together and walked along the street. At almost any corner Bat expected the burglar to leave him, but to his surprise this did not happen; the man went with him back to the hotel. In the little office with the sanded floor, Big Slim said:

"Well, see you to-morrow, maybe, bo."

Bat waved a hand and the cracksman disappeared through a door upon which was painted the word "Private." Through his inspection of the hotel, inside and out, during the day, Scanlon had gotten a fair idea of its plan.

"That door," he told himself, "will take him to the rooms where I saw him with Bohlmier and Nora last night. It might be just as well——"

At once he was at the desk and demanded his key of a thick-necked young man who wore a narrow stand-up collar; in the course of a few minutes he was in his room and had taken a station at one of the windows.

The flare of light came from below—from a single window this time—and there sat Bohlmier in a round-backed chair, with Big Slim resting against the table edge and swinging one leg. The burglar was explaining something very carefully, and the old Swiss was listening, his face upturned and the gas light gleaming on his heavily rimmed spectacles.

"Whatever it is," said Bat, "the old party agrees without a qualm." He watched the two for a space and shook his head. "A badly joined team, as far as looks go," he mused, "but if the feeling they give me counts for anything, their work would be as smooth as the devil's own."

Old Bohlmier arose finally and went to an old chest that stood in one corner. Throwing back the lid of this

he took out, one by one, a number of tools and laid them side by side on the table.

"A cracksman's outfit!" murmured Bat, a feeling of disappointment running through him. "It's only Big Slim going out on a 'job,' after all."

The lank burglar examined the appliances upon the table and nodded his approval of them, after which he stowed them away in a small cloth bag. Then he and Bohlmier prepared to go.

"Hello!" said the big athlete. "The Swiss is going, too!" His face lit up with renewed interest. "It must be more than just a plain job of burglary, after all."

Quietly he slipped from the room and locked the door; and then with a careless air he left the hotel. Reaching the shadow of a building across the way he stood and waited; in a few moments Big Slim and Bohlmier emerged at the side door and after a furtive look up and down the street, they started away. After them, on the other side, went Scanlon, treading cautiously, so as to make his progress as soundless as possible, and keeping well in the overhang of the buildings. He expected a long journey in the wake of the two prowlers; but at the end of a half dozen blocks he was pleased to find that this was not to be the case. They stopped before a sort of loft building, and, in the shadow of this, held a conference. From the mouth of an alley Bat watched them; then, with a feeling of consternation, he saw they were advancing toward him.

"They've spotted me!" was his first thought; but in a moment he realized that this could not be so; the darkness where he stood was too intense for them to have made him out. A second thought was illuminating; the building beside which he stood was to be the scene of their effort. He shrank back into the alley. Overhead was a tangle of fire-escapes; dozens of windows, some of them broken and with paper and old clothes stuffed into the openings, looked down upon him.

"A burglary in such a place as that!" Bat stood aghast at the idea. "What are they after?"

The two men were now at the opening of the alley and came cautiously along. From the shadow of the far wall Bat watched them. Softly, he heard the voice of Bohlmier:

"Is dis der door? Eh?"

"Yes. It's never locked in this joint," said the other, in an equally low tone. "The halls are as public as the street."

The old Swiss clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

"To bick oud such a place," spoke he. "It is not goot sense."

Big Slim put his hand out and Bat heard a door creak on its hinges.

"Now, then," spoke the lank burglar, to his companion, "in you go. And if we meet any one, act as if we'd lived here for a dozen years."

The two disappeared; and as Bat heard the door close softly behind them, he drew in a long breath.

"Well, here goes," said he. "There will be very little cover now."

He knew if he once allowed the burglar or his colleague to get out of view or hearing, his chances of coming upon them again were greatly lessened. And yet too much promptness might land him stumbling

upon them, spoiling everything. Guardedly, he turned the knob, and the door opened the merest trifle. Through the chink he had a clear view of a dirty hall, long, and lighted by a single incandescent lamp. Quietly he stepped inside, closing the door after him. At the far end of the hall was a staircase; and he went toward this with padded feet. The flight of stairs ran straight ahead; at the top was a turn and a blank, hand-smutted wall faced him. From somewhere in the hall above, unseen by him, a brilliant light was burning; and it fell upon the flat space at the top of the steps unwaveringly. Two grotesque shadows lay upon the wall, swollen and distorted and making uncouth gestures.

"Ah," said Bat, still at the bottom of the flight. "There they are, talking it over."

As he stood looking and listening he caught a rustling of skirts, light footsteps and the sound of a woman's voice from somewhere in the regions above. In a few moments this was followed by a frightened squeak, a chorus of startled and indignant voices, and then down the stairway upon him charged two rather pretty girls, somewhat over-dressed, both chewing gum and talking shrilly.

"It's that big boob that's taken eleven, on the third," said one. "He looks like a scarecrow. What does he mean by hanging around like that, frightening people?"

"I'm going to go to Mrs. Dolan," said the other, energetically. "A body can't come through these halls any more without a body-guard."

Then, for the first time, they caught sight of Bat, and again the squeaks sounded.

"It's all right," nodded the big athlete. "Don't be afraid."

"My goodness! ain't it awful!" cried one of the young women. "I'll be scared stiff all night."

They scurried down the hall and Bat heard the street door bang after them.

"Eleven, on the third." Scanlon considered this. "That must mean room eleven, on the third floor. And so," a little wrinkle of wonderment appearing between his eyes, "the slim one has taken a room here, has he?"

He glanced up the stairs; the shadows had disappeared from the wall, and he could hear a scuffling of feet as of some one moving upward.

"They're on the next flight," he said. "So I guess this one's all right to negotiate now."

Quietly, he ascended the stairs. The hall on the second floor was deserted; overhead he could hear the tread of the two men as they passed along; so, without hesitation, he mounted to that level. As he stood on the landing with only a turn between him and the hall, he heard a door close.

"All right," said he. "They've gone into their room."

He rounded the turn and saw another dirty passage, with several naked incandescent lamps lighting it; a half dozen doors opened into the hall, but no one was in sight. Bat tiptoed along until he came to a door which bore two angular "ones" painted upon the panels. A light burned inside; he saw that through an open transom; but there were no sounds. Scanlon stood for a moment pondering what should be his next step. If he could raise himself somehow, so that he'd be able to get a view of the room through the transom——

"But that wouldn't do," was the thought that followed this. "They're likely to come out at any moment, and nail me while I peep."

Instinctively his eye went about—and then came to a stop at a door directly opposite number eleven. This was partly open; the room was dark; and as Bat, a plan already forming in his mind, pushed the door slowly open, not a sound or stir greeted him.

"Good!" said he, to himself, a flush of exultation coming over him. "An empty room. This is real luck!"

He felt about for a light, but stopped, realizing that for his purpose darkness would be best. In his movements he had knocked against a chair; so he now drew this up with the back resting against the closed door, and mounted it. Through the two transoms he had an excellent view of Number Eleven. Big Slim and Bohlmier stood with the cloth bag at a table; the burglar produced the tools which they had selected and spread them out with much neatness of hand.

There followed a short consultation held in whispers and with their lips held close to each other's ears; then Big Slim selected a couple of the tools and approached the wall on the right. Quickly the Swiss rolled up a rug and placed it on the floor directly under the spot selected by the burglar for his operations. The paper was peeled off in a large circle about three feet from the floor; then Big Slim attacked the plaster with a bit that chewed through it rapidly; after a hole had been made large enough to insert a short steel bar, great lumps of the plaster fell upon the sound-killing rug beneath. Scanlon marveled at the celerity of the thing, and while he was doing so a saw cut its way through the lath beneath the plaster. There was now nothing but a thin layer of the same substance between the housebreakers and the adjoining room.

"In five minutes they'll be there," said Bat, in perplexity. "And then what?"

There came a flare of light behind him; with a subdued exclamation he turned, his hand reaching for the big Colt in its holster beneath his coat. But the hand paused before it reached its desire; for there upon the side of a low cot sat a beetle-browed fellow, shabby and down at the heel. He had a lean jaw, blue with an unshaven beard, and in his hand, dangling carelessly by the trigger guard, was an automatic pistol.

"Well," said the lean-jawed gentleman, after a pause, with cool inquiry in his voice, "what's the idea? Do you make a practice of coming into people's rooms, building a grand stand for yourself and taking observations across the hall?"

Bat, still standing upon the chair, faced the speaker, assuming a nonchalance he did not feel.

"A couple of friends of mine are over there," explained he. "Little joke on them, see? Didn't know this room was occupied."

"Friends of yours, eh?" The man with the lean jaw stuck his head forward, and a wide grin showed several black teeth. "You look like a fairly respectable guy; and to hear you hook yourself up with a pair of yeggs is a jolt to me." Then suddenly the speaker rose and tossed the pistol upon the bed. In an altered voice he continued: "Suppose you get down off that chair, old top, and let me have a look at the proceedings."

As he said this there was a look of amusement in his eyes; something seemed to fall from him which changed his aspect. With a gasp of wonder Bat Scanlon leaped down and grasped his hand.

"Kirk!" said he, "Kirk, by George!"

CHAPTER XIV

ASHTON-KIRK VISITS HEADQUARTERS

For a moment Bat Scanlon stood looking at the disguised investigator, an expression of almost incredulity upon his face.

"I see it's you!" spoke he. "But, just the same, I feel like denying it."

Ashton-Kirk smiled. However, he made no reply, but stepped up on the chair which Scanlon had just vacated and looked through the transom. When he got down there was an amused look upon his face.

"Your friend, the burglar, seems quite a capable person," said he. "That hole he's making in the wall is a very neat job. But," and he shrugged his shoulders, "he will have his labor for his pains."

"How do you know?" asked Bat.

"Because I went through the room they are breaking into an hour ago—and the thing they are looking for is not there."

Bat mopped his forehead.

"Well," said he, "I'll admit this is all a kind of a whirligig to me. I'm in it, and I'm losing none of the motion, but what's turning the thing is more than I can make out." He looked at Ashton-Kirk. "What place is this?" he asked.

"It's a lodging-house, kept by a Mrs. Dolan. And it happened that several lines of action converged here. But," and he took the automatic from the bed where he had thrown it and thrust it into his pocket, "there is nothing more to be done here, so we may just as well go while the gentlemen across the hall are still absorbed."

He put on a shabby coat, and with a worn hat pulled well down upon his head, he opened the door and took a look out into the hall.

"Quick, now!" said he to Scanlon. "It's important that you should not be seen, for your acquaintance with these people may be valuable still."

Bat slipped through the doorway and down the hall, and when Ashton-Kirk followed a few moments later, he found the big man awaiting him in the shadows of the alley.

"Where to?" asked Bat.

"There is a taxi station near here," said the investigator; "we'll need a cab."

They walked through the silent street and finally saw the illuminated sign of a garage; they got into a cab, Ashton-Kirk saying:

"Police headquarters."

The taxi rolled rapidly on its way; block after block was passed. Bat endeavored to reopen the matter of his finding the investigator in the house they had just left, but Ashton-Kirk did not seem disposed to talk; he sat in one corner of the cab, apparently deep in thought. At length they brought up before the enormous

pile in which the police, together with other municipal departments, had their headquarters. Their feet echoed hollowly as they walked through the marble corridor; a drowsy elevator man ran them up to the desired floor, and in a moment more they were in the department devoted to the detective branch of the police.

A man with a deeply-marked face and iron-gray hair sat at a desk.

"Hello, Scanlon!" greeted he, affably.

"How are you, Sarge?" replied Bat. "Doing your little night trick, eh?"

"Yes." The old plain-clothes man yawned a little. "Nothing exciting in it, either; hasn't been a thing stirred since I came on." Then with an indication of interest: "But maybe you've got something that'll help keep us awake."

"Osborne," said Ashton-Kirk. "Is he here?"

The old headquarters man bent his brows at the shabby figure; the slouch, the leering look, the head aggressively thrust forward, marked it plainly as of the class against which he had been pitted for years.

"Yes," he replied, briefly.

"We'd like to see him."

"Right through the door," said the veteran detective.

The two passed through the door indicated, and saw the burly figure of Osborne, comfortably installed in an easy chair, reading a newspaper.

"Hello," said he, sitting erect. "That you, Scanlon?"

"Me, with a friend." Bat grinned, highly entertained. "He wants to have a little talk with you, I think."

Osborne examined the figure before him attentively. Ashton-Kirk leaned against the office rail, his hands in his pockets, the rat-like thief to the life. The detective examined him carefully, but no ray of recognition came into his face. Then, like throwing off a garment, Ashton-Kirk allowed the mannerisms he had assumed to drop from him. Osborne at once sat erect with a laugh of pleasure at his own lack of penetration.

"Good!" said he. "You almost fooled me." He arose and shook the criminologist's hand. "But what's the idea?"

"I've just been paying a little visit," replied Ashton-Kirk. He seated himself upon the edge of a desk. "Anything new?" he asked.

"Not much. We've still got young Burton, of course, but he's about as close-mouthed a proposition as I ever had anything to do with. He says he isn't guilty, but that's all he *will* say. We've given our evidence to the district attorney's office, and they'll pass it on to the Grand Jury in a few days."

"You've still got it in your mind that he's the person you want, have you?"

Osborne crossed one leg over the other and put his thumbs in the armholes of his vest.

"I have," acknowledged he. "I've had a good bit of experience in these things, and it looks pretty straight to me. We've got the motive, all right, and it's a strong one. I think a good case can be built up around that, the candlestick and the testimony of the maid and nurse. As a matter of fact," with professional complacency, "I've seen more than one man go to the chair with less evidence against him."

"But suppose there were some other little points to be taken into consideration?" asked Ashton-Kirk. "As I see it, you are restricting yourself to a very narrow field. The sort of life the Bounder led is well known to every one. Do you suppose he was without enemies? Is it not possible that others may have had motives for dealing the blow that ended his life?"

Osborne nodded his head, but his comfortable attitude did not change.

"Sure," said he. "That's so. I've no doubt that Tom Burton, in his time, double-crossed a dozen 'guns' that would have been only too glad of a chance to 'get' him. But they didn't do it; no one but the man we've got had the chance that night. They weren't near enough."

The investigator bent toward the speaker, his eyes steadily upon his face.

"How sure are you of that?" said he.

Osborne took his thumbs from the armholes of his vest

"I'm certain," he replied. "There wasn't any one around but them we know of. And that being the case there couldn't be——"

But Ashton-Kirk stopped him.

"Just one moment! Don't you think you are rather offhand in saying 'and that being the case'? Are you quite sure that it is the case?"

Osborne pulled himself up straight in his chair and stared at the investigator. Bat Scanlon, watching and listening, felt a little stir of excitement as he realized what his friend was about.

"He's getting him worked up into a state of doubt," was Bat's opinion. "In a minute he'll have him so he won't know what he believes."

However, there was more than this in the big athlete's thoughts. The way Ashton-Kirk took to bring doubt to the mind of the headquarters man awoke a vague distrust in that of Scanlon. The question of motive filled him with uneasiness—that as to the likelihood of a person other than young Burton being near enough to strike the death blow, turned him cold and helpless.

"You've got something on your mind," said Osborne to the investigator. He arose to his feet and stood with shoulders squared and legs very wide apart. "What's it all about?"

From his coat pocket Ashton-Kirk drew a glittering little revolver.

"I picked this up on the lawn at No. 620 Duncan Street the morning I went over the place," said he, quietly.

The big headquarters man almost snatched the weapon from his hand, so disturbed was he at this announcement. With greedy eyes he inspected it.

"Smith & Wesson," said he. "Twenty-two calibre, five chambers, all loaded." He stood weighing the

revolver in his hand and looking at the investigator. "Anything more?" he asked.

"I saw undoubted indications of a woman's presence—a woman who had been lurking outside the house and peering in at the window of the room in which the Bounder was killed."

"A woman!" Quick excitement was in Osborne's face. "Why, one of the first things I said when the news came in was——" He stopped, a frown wrinkled his brow and he shook his head. "Indications are one thing, but proof is another," he said. "Suppose it was shown that a woman was hanging around outside the house that night?—suppose she carried this gun? What would that get us? She wasn't inside—therefore she couldn't have killed the Bounder. And then, again, the man was killed by a blow on the head. He wasn't shot."

Ashton-Kirk shrugged his shoulders with the air of one who had relieved himself of a responsibility.

"I'm merely pointing out these facts to you," he said. "Of course you can do with them what you like."

With a nod to Scanlon, he was ready to go. Osborne stopped them at the door and asked a half dozen questions, all bearing pointedly upon what the investigator had just told him.

"All right," said he. "Thanks. This looks as though it'd be of little use; but then it doesn't do any harm to know all you can about a case."

Bat Scanlon heard the investigator chuckle as they got into the waiting taxi.

"It would be a safe gamble that he will be out at Stanwick in the morning looking over those places he has neglected heretofore," laughed Ashton-Kirk, as the driver slammed the door shut after them and started toward the destination given him.

Bat, anxious of eye, and with lips grimly pressed together, was silent for a space, and then he said:

"What was the idea of telling the 'bulls' those things? You don't give your clues away as a rule."

Again Ashton-Kirk laughed.

"I don't think headquarters will go very far on what indications they get from the lawn at this stage," said he, drily. "So I don't anticipate much interference from them. And," with a nod of the head which told Scanlon everything and nothing, "I have a little theory which I desire to try out. And I expect an answer within twenty-four hours."



CHAPTER XV

SCANLON STATES HIS POSITION

It was a fall Sunday, misty and with a fine rain falling; the mean street in which Ashton-Kirk's house stood—once the street of the city's aristocracy, but now crowded with the hordes of East Europe—looked sodden and cheerless. Bat Scanlon, as he mounted the wide stone steps and rang the bell, looked about and philosophized.

"Funny how things have their ups and downs—men as well as streets. And this is one of my days for being down. Down at the bottom, too," disconsolately; "at the bottom, with all my vexations piled up on top of me."

Stumph, grave of face, and altogether the very model of men-servants, opened the door.

"Yes, sir," said he, in reply to Scanlon's question. "Mr. Ashton-Kirk is at home. You are to go up, sir."

Scanlon made his way up the familiar staircase; from the high walls, the rows of painted faces looked down on him from their dull gilt frame.

"A fellow must feel a kind of a pressure on him to have an assorted gang of ancestors looking down on him this way all the time," said the big man, mentally. "I don't know whether I'd like it or not."

Stumph knocked at the study door, and when a voice bade them come in, he opened it and stood aside while Scanlon entered. Ashton-Kirk sat upon a deep sofa with his legs wrapped in a steamer-rug, smoking a briar pipe, and going over some closely typed pages.

"How are you?" greeted he. "Take a comfortable chair, will you? You'll find things to smoke on the table. And pardon me a moment while I finish this."

Scanlon lighted a cigarette and sat down. The criminologist plunged once more into the typed sheets, and while he was so engaged, Bat's eyes roved about the room. Through the partly open door at one end he had a detail of the laboratory with its shining retorts and racks of gleaming apparatus; in the study itself were rows of books standing upon everything that would hold them; cases were stuffed with them; they littered the tables and stands, some spotless in their fresh newness, others dingy and old, with warping leather backs and yellowed pages.

Ashton-Kirk put the sheets down at last and sat for a space smoking in thoughtful silence, the singular eyes half closed. Then he threw aside the rug and arose; pressing a call button he began pacing the room.

"This little case of ours is gaining in interest," said he. "Its scope is widening, too. I put one of my men, Burgess, on a detail which I wanted thoroughly searched, and it led him to New Orleans."

Scanlon elevated his brows.

"No!" said he. "Is that a fact?"

There were a number of newspapers scattered about the floor. Ashton-Kirk kicked one of them out of the way as he turned the table in his pacing.

"I suppose you've seen the afternoon editions," said he, with a smile at the corners of his mouth.

"Not yet," said Scanlon. "It's a bit early."

"I had Stumph get me some of them," said the investigator, "and it's just as I expected it would be. My plan of last night worked perfectly."

"You mean what you gave Osborne at headquarters."

"Yes. One of the first things he did was to call in the reporters and tell them of the new clues. He neglected to state, evidently, by whom they had been found, and the reporters naturally took it for granted that he was the person."

"Of course," criticized Bat, "that's the regular way for 'bulls' to work. They grab off everything they can."

"Listen to this!" Ashton-Kirk took up one of the newspapers and turned to the first page. "The head-lines read:

"CLUE TO STANWICK PUZZLE

A WOMAN FIGURES IN MURDER OF BURTON

Clever Work by City Sleuth

He Finds Evidence Overlooked by Others'"

"Stuff of that kind is like steam coal to a boiler," spoke Mr. Scanlon. "It'll keep the reporters going for days."

"The body of the article is shot full of fanciful matter," said the investigator, as he tossed the paper aside. "It must have been a youth of considerable imagination who wrote it; the casual reader would take from his printed remarks that the city authorities have the woman who made the footprints directly under their eyes—that only an order is necessary, and she'll be taken into custody."

Scanlon looked at the graying end of the cigarette with uneasy eyes; he shifted in the big chair and crossed one leg over another.

"That fellow Osborne'll never find out anything unless some one tells him," said the big athlete. "And no one's going to do that—not yet, anyway, eh?"

There came a knock upon the door.

"Come in," called Ashton-Kirk.

A short man entered; he had big shoulders and remarkable girth of chest, and he carried a black, hard hat in his hand.

"Sit down, Burgess," requested the investigator. The man with the bulging chest nodded to Scanlon and took a seat upon the edge of the sofa. "I've just been going over that report of yours," went on Ashton-Kirk. "You have done very well. And I thank you."

Burgess fingered the rim of the black hat, and seemed gratified.

"I never saw a job develop so," said he. "Didn't look like much at first; but it was all over the place in a day or two. I had to jump clean to Cleveland almost at once. I guess Fuller told you." And as the investigator nodded, the big-chested man proceeded: "I squeezed Cleveland dry, and followed the lead to Milwaukee, then to Nashville, and finally to New Orleans. I got most of my leads in Cleveland; she was married there and quite a lot of people knew her."

Ashton-Kirk picked up the typed sheets and glanced through them as though to refresh his memory.

"They seem to speak very highly of her," said he.

"Couldn't be better," replied Burgess. "But there was one little drawback. There wasn't any of them that knew her very well—except professionally. And to know a person only professionally is no guarantee that you know the facts about her."

"Very true," said Ashton-Kirk. His eyes were still going over the sheets. "You say here that Parslow was rather negative concerning her."

"Yes. You see, she was with him for some time; and once, when he couldn't do very well without her, she told him she'd have to have more money. A thing like that," and Burgess smiled and nodded, "sometimes makes them shy of the good word." The man nursed his knee, the hard hat still in his hands. "I went to see Parslow at his office. He's been manager of that theatre for fifteen years and made it pay, after every one else had failed. Kind of a tight old wax, I'd say. I couldn't get much out of him at first; but later he talked plenty. He wouldn't say anything against her, but he didn't praise her much."

"At Nashville you had more success?"

"Oh, yes; a good bit more. She'd been there a season, after leaving Cleveland. There is a Mrs. Thatcher, who keeps a boarding-house, who let me in on some inside stuff. You've seen it all in the report, I suppose. The lead that took me to New Orleans was a promising one, but it didn't turn out as well as I expected. But I got some information, at that."

Ashton-Kirk once more pressed one of his call bells; and then turning to Burgess, he said:

"What you have learned will be of real service. It's always well, I think, to have a background for a case like this; the bare facts concerning the crime itself are not always quite satisfactory."

Here Stumph entered the study, and the investigator spoke to him.

"Bring me Volume IV, and at once, please."

After the grave-faced servant had left the room, Ashton-Kirk went on with his remarks to Burgess. Bat Scanlon sat quietly listening; there was something forlorn and sunken in the way his big frame rested in the padded chair, and the expression on his face was one of almost despair.

In a few moments Stumph appeared bearing a huge canvas-covered book; this he laid upon the table, and Ashton-Kirk at once began to turn the pages, filled with writing in a copper plate hand and ruled with great precision.

"I had intended to put Fuller on this," said he, as he scanned the entries, "but he's still deep in something else."

Burgess half arose and looked at the open pages. And as he settled back on the sofa, he nodded.

"Yes, he's clever at that. But I guess we can go through with it, and not bother him."

"Put down these names," said Ashton-Kirk. Burgess at once produced a note-book and a pencil. "Cato Jones," read the investigator.

"I know him," said Burgess as he jotted down the name. "A mulatto who keeps an antique shop in Farson Street."

"Judah Rosen."

"He's likely," commented Burgess. "I saw a record of him once as written up by the Manchester police. They made it so hot for him in England he had to jump out."

The criminologist read out a number of additional names; then Burgess closed his note-book and put it in his pocket. Ashton-Kirk took a folded paper from a drawer and handed it to him.

"Here are your instructions. Work carefully, and whatever you do, don't let any inkling of what you are after get out."

Burgess glanced at the document's contents, and at one point his mouth puckered up as though he were going to whistle.

"All right," said he, as he refolded the paper and put it, also, in his pocket. "Anything more?"

"Not now. But keep in touch."

Burgess promised to do so; and with a nod to Ashton-Kirk, and one to Mr. Scanlon, he left the room.

"Burgess hasn't the natural tact of Fuller," said Ashton-Kirk as he threw himself once more upon the sofa and began recharging the briar pipe. "But he has done amazingly well at times. He has a pushing way about him and seems to do things by sheer pressure in which a more pointed intelligence would fail."

He lit the pipe and rearranged the rugs comfortably about his legs. Then with a contented sigh, he lay back and looked at Scanlon.

"Well, we seem to be doing fairly, eh?" said he. "I rather think that before long we'll make an end of this affair."

Bat crushed the fire from the end of his third cigarette against the side of a pewter bowl upon the table. Then leaning toward the investigator, his hands upon his knees, he said:

"I want to let you in on something I think you ought to know. This whole matter has come to a point where it's best for me to declare my intentions. Before very long I can see myself taking a stand; and when I do, I don't want you to be surprised."

Ashton-Kirk looked at him, inquiringly, but said nothing.

"And to explain just what is behind this possible stand," proceeded Scanlon, "I'll have to tell you something I've never told a soul before." There was a direct bluntness in the voice and the manner of the big athlete which men who are naturally diffident assume when they approach certain subjects.

"About eight years ago," went on Bat, "I went broke on a wrestling tournament in 'Frisco; and right away I had to look around for something to run the wolf off the property. In Oakland there was a theatrical

manager who had nerve enough to do Shakespeare, and he was rehearsing 'As You Like It.' A friend of mine tipped me off that there was a week's work for me if I went after it; and go after it I did. Acting was new to me, and it had my nerve a little; but the director told me not to bother, for I could leave that all to the regular company; my work was to rehearse the leading man in a little wrestling bout, and then go through it with him in the show."

Ashton-Kirk laughed.

"And so," said he, "you are another of the many who have sweated their way through the rôle of 'Charles, the Wrestler.'"

"That was me," replied Bat. "But I didn't sweat much. The leading man was a kind of a drawing-room actor, and I had to keep at low pressure all the time so as not to wear him out. But what I did as an actor ain't got much to do with what I want to tell you. The big thing is that the Rosalind of that production was Nora Cavanaugh; and it was the first time I ever saw her."

"Ah!" said Ashton-Kirk. "You knew her as far back as that, did you? That's interesting."

"She was the finest thing I ever looked at," said Bat Scanlon. "And not only that, but she rang with the right sound. I was never what you would call a woman's man, and so I never got to knowing much about them. But in the week I was in that Oakland theatre I took a new course, and, though she never knew it, Nora was the teacher."

"You didn't fall in love with her!" said the investigator, through a haze of pipe smoke.

"I did," replied the big athlete. "I fell for her as a man falls off a steeple—there was never a chance for me—even if I'd looked for one—which I never did."

"That's a novelty," said Ashton-Kirk. "I'd never have thought of you in that way, Bat."

"I'd never have thought it of myself, only it was kept pretty bright in my mind," said Scanlon. "We got to be good friends—but I had to jump away south. When I got back, Nora was in Denver playing a season. I didn't see her for a year; and by that time she'd got her head full of being a big star in the east, and so as I had nothing of value to dim this idea, why, I pulled out without her ever knowing just how I was feeling. In another year she was married—to Burton; and I was down for the full count."

"Too bad!" said Ashton-Kirk, rather more absently than should have been the case. "Too bad!"

"And that's what I mean," said Bat Scanlon, "when I say that I may declare myself before long. I won't if I can help it; but if certain things come to pass—well, there's nothing else to be expected."

"Of course not!" said the investigator. "You are quite right. But let us hope that everything will come out all right." He looked at his watch, and then arose briskly from the sofa. "I'd almost forgotten," he said. "My plan was to visit young Burton to-day. Will you come along?"

The idea appealed to Scanlon. He had seen the young artist only once, and that once had left its impress on his mind.

"Sure," said he; "there's nothing I'd like better than a chance to hear and see that young fellow again."

Ashton-Kirk summoned Stumph and said:

"Tell Dixon to bring around the car at once."

Ten minutes later, attired in a long, closely-fitting coat, he walked at Scanlon's side down the steps to the waiting car.

"Perhaps," said the investigator, "it would have been a trifle better if I had made this visit a day or two ago, as I had intended. But I had a reason for not doing so." The door of the car closed upon them and as they whirled away through the fine rain Ashton-Kirk went on: "Last night I told you I was trying a little experiment. Well, to-day," and there was a look of eagerness in the keen eyes, "I hope to get a result."

"What sort of a result?" asked Scanlon.

"Oh, that I don't know. Wait, and we shall see."



CHAPTER XVI

"CONFESSED!"

The sombre, battlemented walls of the jail looked grim and merciless through the gray of the day. To Scanlon they seemed of appalling thickness and hardness; the turrets, which occurred at regular intervals, he knew held men, armed and sleepless, who watched tirelessly. Hundreds and hundreds of dingy souls drooped inside; guilt hung over the whole place like a palpable thing.

"Crime will never be cured by placing criminals in institutions like this," said Ashton-Kirk, as they waited at the gate. "Instead, it breeds here. Prison-keepers are a race of themselves; as a rule they are bullies and grafters. And men placed for terms of years at the mercy of these can't be expected to grow, except toward the shadows. A youth, who, because of idleness, impulse or dissipation, offends society in some way, is thrown into this pit of moral filth to cleanse himself. Very few men have the fibre of the true criminal; and when a casual lawbreaker sees this dreadful blow leveled at his soul, he is at first bewildered and afraid; then, if he has any spleen, he arrays himself against the force which struck the blow. And, so, society has gained another enemy."

They were admitted by a uniformed guard, and in a few moments were in the office. A white-haired man in a formal frock coat of a decade ago greeted Ashton-Kirk warmly.

"I am delighted to see you," said he, as they shook hands. "I doubt if you have been here since that forgery case of Hamilton & Durbon. Old Clark had reason to be thankful for your visit that day, sir, for it saved him a long term of undeserved imprisonment."

Ashton-Kirk smiled.

"It was rather a simple matter, and took only a few minutes to demonstrate," said he. "The firm was struck by panic, and frightened people usually want a victim. If this had not been so in their case—if they had used the ordinary intelligence of the day's work—they would have seen the truth themselves."

Here Ashton-Kirk presented Scanlon to the warden. The latter put on his eye-glasses and bowed with old-fashioned courtesy.

"We should like to see Frank Burton, the young man accused of murdering his father," said the investigator, after a little.

"Ah, yes!" The warden nodded, sadly. "That is a very dreadful case. I am told there is little doubt he is guilty. And a very prepossessing boy. It is a great pity."

He went to the other side of the office to ring a bell, and Bat took the opportunity to say:

"What name did you give him?"

"Eastabrook! You may have heard of him. He has written books on penology, and goes about lecturing on prison conditions."

Scanlon looked dubious.

"I hope it won't depend on his say-so," said he. "He don't sound like a heavyweight to me."

"He's as easily deceived as a child—and I rather think that is why he is here. His great obsession is loyalty; every guard in the place may be a grafter and a rascal, but as long as there is an effusive display of loyalty to him, his eyes are closed. One honest man of his type is more of a clog to reform than all the scoundrels combined."

Here the old warden returned; at the same time a guard entered the office.

"Healey will show you the way, Mr. Ashton-Kirk," as he shook hands with the investigator. "And I trust your interest in this unfortunate young man will have happy results."

He also shook Scanlon's hand and expressed much gratification at having met him; then the two followed the guard out into the courtyard and into the gloomy corridors of the jail. There was a stale, confined smell in the place; a chill was in the air—the sort of thing that comes from continued damp. The blank steel doors with their rows of rivet heads, and the criminal history of the cell's inhabitant hanging beside them on a neat card, oppressed Bat.

"There is a movement on foot to do away with capital punishment," said he, to Ashton-Kirk. "What makes them think life imprisonment isn't as bad?"

The investigator shrugged his shoulders.

"They *don't* think that," said he. "They merely present the indisputable fact that a legal murder cannot in any way make amends for an illegal one. When that is acted upon, I'm of the opinion that the jailing of men will get more attention."

The guard was a heavy-faced man, who walked with a limp. He had overheard these remarks, and now spoke.

"We hear lots of things like that," said he, resentfully. "People come here in gangs sometimes and talk their heads off, pitying men who can be handled only when they're locked up. If sheep could talk they'd say things just like these people; and these people, if the criminals weren't jailed, would be just as helpless among them as the sheep."

Bat Scanlon looked somewhat impressed.

"You've said something," said he, with a shake of the head, "but you haven't said it all."

"There was a woman here this morning," said the guard. "Was also in to see this fellow, Burton," as an afterthought. "And she talked that stuff, too."

"Came to see Burton, did she?" Ashton-Kirk looked interested. "Who was she?"

"Some kind of a relative, I think. It was Miss Cavanaugh, the actress."

Just then they came to a cell before which the guard stopped.

"Here you are," said he. "This is the man you want."

There was a shooting of bolts and the pressure of an opening door. The inner door was of close bars; they saw a narrow cell with unrelieved walls and a grated opening through which came a small trickle of daylight. A figure arose from the cot at the far end and stood looking uncertainly at the doorway.

"Want to go inside?" asked the guard. "The warden said it'd be all right."

"Thanks," said Ashton-Kirk; "if you please."

The barred door was unlocked and opened; the two entered, and stood face to face with young Burton.

"How are you?" said Scanlon, holding out a ready hand. "Remember me? I saw you at your place at Stanwick one day."

"The day I was arrested," said the young man. "I remember you."

Scanlon waved the hand, which the other had neglected to take, toward his friend.

"This is Mr. Ashton-Kirk. You may have heard of him. He's interested in this case."

The young artist made a weary gesture.

"That can be said of a great many people," he said. His face was white and had a harassed look; his eyes shone feverishly. "I have been, to speak frankly, plagued to death by their interest. It isn't a pleasant thing to feel that almost every one is consumed with the desire to place a brand of some sort upon a fellow creature."

Ashton-Kirk regarded him without resentment.

"I understand the feeling, I think," said he, quietly. "It comes from the shock of the charge laid against you, and the depression of the jail. But consider this," and the singular eyes held the young man steadily; "if the truth is to come out in this matter, interest must be taken by some one. If you are to be freed of this charge it will be very likely, by placing the weight of it upon some one else."

A look of despair was in the hot eyes of the prisoner; his hands clenched tightly.

"All his life," he said, as though speaking to himself, "all his life he did evil; and now that he is dead, the evil continues." He pointed to a bench at one side and added: "Will you sit down?" The two having seated themselves, he sank down weakly upon the edge of the cot. "I've been in poor shape since I came here," said he. "I can't sleep, and my nerves are gone."

"That's bad," said Bat Scanlon. "Nothing wears a man out like loss of sleep. Try to quit thinking of this affair; if you don't——"

"Quit thinking of it!" Young Burton laughed in a high pitched fashion that was very disagreeable to hear. "Quit it? You might as well ask me to stop the sun from coming up. I could do it just as easily."

There was a short silence; young Burton picked at the coverings of his bed with nervous fingers; and then he resumed:

"They say that any good thing brought into the world remains; that good can never be destroyed. I wonder if the same cannot be said of evil. He is dead; and yet what he did is living after him."

"That is probably one of the things that will oppress mankind forever. The persistence of evil is the thought behind many ancient religions. Indeed, one might include modern creeds as well," added Ashton-Kirk, "for Christianity teaches that evil clings from generation to generation, from age to age."

"I recall *him* first as a man whom I felt to be a stranger, but whom I was told to call father," said young Burton. "He did not live with us, only appealing now and then and making my mother very unhappy. Even then, small boy as I was, I hated him; and I know he detested me."

The young man was in that queerly relaxing state which causes men to tell their private griefs to even casual acquaintances.

"Very often," he went on, "we were rather happy, but that was always when my father was away. I remember a little white house on the outskirts where we lived unmolested for several years. My sister was at school; I was employed by an old wood engraver, one of the last of his kind; my mother earned a good living and we were quite comfortable and happy. My father had been away for so long that I had almost forgotten him; when a thought of him did come into my mind, it was as of an old trouble—and one that would never come again.

"But one evening when I reached home I found him there. My mother's face was white and she was trembling. But he was smiling! I would rather," and young Burton raised a shaking hand, "have heard another man curse than see him smile."

"I know the feeling," said Bat Scanlon. "I've felt something like it myself."

"He wanted money," proceeded the young artist. "I knew my mother had a little store somewhere, which she had put away, for the winter was coming on. He was cunning and must have divined this—it was the kind of thing she would do. When she refused, he smiled and insisted. And finally—the smile still on his mouth, remember—he struck her! I had been silent until that; but when I saw the blow fall, I became a maddened young animal. I flew at him blindly, and he beat me like a dog. A half hour later he went away, and with him went what money my mother had saved."

"Bad!" said Bat Scanlon. "Very bad!"

"And now," said the young man, "he's dead. But the evil which his life brought into the world still lives!" Oddly, his mind seemed to cling to this thought; his eyes, looking straight ahead, were filled with apprehension; his fingers picked nervously at the edge of a blanket.

"Evil is fear, and fear can be conquered," said Ashton-Kirk, quietly; "if a man wills it, he can stamp it out."

"Evil is fear!" The prisoner looked at Ashton-Kirk in sudden inquiry. "In what way?"

"In every way," replied the investigator. "No matter what its form, evil has its base in fear. And it is one of the plain offices of man to destroy this monster which has ridden him from the beginning. For when the race was young, the world was filled with unnamed dread—the darkness was peopled with unseen things. From this fear sprang superstition. The future held the first men cowed; the past had left the marks of trials and the memory of pain. And the fear of life has since made more criminals than perhaps any other thing; while dread of repeating the past has broken countless lives."

Ashton-Kirk paused for a moment, his eyes still fixed upon the young man; then he went on:

"This evil which oppresses you so has its roots in a fear, has it not?"

Again there was a pause; the prisoner's eyes met those of the investigator, fixedly.

"Don't allow it to crush you. You are in deadly danger; you need your mind to save yourself."

He arose and stood before the other; one hand went out and touched the prisoner's shoulder.

"I have brought you news. New clues have been found. Before this, the police have worked only along lines which led to you. Now they've gone off on another track. There is a woman in the case," and he patted the drooping shoulder, "and they hope to fasten the crime upon her."

Young Burton came to his feet with a jerk.

"A woman!" he cried. "They are crazy! A woman!" Once more he uttered the high pitched laugh which had affected Bat so disagreeably. "What can they be thinking of!" He stared with excited eyes at the investigator, then at Scanlon, then back again to Ashton-Kirk. "I will not allow it," he cried. "Do you hear? I'll not allow it. No woman did this thing. Tell them I said so. I will not permit an innocent person to be blamed. I did it! I did it—alone!"



CHAPTER XVII

THE WATERS ARE TROUBLED

The vast machinery used in gathering the news makes it possible for an event, only an hour or two old, to gain a place in the types and proclaim itself to the public. And only a short time after Frank Burton made his confession of guilt in his cell in the county prison, the newsboys were crying the fact in the street.

Ashton-Kirk and Scanlon had finished with their lunch at Claghorn's; at the cigar counter in the lobby they paused while they selected their favorite brands.

"How are you?" said a familiar voice, and looking up they saw Osborne, big, smiling and serene. "Nasty day," he proceeded, shaking some raindrops from the rim of his hat. "I suppose you've heard the news."

Ashton-Kirk carefully lighted the tip of a blunt cigar.

"What news?" he asked.

The heavy shoulders of the headquarters man twitched with pleasure; he saw, in this answer, the evasion of a defeated man.

"Why," said he, with an effort to keep the triumph out of his voice, "the confession of Frank Burton."

"Oh, that!" The investigator elevated his brows. "Yes, we heard it. As a matter of fact the confession was made in the first place to Scanlon and me."

The elation died slowly in the broad face of Osborne; however, that he still felt his sagacity to be of a superior quality was plain. So he said, with a carelessness calculated to discount the point gained by the other:

"Oh, that so? Hadn't heard of it. Well," and he laughed good-humoredly, "that makes it all the better. You know it's true!"

"It's so, all right," said Scanlon. "He told it to us, and afterward to the warden and a half dozen of the prison people."

"I said the other night we had a good case against him," smiled Osborne, as he looked at Ashton-Kirk with nodding head. "Didn't I? Didn't I tell you I'd seen men sent to the chair on less?"

"Yes, I remember some such expression," replied the investigator.

"But you kind of pooh-poohed it," said the headquarters man, smiling even more broadly than before. "You spoke of other indications, don't you remember? It was your idea a woman was in it." He looked at Scanlon, and laughed. "Recollect that?" he asked. "He said a woman had been hanging around outside—with a revolver—an old flame of the Bounder's, maybe."

Scanlon also laughed—and in the sound was an indication of vast relief. Women had disappeared out of the orbit in which the crime swung, for Mr. Scanlon. He had gone for days with a fear in his mind, with his spirit sagging under a weight of expectation. But now he was free of that. No woman figured in the case—the murderer had said so in his confession. Woman had vanished utterly from all things having to do with the affair. And so Scanlon laughed—a laugh of relief; and as he looked at the big, good-natured

face of Osborne, he realized that while he had always liked him, he had never appreciated him so much as now.

"Yes," said he, "I remember. He rather figured on the lady. But, then, I've heard it said that you never can count on ladies. You don't know just when you've got 'em."

There was a flavor to this old saying of men that had a recent tang—and flavors, like scents, are most reminiscent. Yes, he had heard it—only a very short time before, and under unpleasant circumstances. A cloud came over the big athlete's face; he tried to put the feeling aside, and in the effort to do so, memory flared up and showed him the facts. It had been in Duke Sheehan's place during his first talk with the burglar, Big Slim. It was the cracksman who had spoken of the undependability of women. Then with a rush came other things which he had said; chief among these was the story of how Nora had followed her husband on the night of the murder. And then, also, there was the thing he had seen himself through the windows at Bohlmier's hotel. But as these thoughts pressed forward in his mind he crushed them back.

"They happened," said he. "I don't question those I heard about, and I know what I've seen. But," and he sighed profoundly, "she ain't had anything to do with that man's death. There's no doubt about that. The party who did it has given it all up. It's as clear as sunshine on that point; and the other thing can wait; explanations for them can come at any time."

During the progress of these things through the mind of Mr. Scanlon, the talk had proceeded between Ashton-Kirk and the headquarters man.

"All right," said Osborne; "I know you seldom agree with the police about things, but this is one in which there is nothing more to be said. Burton himself says he did it—and his word is the last one."

Ashton-Kirk looked at his cigar with a favoring eye; the aroma was rich, and through the smoke he detected that thin spiral, of a denser texture, which spoke of the presence, in a proper proportion, of the leaf he prized.

"The thing which makes me quarrel with the police in most instances," said he, quietly, "is not want of foresight, but almost a complete lack of that vastly commoner gift—hindsight. Take this present case, for an example. You have just claimed that there is nothing more to be said—that young Burton in his confession has spoken the final word. How often," and he knocked the spear of ash from the cigar, "have confessions proven false, in your own experience? Look back over the last few years, and you'll find at least six clear cases of confessions which were untrue. On the records of the district attorney's office is written a case, years ago, of a man who confessed to a murder and was hanged. Afterward it was proven beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was innocent."

Osborne laughed once more; nevertheless a shade of doubt darkened the brightness of his humor.

"You're right there," admitted he. "Things like that have happened, but they are so few that we can't figure on them. This case," and his jaw set, "is sewed up. Young Burton is the man, and I think, when all is done and settled, you'll admit it yourself."

Ashton-Kirk nodded, and a glint of humor appeared in the keen eyes.

"You can always be depended upon to run close to form, Osborne," said he. "However, when all is done and settled, we shall see what we shall see." Then as he and Scanlon started through the lobby, he said over his shoulder: "In the meantime it would be well for you not to lose sight of those two clues I gave you last night. They may prove very useful."

Osborne grinned and waved a hand.

"All right," said he. "I'll put them away in camphor. They'll be good and safe there."

As Ashton-Kirk and Bat emerged from the hotel, the big athlete turned to his friend with serious eyes.

"How much of what you've just been saying to him is right, and how much is just bluff to cover a place where you miscued?" asked he.

"What I gave him are the facts," replied Ashton-Kirk. "A confession is not always conclusive, as I have just shown. There are circumstances under which a man may confess, because he fears to have the real truth come out. And there are indications in this case which rather hold that guilt lies in another direction than young Burton."

"Do you believe, in spite of his confession, that he is innocent?"

"I believe nothing—as yet I am merely searching for the truth."

They were standing beside the investigator's car as they talked; and now Ashton-Kirk gestured his friend to get in. But Bat shook his head.

"No," said he. "There is plenty of motion in a motor car, but it's not the kind of motion I want. I'm for a walk. And I'll like as not see you in the morning."

He strode away down the street, and for a moment the investigator stood gazing after him; then he opened the door, got in, and the car drove away.

Bat Scanlon walked for hours, thinking, thinking; and out of it all he got only what the first few moments told him. If young Burton had confessed to a thing of which he was not guilty, it must be as Ashton-Kirk said: fear that the real truth might come out. But fear of what? There could only be one thing: the fear of the charge being placed at the door of some one else.

"And who could that some one else be but the one," kept repeating in the big athlete's brain. "Who could it be but"—here he'd feel a sudden snapping in the nerves of his head, and the blood cells would gorge and thunder—"who but she who went to see him to-day—after the news came out that a woman was suspected."

Leg-weary and with an exhausted mind, Bat reached his gymnasium. Danny, the red-haired office boy, was there, and looked at his employer almost incredulously.

"Gee, boss, you look all in," he told him. "You ought to get Sebastian to give you a going over."

Sebastian was a huge Bohemian rubber, and Scanlon agreed to accept his ministrations. After a bath and a shower, the Bohemian kneaded and punched some suppleness into him; an hour's sleep followed this, and he was pleased to find himself in a mood for dinner.

"Good!" said he. "That's the right spirit. Being down in the mouth never helped any one yet. There still seem to be a few things to do in this case, and it's up to me to do them. So I'd better be fit if I'm going to get away with them."

It was while at dinner that an idea came to him like an electric shock. He would go see Nora; he would talk to her; if quite necessary he'd tell her all the things he knew and all those he suspected. And what she

said in reply he'd believe; every word would be held to by him, absolutely. No matter what came or went, after that, he'd believe nothing else.

"Why didn't I think of that before?" he asked himself, elated. "It's just the thing to settle it all. The great trouble with this affair is that there hasn't been enough plain talk. A little bit more might have cleared things up completely."

He smoked contentedly for a space after dinner; then he proceeded to Nora's house. The trim maid answered his ring.

"Yes; Miss Cavanaugh is at home."

Scanlon waited in the large old-fashioned reception-room while his name was taken up. Then the maid reappeared and led him to Nora's private sitting-room. Here he found her in a robe of silk and lace reclining upon a sofa, propped up with gay pillows, a book beside her. She held out one hand to him; the loose sleeve fell back, showing a beautiful arm, white and firm, and rounded magnificently.

"Oh, I'm glad to see you, Bat!" she said, and her tone and eyes confirmed the truth of her words. "It's been days and days since you were here, I think. I've called you on the telephone I don't know how many times, but never could find you in."

"I'm sorry," he said. "But this is kind of a busy time with me."

She pointed to a low chair, very deep and comfortable looking, which was near the sofa.

"Get a pillow for your back," she said, "and sit there." He did as commanded, and she looked at him with something like wistfulness in her great eyes. "Oh, it's so nice to have you there, Bat; you can be so still and wonderful when you want to."

"Still, yes," agreed Scanlon, "but I'm not so sure about the wonderful."

She smiled at him.

"If you were quite sure of that," she said, "you wouldn't be nearly so nice." Her great mass of bronze hair was loosely arranged about her head, and against the delicate blue of a pillow it shone like red gold in the light of the reading lamp. "I'm so glad it is Sunday," she went on, "and that I am not to play to-night. For I'm tired, Bat, more tired than you'd believe."

"I'd believe it, no matter how strong you made it," said he. "What you've gone through has been enough to tire any one."

She reached out and patted his hand gently as it rested upon the arm of his chair.

"Bat, you are so big and strong that you seem to give out sympathy naturally. And that is a quality which all women like." She paused a moment; her white, strong, beautifully-modeled fingers trifled with the bracelet of raw gold; her eyes were bright as though with tears, and there was a sad little smile about the corners of her mouth. "And it is so easy for a woman to be mistaken in men," she proceeded. "In the end she always selects and holds to one, and she is apt to judge all the others by him.—If he is weak, she feels that all men are weak; if he is strong, they are all strong. And if he is cruel and mean and selfish, she feels a desire to hate them all—and sometimes she does!"

Bat nodded his head slowly and wisely.

"Sure," he said. "That's to be expected. But in the end," hopefully, "her mind often clears up on that point. She finds, if she gives herself the chance, that there is really a big difference between them."

"You have some idea what my experience has been in the last five years or so," she said. "It has not been beautiful, Bat; it has, at times, been hideously ugly; and the tears I have wept and the things I have borne and the vows I have made have been very many. There have been times when I could think only of death, so completely humbled have I felt, so without spirit, so utterly in Tom Burton's power. I have told you something of his slimy plots, of his detestable innuendoes. He knew of my loathing of the divorce courts, and my fear of scandal, no matter how unfounded, and played upon them constantly, feeling sure that in the end I would meet his demands."

"But that's all over, Nora," said Bat. "It all belongs to the past. Try to forget it."

"I am going to forget it," she said. "Never doubt that I'm going to put it away from me and never think of it again. I speak of it only because I have something in my mind which recalls it strongly—as altogether dissimilar things sometimes do. All men are not evil, Bat; I suppose I have really known that always; but now the fact comes forward in my mind and takes the place of the fear I have had for so long. Some men are really very good, very kind and gentle. Some of them—perhaps only a few—would sacrifice themselves to assure the security of one who was unhappy and in trouble."

Bat Scanlon coughed and stirred in his chair.

"When did that idea come to you?" he asked.

"To-day," she replied; "just to-day, and——" But here she suddenly stopped, and the man saw a startled look flash over her face. "But of course," she resumed, hastily, "these things never come to us at the time we first realize their presence. They are a growth, it is said, and it takes time for them to make themselves known."

In spirit, Bat Scanlon felt himself sinking to the level of the afternoon. "Sacrifice ... to assure the security of one who was unhappy and in trouble." What did that mean? Nora had been in that position; young Burton, according to the theory of Ashton-Kirk, had made just such a sacrifice. Nora had been in a state of great agitation; she had visited the prisoner just before his confession of guilt; and now she was quieted, she was smiling and grateful!

The big man got up and walked the floor. She followed him with her great, brown eyes.

"Bat," she said, "you are nervous. And, now that I look at you, you are pinched and not of a good color." She lifted herself up upon one elbow, and continued, accusingly: "You have been worrying! Confess!"

"I have," said he. "This matter of Burton's death has fastened itself upon me tight; I can't shake it off."

"But," she said, "why should that be, unless"—and she paused while she looked at him searchingly—"it is because of me?"

"It *is* because of you," replied Scanlon, "for Burton was no kind of a fellow for me to worry about; things will go much better without him."

"But," and she looked at him, steadfastly, "if that is the case, then I should be much happier as it is. So why should you worry and grow pale and not be able to sit quietly and talk to me?"

He was about to begin some sort of an answer to this; at the moment he was standing in a position which

gave him a view of the street through one of the windows. His glance wandered in that direction, his mind occupied in forming a set of phrases which would be sufficiently evasive. But suddenly the gaze became fixed. A man stood upon the opposite side of the street looking toward Nora's house; the street lights were in his face and gleamed upon a pair of large metal-rimmed spectacles; one hand was furtively gesturing as though in signals to some one down below. The man was the Swiss, Bohlmier.

CHAPTER XVIII

NORA GOES TO STANWICK

Through the upheaving in his mind, Bat Scanlon managed to squeeze a reply to Nora's question which held some traces of plausibility.

"A fellow always feels upset by things like this," said he. "Most of the time there is no reason for it, but that seems to make no difference. He feels that way just the same."

He left the window and returned to his chair. There had been many things in his mind when he resolved to pay this visit, things which were direct and the answers to which must be illuminating. But they were all gone now. Her attitude, her words, had made them impossible. They talked of many things during the next half hour—that is, Nora talked. What Scanlon said he could never afterward remember. But there was one thing which always brought the fact of the conversation sharply to his mind—and that was his conjectures as to the man in the street below. Why was he there? and to whom was he signaling?

These thoughts finally became so insistent that Bat arose.

"I must be going," he said, rather lamely. "There are a few things I must do to-night."

"Oh, and I thought you'd come for a nice long visit," she said. Her tone was reproachful; but at the same time Scanlon could not help but notice that the glance which she gave the briskly ticking clock was one of relief.

He stood looking down at her; finally her eyes lifted to his and the expression she met was very grave and very honest.

"Nora," said he, "I've always been for you. You know that, don't you? And I always will be for you. So if there is ever trouble—any at all—you know where to come."

She arose. Nora was a tall woman, but she had to lift her face so that her eyes might meet his. She laid both hands upon his breast and when she spoke there was just the least tremble in her voice.

"I know," she said. "Dear old Bat, I know. Haven't I always called on you when I needed help, and you were near enough to hear? You are the most loyal friend a woman could have; I have been grateful for you, Bat, and I have prayed for you, many times."

"No!" said Scanlon. "No; have you though, Nora? Well, what do you know about that?"

When he went down the stairs he had a lump in his throat, and there was a tendency to blink drops from his lashes—Bat would have denied indignantly that they were tears—which amazed him. In the lower hall he met the maid.

"Isn't there a way out beside the front door?" he asked.

"Oh, yes; there is a door which opens onto a yard beside the old carriage house," said the girl.

"I'll go out that way," said Bat.

Surprised, but making no comment, the maid led the way. Scanlon passed through a door into the yard and

then through a gate which opened upon a small, quiet street.

"Thank you!" said he. And when the gate had been closed and the maid vanished, he started down the street; in a few moments he had rounded the corner; then a dozen yards brought him to the thoroughfare on which Nora's house stood. Cautiously, he peered from a sheltering doorway. Yes, there was the figure of the Swiss in the same position as before; and as Scanlon looked he saw a tall, stoop-shouldered man cross the street and stop at Bohlmier's side.

"Big Slim," said Bat. "That's who the sign was being passed to a while ago."

He watched the two men while they engaged in earnest conversation; then they started off, and he followed them. However, they did not go far; at the intersection of a small street they paused and then disappeared. Something in their manner of doing this told Bat their intention.

"They are going to lie low just around the corner," he said. "Waiting for something, I think."

He was but a dozen yards from Nora's house at this moment; and at an ornamental iron gate, of the period just after the Civil War, stood an aged colored man, very black, very highly collared and with much of the dignity of a servant of the old time. Bat paused and said with the carelessness of a casual stroller:

"Nice old street you have here, uncle."

There was the proper amount of confidence in the big athlete's manner, and his voice had that subtle shade of authority which carried the remark in its proper groove. For these ancient servitors are to be approached in only one way if results are to be had.

"Yas, suh," replied the black man at the gate, "yas, suh! It is a nice ol' street, suh. Not whut it was yeahs ago when I fust come here, no suh. But nice and quiet. And 'spectable."

"Of course," said Bat "Sure enough, entirely respectable!" He watched and saw that the two did not reappear at the street corner; a feeling of doubt was in his mind; he had no means of knowing if his conjectures as to their movements were true. However, if they had gone, very well! If they had not—well, he would be there and would know. "Yes," he went on, "a fine old block. Not many like it left."

"No, suh. Dey's mos' all gone. Lots o' po' folks f'om fur-off places crowdin' in, suh. An' dey jes' natch'ly push into de ol' streets. Ol' houses am like ol' families, suh. Dey's mighty scarce. Indeed dey is!"

Apparently Bat had chanced upon a favorite topic; like many of the old families, of whom he spoke so regretfully, the ancient man-servant cherished the days of the past. This Bat felt to be rather fortunate; it would provide a subject for conversation while he stood waiting in the shadow of the trees which ran along in front of the houses.

"A new section will grow up," he suggested. "And new families will proceed to grow old in them, and make them, also, respectable."

But the old darkey refused to consider this.

"No, suh, 'tain't possible. Dey'll never be like de ol' folks—not jes' like 'em. Yo' can't make quality, boss, no, suh."

Bat was still engaged in talk with the ancient darkey a quarter of an hour later when he saw the door of Nora Cavanaugh's house open, and a woman emerge. Though she was enveloped in a long coat and furs,

there was no mistaking the air, the free, splendid carriage. It was Nora.

With a glance up and down the street, she descended the steps and made her way north. As she passed the corner, Scanlon's eyes were fixed upon the one opposite her; with a tingling of the blood he saw the two men bob out with furtive eagerness; and, in a few moments, they were following her. He at once said good-night to the old servant and fell in their wake.

Nora walked rapidly; within ten minutes, from the fixedness of her direction, Bat guessed her destination.

"The railroad station," he said. "The railroad station, as sure as you live."

This guess proved a good one; the huge pile of the station soon loomed into view, the lights about its top dimming in the mists of the evening, the great round clock looking solemnly out across the city. Bat saw the two men follow into the building; he at once stationed himself at a door, through the glass of which he had a view of the ticket window. Nora went, without hesitation, to a certain window far down the room; in a few moments she turned away, a ticket in her hand and her eyes going to the clock. And as she disappeared up the stairs which led to the train shed, Bohlmier and Big Slim slipped up to the window, purchased tickets and followed her. When they were out of sight, Bat entered and walked down the huge room. Over the window to which the others had gone he saw a sign which told him the tickets for sale there were for the branch road upon which lay the suburb of Stanwick. Bat also bought a ticket.

In the train shed a light over a gate called his attention to the three cars which usually made up the local for the western suburbs. Nora was not in sight; the Swiss and Big Slim were climbing into a dingy combination baggage and smoking car which was directly behind the engine.

"I don't want to get into the car Nora's in," mused Bat. "And as she's an experienced traveler, I'd say that was the middle one."

He entered the last car by the rear door; a glance showed him that Nora was not there; and he settled himself in a corner seat opening a newspaper and holding it before him so as to avoid even the small chances of detection. In a few minutes the train started and in half an hour it brought up at Stanwick. From his window he saw Nora on the platform. His first impulse was to get out on the other side of the train, but instantly he realized that he must not do this.

"It's the very thing those other two gentlemen will do; and they'd spot me sure," he thought.

So he waited until the last possible moment; he dropped from the car as the train was pulling out, and a heaped up baggage truck hid him from view. He saw Bohlmier and Big Slim pass cautiously along the length of the platform, and out of sight; and then pursuers and pursued made away in the direction of Duncan Street.

"It's getting to be familiar ground," said the big athlete; "I think I could find my way there with my eyes shut."

The streets of Stanwick were lighted here and there by incandescent lights which shone yellowly through the heavy darkness. Bat could not be sure as to what was going on ahead of him, as the two men were careful to keep out of the rays of the lamps as they passed them. So he proceeded slowly with only occasional glimpses of the moving figures. Finally, as he neared the Burton home, he lost them entirely.

"They've taken cover," said he, between his teeth. "And now I'll have to trust to chance."

Keeping in the darkness as much as possible, he advanced; and in a little while he saw a muffled figure standing before a gate as though hesitating. It was Nora, and the house before which she had halted was No. 620. However, the hesitancy did not last long; for as he watched, she pushed open the gate and made her way toward the house.

Scanlon waited, his eyes going about in expectation of a movement of some sort from the shadows around him. But none came, and he gave his attention once more to Nora. He saw her move along the path as though to the door, over which burned a light; however, when within a half dozen yards of it, she veered to one side, and, to Bat's surprise, stole with quiet tread around the house.



CHAPTER XIX

IN THE DARK

As Bat Scanlon saw Nora disappear around the Burton house he once more awaited some developments from the shadows; but again there was no sign of the presence of either the Swiss or the lank burglar. So after a little he moved on until he reached the gate of the adjoining house and quietly lifted the latch.

A dog, from somewhere in the darkness, barked; Bat halted and listened, but there were no further sounds, and so he went on. Placing his hands upon the low division fence he bounded over upon the Burton lawn. Almost directly before him was the rose arbor behind which Ashton-Kirk had discovered the woman's footprints; and the big athlete took his place in the deep shadow of this and looked about. The window of the Burton sitting-room was lighted; inside was Mary Burton in her reclining chair, propped up by pillows, and reading. The shaded lamp cast a soft glow upon her; the white face wore an expression of suffering, and with this was a meekness, a submission which made it nun-like.

A woman's form flitted between Scanlon and the window; it stopped, and then the watcher saw Nora Cavanaugh peering in at the sick girl.

"Her notions of a social call seem to have picked up a twist somewhere," said Bat, to himself. "What's the idea?"

However, Nora only remained at the window for a few moments; then she disappeared in the direction from which she had come. In Bat's mind was a picture of two lurking men, the lank desperado, and the mild looking, yet murderous, Swiss; and he felt a chill of fear as he gazed into the darkness which had swallowed the girl up. A moment or two passed, then he heard the quick br-r-r-r! of an electric bell from the house.

"The door-bell," said Bat. "Through the sound of a hundred others I'd match myself to pick the one attached to the door of any house. They are all of the same family."

Another little pause; then he saw Nora in the sitting-room, the nurse behind her, and the sick girl reaching out her hand gladly. Bat breathed a sigh of relief.

"All right," said he. "Inside, she's not so likely to meet those gentlemen."

The nurse disappeared from the sitting-room; Nora sat down and began to talk with the invalid, earnestly. Outside all was still; after a little, Bat searched the surrounding shadows intently for anything that might indicate the whereabouts of Big Slim and Bohlmier; but the darkness was silent and complete. The windows of the houses opposite and adjoining were lighted; from one some little distance away came the faint tinkling of a mandolin, and the deeper sounding strings of a guitar; from still another came fresh young voices singing an evening hymn. Figures could be seen through the windows or silhouetted upon the shades; at one Bat saw a tiny girl and a very large dog who seemed her especial chum; they romped gaily; Bat heard the child laugh and the dog bark.

"Nice," he mused. "Nice and homey. Regular Sunday night stuff in the bosom of the family. But no sign of the two gentlemen who did the shadowing. They are lying low, I guess, same as I am."

He gave his attention once more to the sitting-room; Nora and the sick girl were still engaged in conversation. As Bat looked, Nora took a crumpled newspaper page from her hand-bag, as though it were

a part of what she was telling. The girl in the chair lifted herself up, eagerly, took the paper in her hand and read the staring head-lines. Then Bat saw it flutter to the floor, he saw her sit upright for a moment, gazing at Nora with wide-opened eyes; she sank back suddenly and heavily upon the cushions.

"Fainted!" said Bat, excitedly, leaning forward. He saw Nora arise quickly and bend over the girl, then he saw her open the door. "Calling the nurse," said he.

In a moment the nurse was in the room; and under the care of the two the invalid was soon restored to consciousness. Then followed a period of comforting, of patting pillows into shape, of cheerful assurance. Nora then kissed the invalid and bid her good-bye. She left the room with the nurse following her.

"Just came, evidently, to give her the news," said Bat to himself. "But I wonder why the haste. It wasn't the kind of news that would give joy or anything like that."

In a few moments he heard the front door close, and steps upon the walk. These ceased after a moment; there was silence; and then, to his amazement, Nora once more flitted through the darkness and came between himself and the window.

"There is a reason for it," said Bat. "She's not doing all this out of just idle curiosity. But what it leads to is a thing I don't——"

The thought was halted, unfinished, in his mind; for through the darkness, quite close at hand, came a cautiously moving shape; and from its direction, it was also seeking the shelter of the rose arbor. There was a door in the far side of the latter, as Bat had noticed on the day of Ashton-Kirk's investigation; he slipped quietly around and in at this; and through the trellis work he watched what was proceeding outside. The first glance showed him that Nora was now, also, moving toward the arbor, and the thought of what might occur upon her meeting with the prowler in the dark caused Scanlon's hand to go inquiringly to the big revolver which he carried in the breast pocket of his coat, and to shift it to a place where it would be more convenient.

But, though he strained his eyes to catch some indications of the shadowy figure he had seen only a moment or two before, he could not do so; it had vanished. This did not add anything to the big athlete's quietude of mind; for the footsteps of Nora, dulled by springy sod, were now close at hand.

The girl reached the arbor and took up the position which Bat had lately occupied; and he knew that she had settled herself for a vigil—to watch all that passed in the sitting-room of the Burton house. Naturally, the eyes of the big man also went in that direction once more.

The nurse had returned to the room and was bending over the invalid, a glass in her hand. The girl lay motionless, her face turned upward and her thin hands pathetically folded. The nurse, after she had succeeded in inducing the patient to take a few drops of what she held to her lips, busied herself with some things upon a small table near the chair; then she left the room.

There was a pause; no movement came from the room whatsoever. Bat fancied that the sick girl had gone to sleep; but this thought had no sooner taken shape in his mind than he saw her stir. Then she arose slowly in the chair, and sat, apparently listening, her manner surprisingly alert. Only a few moments ago she had shown every sign of exhaustion; now her strength was unquestioned, for her body was firmly held and her grip upon the arms of the chair was sure.

There came a little gasp from Nora crouching behind the rose arbor.

"Surprised!" thought Bat. "And no wonder! I'm just a little bit that way myself."

Mary Burton threw back the blanket in which she was swathed, and stood up. She wore a long dressing gown, tied about the waist; from a pocket of this she took something, and then after a moment of listening approached an old mahogany high-boy, unlocked and opened a drawer and looked into it. Almost at once it was slid back into place and relocked; the girl stood poised for an instant, as though not sure as to what her next movement would be; then she went tiptoeing to the door, opened it, and disappeared.

Nora drew a long breath; and Scanlon, as he stood, amazed, felt like echoing it. But the next instant all that which had happened in the sitting-room, surprising as it had been, was wiped from his mind. From outside there came a low-pitched voice, that of old Bohlmier:

"Do not make some noise!" it said. A gasp came from Nora, a gasp which would have been a scream if fear had not suppressed it. "I will talk a little with you, if you please."

There was an instant's silence; Bat pressed hard against the trellis work of the arbor—only a few inches separated him from the girl outside, and he could hear her breath catching sharply in her throat as she spoke.

"Who are you?"

"We will not speak of that," said the Swiss. "Only we will talk of things that interesting are."

This seemed to have a tonic effect upon Nora; when she answered her breathing had become almost normal; her voice was strong and held some confidence.

"I know you now," she said. "I saw you the other night."

Old Bohlmier chuckled.

"Ach! yes, the other night. You saw me, yes, but you spoke to me not! Now it will the other way be. Eh?"

"What do you want?" asked Nora, sharply.

"Do you so ask?" Bohlmier's tone was one of astonishment. "Is it possible? There is one subject only which we can talk about Is it not so? One subject. Yes?"

"I thought I told your friend all I had to say about that," said the girl.

"Ach! no! It is not true." If he had been able to see the old rascal, Scanlon was sure his head would be wagging and a mild smile would be upon his face. "You told him so—yes. But it is not true. Much more have you to say. Plenty more. And you will say it to me, eh? Now!"

The vision Bat had in his mind became more and more clear; not only would the bald head be moving from side to side, but it would be thrust forward in the deadly snake-like motion which the big athlete had seen once before. And the smile? He had never seen one like that which his ear told him Bohlmier's would be—a mild, quizzical smile which was a habit of the muscles only, and through which a pair of eyes gleamed with devilish purpose.

"Has he got me nervous, or something?" Bat asked himself. "Or do I call the turn on him right?"

"My friend," proceeded the old Swiss, "is a gentleman much experienced in certain things. In others he has not so much experience as that," and the listener heard him snap his fingers, sharply. "Not so much as

that! And so he let you go without some understandings."

Bat heard Nora laugh. It was not a pleasant laugh; nevertheless it caused a thrill of pleasure to shoot through him.

"Good!" he thought. "She has her nerve with her. He hasn't scared her even a little bit."

"Perhaps," said Nora, to Bohlmier, "you have the experience he lacked?"

"I haf the handling of many affairs had," came the voice of the Swiss, smoothly. "And from the first I asked for this one; for I knew, dear lady, I could the results get."

"You mean you thought you could frighten me where he failed." Again Nora laughed. "You have confidence." Then with a note of curiosity in her voice: "What would you have done?"

A sudden sharp movement came from outside the rose arbor; Bat heard the hissing of Bohlmier's breath and a sharp cry from Nora. A diminished light ray, unseen in any other way, was caught upon the uplifted blade of a knife; then Bat drove his arms through the frail trellis work; with the left hand he gripped the arm of the Swiss and twisted it wickedly. The knife was heard to strike against the side of the arbor as it fell. Bat's right hand, at the same instant, slipped along the man's body and gripped his throat like iron; and as he held him, he heard the muffled sound of Nora's steps as she fled away.



CHAPTER XX

QUEER INTELLIGENCE

The grip of Bat Scanlon upon the throat of Bohlmier did not relax; both hands of the Swiss clutched at the arm thrust through the trellis work of the rose arbor, but their puny strength was as nothing against the brawn of the big athlete. After a little the hands lost their power and slid helplessly away. Scanlon no longer heard the wheezing breath in the man's chest; and, so, he let go his grip. Bohlmier crumpled up and fell to the ground.

Bat drew his arms through the frail woodwork; there were many abrasions upon his knuckles and he was nursing these solicitously when he heard the stumbling approach of some one through the darkness. Instantly he was all attention; for a moment he fancied it was Nora returning; but the steps were not like hers—they were those of a man. Within a few yards of the rose arbor they stopped; there was a silence and then a voice said whisperingly:

"Hello! Bohlmier, are you there?"

"Big Slim!" was Bat's mental exclamation. "Hunting up his pal."

As no reply came to the lank burglar's low call, that gentleman moved nearer; there was an awkward scrambling, a heavy body struck the side of the rose arbor and set it creaking; then the voice of Big Slim was heard uttering guarded but profane remarks.

"He's fallen over the Swiss," Bat told himself, grimly.

That this was true was proven in another moment. There came a long-drawn breath from the man outside as though he'd made a startling discovery; then Bat saw the glimmer of a light, faint and guarded, but enough to show the figure of the Swiss huddled on the ground, and with another stooping over it. The light suddenly snapped off; silence and darkness followed.

The silence was so long continued that Bat grew uneasy. He was anxious to once more get on the track of Nora; also he was not quite sure as to his own position.

"It was easy to see through this place just then," he thought. "That light must have shone in a little. My friend outside is a person of observation; so how do I know he hasn't spotted the fact that some one is here."

That the burglar could have recognized him, even if this were so, was impossible; for the light was too brief and too dim. But that he had caught sight of some one inside the arbor was within probability; so Bat stepped with great caution toward the doorway. As he reached it he saw, or perhaps felt, that there was a bulk directly before him, much denser than the darkness; and as he studied this it occurred to him that it was about the size of a man. But he was not at all sure; so he stood very still, all his thews flexed, and waited for it to move. In a few moments there came a slow stirring; the bulk seemed to push forward. This was all Scanlon required; he lashed out with his right fist; it crashed into a living something with frightful force; there was a low outcry and a fall; and then Bat stepped out into the night and was away.

A score of paces from the rose arbor he stopped. He had not the least idea as to the direction Nora had taken, and so was puzzled about the next thing to do. But after the fright she had gotten he felt sure that she'd not linger about the little patch of ground surrounding No. 620 Duncan Street.

"She's away to the station," he said. "And that's my play."

So in a few moments he was on the street and hurrying toward the station. When within two score yards of it he heard a bell clang and caught the hiss of released steam. Then a train pulled out and rolled away down the dark line of track. The station lights were out, the platform was deserted and the waiting room, when he tried the door, was locked.

"Like as not she caught that train," mused Bat as he stood upon the platform. "And if so, all right."

He looked at a train schedule with the aid of a match, and then at his watch.

"Ten forty-eight," said he. "That's an hour yet. Some wait."

And a dismal, unproductive hour, too. The deserted platform, the chill winds and the drizzle of rain, made it most uncomfortable.

"I ought to be doing something," said he. "I ought to be——"

Of course! He ought to be at the Burton house; he ought to be trying to learn what was behind the marvel of the invalid girl who so suddenly became well; he ought to be eager and anxious to discover the objective of her cautious movements! At once, without any hesitancy, he hurried back along the way he had just come. Lights still burned brightly in comfortable little houses, set back from the street; they glowed with cheer and family life; but on the way he did not encounter a single pedestrian.

"Stanwick is strictly an indoor place on a rainy Sunday night," he mused, as he hurried along. "And I don't know that it hasn't the best of it."

He was inside the iron fence at No. 620 when he detected the first signs of a stir; these were the low sounds of careful steps on the walk and the murmur of conversation. He crouched in the shadow thrown by the house; the steps grew nearer and he recognized the voices as those of Big Slim and Bohlmier.

"I haf not much strength," wheezed the Swiss. "Holt me up! Ach! what a grip! It was like a gorilla's!"

As they drew opposite to Bat, he saw in an uncertain sort of way that the burglar was supporting his friend.

"Grip!" said Big Slim. "Well, the wallop he carried had some heft, too. Once I thought I had him; he stood right in front of me; but as I was reaching for my 'gat' he drove one at me that a bull couldn't have stood up under."

"That woman!" gasped Bohlmier, "she is full of tricks, yet. Who would haf thought she had somebodies here with her."

What the burglar replied Bat could not catch, for by this time they had reached the sidewalk. Under the light he saw the Swiss was holding to the other feebly, and that his steps were tottering and weak.

"I must have shut down on him even harder than I thought," said Bat to himself. "It was the knife that did it, and him whipping it out on Nora."

He waited until the two had disappeared; then he made his way softly around the house on the side he had not examined before. Here the windows were all blank and dark except one at the extreme rear. There he could see the colored maid washing some glassware; this window was partly open and he heard the

woman's voice singing:

"Swing low, sweet chariot,
Come fo' to carry me home."

Bat stood for a while in silent inspection of the place.

"Nothing doing, evidently," he said. "Just as quiet as you please."

He turned his eyes for a few moments upon the surrounding houses; and when they wandered back he noted with a start that one of the upper windows was now illuminated. He stared steadfastly at it, and as he was doing so the light grew brighter; he stood wondering at this, then he saw Mary Burton, a candle in her hand, appear at the window. But this was only for a moment; she moved away and the light dimmed, finally disappearing completely.

"She's left the room and closed the door," said Bat.

A few moments passed, and then a second window, this time on the floor below, flashed up with light. It remained so for some little time, now growing dimmer, and now stronger, showing that the girl was moving about the room. Then, like the other, the window suddenly became blank. One after another the windows were lighted up in the same fashion; sometimes Bat saw the girl, her dressing gown held about her with one hand, while with the other she held the candlestick. Then both she and the light disappeared altogether.

"Quite an active little excursion," said Bat. "Quite active and extraordinary. What is it about, I wonder? Why this sudden parade through the house on the quiet?"

He remained where he was for a short space of time. But all was silent save for the maid crooning the hymn, and the occasional inquiring bark of the dog on the next place, who probably got a strange scent coming down the wind. As there was nothing more to be hoped for there, he shifted his position to the other side. And as he came in range of the sitting-room window he saw the invalid reclining once more in her chair, supported by pillows, and with the nurse bending over her.

"Well," said Bat, after he had pondered over this scene for some time, "that seems to be taps for the evening."

He lingered a half hour, however, thinking there might be a possibility of something more; but as nothing happened, he made his way to the street, and crossed to the opposite side. Standing in the sheltering shadows of a building, while he contemplated the Burton house once more, he was given a start by a voice saying:

"Taking a look at it, eh? Well, it's worth it. I've been here ever since the place was Stanwick village, and I ain't never seen goings on in any home like I've seen in that one."

The speaker stood almost at Bat's side; he leaned upon a cane, and from the shaky quality of his voice, Scanlon felt that he must be of advanced age.

"That's where the murder was done, isn't it?" asked the big athlete. For there was a gossipy suggestion in the tone of the old man which made a show of non-certainty of possible value.

"Yes, sir; that's it. That's where Thomas Burton was found dead of a crushed skull," replied the old resident. "That's the house of his son and daughter. I see the father taken away to be buried, and I see the

son taken away to be put in jail. And I see the daughter's doctor coming to see her every day."

Here the old gentleman broke into a cackle of laughter.

"Every day," he repeated. "In a carriage with a little medicine case."

"An old party who seems to have his wits about him," said Bat to himself. "And not at all backward about making a show of them."

"I have a son," continued the old man, "and my son has a wife. We live a little piece down the street. My son's wife is fussy; she doesn't like any kind of public notice. And so, when I wanted to go to the police with what I've seen, she wouldn't hear of it. She said we might even have our names in the papers."

"Women are that way sometimes," said Scanlon. "I've noticed it more than once."

"Fools, I call them," declared the old resident. "But when they have control of things, you've got to let them have their way." He stood with his face turned toward No. 620 for a few moments and then continued: "Yes, sir, queer things go on in that house. People that's sick don't act the way she does."

"Who does?" asked Bat.

"Why, that girl over there! Every day stealing away out at the back door with a veil over her face and some one's else clothes on, and taking a taxicab for I don't know where."

"You saw that, did you?" asked Bat, eagerly.

"Yes, sir, I saw it; and I've seen it every day since the police were taken off guard. Sick!" again came the cackling old laugh. "Sick! Why, she ain't no more sick than I am."



CHAPTER XXI

WHAT THE BURGLAR SAID AT GAFFNEY'S

What the old resident of Stanwick said to Bat Scanlon aroused that gentleman to a high pitch, and he began asking eager questions.

"I don't know where she goes," said the man. "I wish I did. But I've seen her two or three times, and she was just as spry as you'd want anybody to be. Sick! Sick nothing!"

Bat's questions continued for some time, but this was the only fact the old man had; and so the big athlete bade him good-night.

Scanlon thought it best not to go to the railroad station, for there he would be almost certain to encounter the Swiss and Big Slim. There was an electric road which cut through the far end of the suburb, and he concluded it were safer to use this into the city, even though it did take much more time.

"But everything's done for the night," said he. "I've got a few more things to think about, too. So what difference does a half hour or so make?"

Bat got to bed at his hotel at about midnight; but it was several hours later before he got to sleep, for the events of the night tossed and mingled in his mind in a most distracting fashion. Consequently, next day, he arose late, and when he reached the gymnasium it was almost noon. A note lay upon his desk in the office written in a well-known hand.

"I have taken the liberty of borrowing Danny," it read. "There is a matter of some importance which I desire to get at the bottom of, and a small red-haired boy is perhaps the best agent I could employ. Keep in touch with me.

KIRK."

Jimmy Casey, who taught the use of boxing gloves in the gymnasium, explained the matter.

"He comes here, in an awful rush, about ten o'clock," said Jimmy, "and wants to see you. When he finds out you ain't here, he says it's all right, and don't make no difference anyhow. So he goes into the office and talks to the kid. And maybe that kid ain't glad, or nothing. His mug looked like a tin pan that'd just been scoured. A couple of minutes later they beat it away in a cab."

"It's all right," said Mr. Scanlon. "Some little hurry-up business, I guess."

All day Bat worked steadily with his clients. Once in the afternoon he paused long enough to call Nora on the telephone. Her response was cheerful; indeed, she talked rather gaily of many things, and he finally hung up the receiver with a wrinkle of discontent between his brows.

As evening came he took a shower and a rub-down, and then went out for a stroll. He had no definite notion in his mind except that he wanted fresh air; but, somehow, his steps led him to the neighborhood of Bohlmier's hotel.

"Being here," said he, "I may as well go in and visit the halt and the lame. I wonder how much damage I did those two parties. Maybe I'll find them in their beds."

He entered the office. Behind the desk was the thick-necked young man with the low, stand-up collar.

"Hello," saluted Scanlon. "Where's the boss?"

"Not feeling right," replied the thick-necked one. "Got a cold, I guess. Settled in his throat."

Bat turned away with a grin hidden behind one hand. In the lounging room of the place he looked about for Big Slim; not seeing him, he ascended the stairs and knocked upon a door on the third floor.

"Come in," said the voice of the lank burglar.

Bat pushed open the door, and found the man standing in the middle of the floor, pulling on his coat.

"Just run up to see if I couldn't drag you off to get some eats," said Bat, cordially.

"I'm hungry," said the burglar, "but I don't know if I can work my face or not." He displayed a swollen region extending from his left eye to the angle of his jaw; besides being puffed and painful looking, it was badly discolored. "Get that? Some bump, eh?"

"I should say, yes," replied Scanlon. "How did it happen?"

"Last night," stated Big Slim. "I spotted a fellow in the dark who's turned a trick on a friend of mine. So I made a try to get him. But," with candor, "I didn't. He got me."

"Tough," sympathized Bat. "But wait! Maybe you'll have your chance to come back. You never can tell."

Big Slim grinned. With his distorted face this was not a pleasant sight, and the look in his eyes was sly and wicked.

"I'll get back," said he. "Leave it to me for that. I'll lay him out so stiff that a slab in the morgue'll be bent like a pretzel in comparison."

Bat looked at the man with all the unrestraint of the practiced negotiator.

"Who is he?" he asked, carelessly.

Again the sly, wicked look came into the eyes of the burglar.

"Don't be in a hurry," said he. "You'll know when the time comes."

Bat drew in a deep, silent breath at this; and when the burglar threw open the lid of a trunk, which he dragged from under the bed, and took from the tray a black, well-oiled automatic pistol, he felt a tightening of the scalp. But Big Slim put the weapon in his pocket.

"No one's ever tagged me out without me landing on his neck," declared he. "I do it one way or another, but I always do it."

They went down-stairs and Big Slim led the way into a back room. It was the same in which Bat had seen the Swiss playing the flute on the night of Nora's unaccountable visit. But Bohlmier was not at all musically inclined at this time.

"No, no," he was saying to the thick-necked young man, "I will nothing to eat have. I am seek! Ach, how I am seek!"

Big Slim looked at Scanlon and grinned; then he whispered behind his hand:

"He was in on the same lot of treatment. The guy got him before he did me." Then to Bohlmier he added: "How's the sore throat?"

"Bad," replied the Swiss, in a strained way. "I a doctor haf had. He said I was lucky that I was not killed."

"Well, you wasn't," said Big Slim. "So forget that part of it."

The eyes of Bohlmier, with a cat-like glare in them, went to Bat; then he motioned to the burglar, who bent over his chair. The Swiss whispered croakingly in the other's ear. Bat could get a word here and there, but not sufficient to make any sense of what was being said. Once or twice he saw the eyes of the two men turn upon him, and their eager expression—deadly and cunning—made him uneasy.

"Sure," he heard Big Slim say. "That's right. I didn't miss that trick."

Then the whispering resumed. He caught fragments, such as: "Get him down there." "Gaffney's." "I'll fix him, all right."

"Who, me?" said Bat, to himself, shifting uneasily from one foot to the other. "Do they really know I'm the party who put them on the hospital list? And are they framing it, right under my nose, to get even?"

He had heard of such things before—the fate of a victim planned in his hearing and he never the wiser for

it. But he hunched his great shoulders and nodded his head. There were victims and victims. And if they tried to lead him into anything he resolved to do his best to prove to them that it was not a sheep they were handling.

"I'll make the proceedings much more interesting than last night's," he promised himself. "There was no 'follow up' then. This time there'll be plenty of it."

In a few moments more the burglar turned to Bat.

"Bohlmier wants us to go down and see a friend of ours," said he. "After we get some feed, you know."

"Sure," said Bat, readily. "Anything to be sociable."

They nodded to the Swiss, who sat following them with inflamed eyes as they left the room. Their journey through the dirty streets to Joey Loo's was a silent one; and as they entered the high-smelling, underground place and seated themselves, the silence was unbroken. One of the detached fragments which Scanlon had caught, a few minutes before, kept recurring to him.

"Gaffney's!" flashed and re flashed through his mind. He paid no attention to it at first; but the mere repetition of the name finally claimed his attention.

"Gaffney's!" He considered it thoughtfully as Big Slim talked to the Chinaman who came to serve them. "Why, yes; didn't I hear that name somewhere before? And not so long ago, unless I'm much mistaken."

He pondered; but where he had heard it refused to come back, and so he dismissed it from his mind. He gave his order to the stolid, greasy-looking Oriental; and then, looking about the place, said to his companion:

"Funny looking crowd, eh?"

Big Slim allowed his eyes to flit about from one pale, hollow face to another.

"There's enough to start a 'snow' party right here, if you had the stuff," said he. "I could pick you out twenty customers without making a mistake."

"It beats booze, that stuff," said Bat. "I've seen some tough examples of how it worked."

"Great business," said Big Slim, a covetous glint in his eyes. "Big money in it. I'd like to raise a nice stake and get hold of a lot of 'snow.' I'll bet I'd take in more real change than a gambling house."

"Stick to cracking cribs," begged Bat "It's got more stuff in it for a man with nerve."

"Listen," said the lank burglar as he leaned across the table, "using your nerve all the time ain't what they tell you it is. Nerve ain't with you always; and when it's all warped and faded with hard usage, that's all you get. If you can't buy more and you can't patch up the old, what are you going to do? So why not a corner in the dope market as an easy graft?"

"It don't listen good," said Bat, positively. "I'd rather get a big name for opening babies' banks. It wouldn't sting so much."

"You're a regular particular guy, ain't you?" Big Slim had a disagreeable grin on his thin-lipped mouth, and eyed Scanlon attentively. "You must have been well brought up."

They ate their food in comparative silence when it was brought; and as soon as they had finished the burglar pushed back his chair.

"Let's get down to Gaffney's," said he. He put his hand to his swollen face as they arose. "I've got a little trick to turn."

The streets were crowded with a mass of cheap pleasure seekers; the burlesque theatres and motion picture places were besieged with throngs; from the open fronts of auction houses the strident voices of the auctioneers rose in feeling appeals that every one grasp the opportunities offered. "Store show" keepers stood upon high, narrow platforms draped all about with canvases upon which were painted monstrous errors of nature and "wonders" fresh from far-off lands. There was a smell of uncleaned corners and open drains; the very mud of the streets held a greasy quality which made the unaccustomed passer shudder a little, and make haste.

And upon all this was thrown the glitter of many lights; from iron poles they hung in huge white domes; windows, filled with flashy merchandise, blazed with clusters of them; reeking alleys were exposed by the glare of their hanging lights as is a deep-set, poisonous sac by the scalpel of the surgeon. Illuminated signs of all sorts glared at one; some were lurid and stationary; others again flowed about in never ending contortions, making grotesque and high-pitched proclamations.

"Gaffney's round here somewhere?" asked Bat, after they had walked through the district for some little time.

"Just off here a little ways," replied the burglar. They turned a corner under the lee of a glaring saloon and found themselves in a small street which lay like a back-water off that thronged avenue. "There it is now."

Bat saw a dingy-looking place with the name "Gaffney" painted in red letters upon the window and two billiard cues in yellow crossed beneath it. They entered and were greeted by a babble of voices, an incessant clicking of balls and the thick odor of poor tobacco. Here and there games of more than ordinary interest were going on; the principals were, as a rule, fox-like young men who wore no coats and staked their handling of their cues against the world for a living. Small crowds were gathered about these contests; the "shots" were lightning-like, and of great precision.

Lining the walls were rows of men, some with vacant faces, others alert and predatory; and as Bat looked about, he noted what he had noted in such places many times before.

"A hang-out for quitters and a meeting-place for yeggs," he thought. "There's more good time wasted in places like this and more crooked deeds hatched than would put a roof over Lake Michigan."

With Big Slim, he took a station at the far end of the place; here and there was a doorway opening into a smaller room and in which more tables were erected.

"Get that fellow with the curly mop," said the burglar, indicating this doorway. "Inside there."

A middle-aged man in his shirt-sleeves, with a remarkably high collar and a shock of curling and very dark hair, was arranging the balls at one of the inner tables. The shirt sleeves were loudly striped and the curling hair was arranged in ornamental waves of which he seemed very vain; for as Bat watched, he saw the man gaze into a specked mirror and pass a hand carefully over them.

"He looks like the beginning of a parade," said Bat. "Who is he?"

"Name's Hutchinson, and he runs this place for Gaffney," replied Big Slim. "And," here he grinned and pulled at his bony fingers until they cracked, "he's a very intimate friend of a friend of mine."

"That so?" Scanlon looked at the man reflectively, and tried to think what possible bearing this could have on the matter which interested him. As far as he was able to see, it had none; but somehow the name Gaffney once more became active in his mind, and this troubled him.

"It's because it's painted on everything around the place," reasoned Bat. "The walls and the cue racks have it; and as I stand here I can see it done backwards on the front window. Gaffney means nothing in my young life, so what is his name bumping around in my head for?"

And then, just as he was on the verge of banishing it from his thoughts, a solution of the name's persistence flashed upon him. It had been used by Dennison that day at the Polo Club. He had called it after Ashton-Kirk as they were leaving.

"That's it!" was Bat's mute exclamation. "That's it. It was Dennison. He was telling us of how the Bounder said he was to meet some one—an off-color party—Dennison thought,—to arrange a little matter of business. And the meeting was to be at Gaffney's."

The big athlete thrilled at the idea. Was it possible that this obscure place was the one meant? But why not? It was just the sort of establishment the Bounder would have selected for a meeting with a crony of the underworld. And it was possible, too, that——

"A friend of a friend of yours," said Bat, to the man at his side. "Well, he might be all right, in spite of his looks."

"He used to deal faro at Danforth's place on the avenue," said Big Slim. "But he's down and out. Maybe," with another grin, "he tried the game himself."

"Sometimes they do," said Bat. "But it's like opening the door of an elevator shaft and walking through."

"He's great pals with a fellow named Fenton," said Big Slim. As he said this, one hand went to his coat pocket in a caressing sort of gesture; and Bat realized, with a ray of comprehension, that this was the pocket into which the burglar had slipped the black, well-oiled automatic. "They're like a couple of brothers."

"I see," said Bat. "A league of two, eh? Well, that's nice. It makes it handy for people who might want to see either of them. Find one and you're sure of the other."

Big Slim nursed the concealed weapon and grinned disagreeably.

"Hutchinson's here," said he, "and so I'm sure Fenton'll be here. And Fenton's the party I want to meet up with."

"I notice," observed Bat, with a downward nod, "that you are coddling your 'gat' some, and so I take it that this fellow Fenton and yourself ain't on good terms."

"Right," said the burglar, readily. "A good guess. We ain't." He took the hand from the pocket and pointed to his swollen face. "It was Fenton done that," said he. "And it was him that almost done for Bohlmer."

The eyes of the big athlete blinked rapidly at this, and he wanted to laugh! But he did not.

"So!" said he. "I get you. It was Fenton who decorated you with that 'shanty.' Well, well." He looked at the other speculatively and added: "But I thought you said it was dark. How did you know him?"

"Who else would be hanging around there?" demanded Big Slim, almost savagely. "Nobody else in the world."

"Hanging around where?" asked Bat, innocently.

Upon the point of replying, the burglar checked himself.

"It don't make any difference where," he said. "I got this on him, all right." There was a pause between them for a few moments, filled with the click-click of the balls, the comments of the spectators and the fervent ejaculations of the players. Then Big Slim said, in an altered tone: "Say, you put that thing over pretty slick on Allen that night at Duke Sheehan's; how'd you like to take on a job of slugging this guy?"

"This Fenton party?"

"Yes. He's bigger than I am—just as Allen was; and it'd be a bad chance if I 'gunned' him."

Scanlon realized instantly that if he refused the man's proposition there would be a blur in their relationship, and this might prevent the unfolding of several things which he felt must be unfolded. So he replied without hesitation:

"Let's have a look at him, if he comes in."

A table became vacant in the back room in a few minutes, and Bat and the burglar took possession of it. They had played for about a half hour when Big Slim, in a journey about the table, apparently to survey the balls from a new angle, said to Scanlon in a low tone:

"Spot the fellow with the broken nose, talking to Hutchinson. That's him."

While the burglar sighted and prepared for a difficult shot, Bat took occasion to inspect the man in question. He had just entered and seemed rather breathless; a cap was fitted down upon his head; he wore no overcoat and his coat collar was turned up, while the garment was buttoned tightly about him. Though only about middle size, he was strongly built and had a rugged, enduring look. His one prominent feature was his nose. This had been broken at some time or other and seemed absolutely boneless and flat.

"I've got him," said Bat. "There's no two noses like that anywhere."

Fenton talked rapidly to Hutchinson; he had the short-breathed, eager manner of a man who bore tidings of an unusual nature; his gestures were short and expressive of subconscious restraint. The manager of the pool room stood listening, a look of stupefaction upon his face; and as Bat watched, he put out his hand and touched the other as though to assure himself that the situation was a reality and not a thing of the imagination. Then he emerged from his dazed state, becoming immediately alert; he said something to Fenton in a quick, nervous sort of way, and the man with the broken nose stopped at once in his eager career, yet with all the indications remaining of one who ached to disburden himself.

Hutchinson placed the care of the tables in the hands of a boy who assisted him, and then went with Fenton to a far corner where the disfigured one recommenced his interrupted communication.

"That guy's lucky to get away with a plain beating," remarked Big Slim, as he chalked his cue. "For I got something on him—something strong."

"That so?" said Scanlon, as he surveyed the array of balls on the table with a great deal of assumed attention.

"Remember what I told you about the woman and the 'sparks' I meant to lift?"

"Oh, yes," said Bat, without a quiver; "and the husband that beat you to it."

"The husband was croaked that night," said Big Slim, tossing the chalk upon a near-by window ledge.
"And Fenton is the guy who did it."



CHAPTER XXII

WHAT DANNY SAW AT QUIGLEY'S

Bat Scanlon touched the cue ball, deftly; the ball it struck broke away at a sharp angle and vanished into a pocket.

"I'm getting case hardened," was the big athlete's mental comment. "A day or two ago this news would have rocked me to the foundations; now I'm not even jarred."

But, as he straightened up, he said to the burglar:

"So friend husband went out under the care of the lad with the concave face! Well, well! That is some startling tidings."

"I could send him to the chair if I wanted to," said Big Slim, longingly. "But I never hook up with the 'bulls' for anything. So I'll just either 'gun' him, or you'll slug him, whichever way it turns out."

"Keep the gun hid," advised Bat. "You can't get away with that stuff. I'll take this fellow on, and in a morning or two you'll hear how he's holding down a bed in a neighboring hospital with enough bruises and contusions to fill a peach basket."

"All right," said Big Slim, grinning appreciatively. "The job's in your hands. Don't be too long, for Bohlmier's waiting, and it was his idea in the first place."

"It might come off in an hour,—who knows?" said Bat. "But," with a glance at Fenton, "it does seem a pity to crush all that enthusiasm. He must be happier at this minute than he's been for years."

The broken-nosed man's excitement seemed to increase; he talked with many gestures; now and then he laughed in a delighted sort of way and slapped Hutchinson on the shoulder. The latter smoothed his waved hair and looked vastly interested; now and then when an opportunity came in Fenton's flood of talk he asked a question, and after each answer he seemed to advance a key toward the high pitch of the other.

"In a second or two," remarked Bat, in a low voice, "he'll be rumpling his hair; and if he ever does that, he'll never get over it."

For at least a half hour the talk went on between the two; at the finish Hutchinson was quite as excited as Fenton.

"It's a pipe," Bat heard him declare in an exultant tone; "a regular pipe. All we got to do is to——" Here the voice sank and he went on, his hands clutching Fenton's arms in a strong grip. The intense eagerness of the two, the excitement which one had imparted to the other, interested Bat. So many curious and unaccountable things had happened of late that he had gotten into the habit of looking for them, and it was with difficulty that he separated even ordinary occurrences from the matter which had been so growing in his mind. It might be, so ran his thought, that this incident had its place in the chain he had seen making—a tangled, hopeless chain to him, without beginning or end.

"But then again—and it's a thousand to one against—it might be nothing at all," was Bat's next judgment. "I'm getting all mixed in my signals and——"

Here he became aware that Big Slim was talking to him; the burglar had run the game out and had put

away his cue.

"As you've taken on this thing for me," he was saying, "I'm going across the river to look up some prospects."

"All right," said Bat, nodding. "Go ahead. I'll stick around a while."

With a wink and a gesture of the thumb toward Fenton, Big Slim went away. Bat carelessly stepped nearer to the two men and seemed greatly interested in a racing chart posted upon the wall.

"I told you there was a chance," Fenton was saying. "Didn't I? I knew the thing would pull up at Quigley's some time or another, didn't I?"

"I didn't think much of it," said Hutchinson, with the air of one who was wrong, and is quite delighted with his bigness in acknowledging it. "But I can see now that I didn't look at it right."

"Leave it to me," said Fenton, smiling expansively. "Little tricks like this are right in my line. And now I'll tell you what we'll do; we'll——"

But Hutchinson stopped him.

"Wait," said he. "Don't be in a rush. This ain't the kind of a thing to hurry through. You've got to take your time; you've got to think it out." The broken-nosed man seemed impressed by both the manner and the words of the other; and, noting this, Hutchinson went on: "Sleep on it. That's a good way. And I'll do the same. Then I'll run in to your place to-morrow afternoon, and we can put your ideas into good shape."

Fenton seemed to consider this quite a sober, steadying notion, and after a few moments more of conversation the man with the ornamental hair went back to the superintending of his pool tables, and the other took his departure.

Bat followed him. The big athlete was not at all sure but that Big Slim would be lurking somewhere outside in order to see if he made any move to carry out his promise against Fenton; and to be seen close upon the trail of the broken-nosed man would be excellent testimony of his good faith.

"And then," he told himself as he went along, Fenton in plain sight, "I want to locate this party, anyway. It will be useful in the show-down."

Fenton stepped out of the little back-water in which Gaffney's place lay, and into the full flood of the glittering, high-smelling avenue. Here there was a danger of losing him in the press and Bat increased his speed, working his way nearer to his quarry. In a few blocks there was another turn, this time into an unfrequented street which had a familiar look. Bat fell back here, and took to the opposite side, holding close to the buildings and walking upon the balls of his feet so as to avoid the usual ringing heel strokes. At the mouth of an alley, Fenton slackened his speed and then disappeared. Bat, from the other side of the street, inspected the place, with mouth twisted awry.

"I've got it," said he. "That's the alley I slipped into the night I tagged after Bohlmier and his pal. And in the said alley is located the house they went into. I wonder," and here he stroked his jaw, "if this fellow with the broken nose has anything to do with the room they broke into through the wall?"

The more he considered this point, the more likely it seemed to be true; and if it were, then Ashton-Kirk had known of Fenton long since.

"Yes, he was onto him," mused Scanlon, his thoughts turning to that night's meeting with the disguised investigator in the same building. "Kirk's had him spotted."

He lingered for some time looking into the gloom of the alley; then it occurred to him that nothing further could be done there, and that a great deal might be done somewhere else. Instantly he started along the street, heading for the same cab stand which Ashton-Kirk and himself had patronized on the night of which he had just been thinking. Here he secured a taxi, and in a short time drew up at the investigator's door. Stumph admitted him, and as he mounted the stairs toward the study, he heard the voice of Ashton-Kirk.

"Hello! Glad to see you." The investigator greeted him with a hand-shake. "Do you know that your office staff is also here?"

"Danny?" said Bat. "No, is he? What's the idea?"

"Came to make a report, I suppose. Didn't you get my note saying I had borrowed him for a while?"

"Oh, yes," said Bat. "That's so."

He followed the other into the study, and there they saw Danny, his red hair glowing under the lights and deep in the pages of some illustrated papers. But he got up and stood looking at his employer with a grin.

"Hello, Mr. Scanlon," said he. "I hope you ain't mad or nothin' for my going away and leaving the office."

"I've explained all that, Danny," said Ashton-Kirk, and Bat nodded good-humoredly. "And now let's hear what you have to tell."

"I tried to get you on the telephone an hour ago," said Danny, as they all three sat down at the table. "Maybe it was longer than that. But Mr. Stumph said you wasn't in, and then I told him I was coming around to wait till you got here."

"Quite right," smiled the crime specialist, approvingly.

"When we left the office," Danny told Scanlon, "we took a taxi. And we went to the Chandler Building. And up on the sixteenth floor we went into an office which was empty. Mr. Ashton-Kirk told me I was to stay there and was to watch things that happened in the place across the hall."

"A sort of speculator in precious stones," said Ashton-Kirk, to Bat. "He buys and sells; and his buying is not always aboveboard. He is also a pawnbroker in a large way."

"I see," said Bat.

"There is a glass in the door of the place," proceeded Danny, eagerly, "glass that you can see through. And I could look through the keyhole of the office I was in right into Mr. Quigley's."

"Quigley's!" said Bat, anxiously, for this was the name he had caught in the excited conversation between Fenton and Hutchinson.

"That's the name of the man who keeps the diamond place," Danny informed him. "There was little boxes, like stalls, right up at a counter, and all with doors on them. People went into these, and then nobody could see who they were. Mr. Quigley would stand back of the counter and talk to them; you could see *him*, all right, and the safe where he keeps his money and watches and things. There was a good many people went in—some of them ladies—and I thought I'd get a sore eye from peeping through the keyhole;

but there wasn't anybody," to Ashton-Kirk, "like the one you told me about."

"You are sure?" asked the investigator.

"Now wait!" begged Danny, who had no desire to spoil the effect of his story by over-haste. "At noon time the waiter from the lunch place came up and handed me in the eats you said he would. While I was feeding myself, I stood up close, to the door so's I could hear if any one stopped at the shop across the way. If they didn't, then I didn't have to peep."

"A good idea," approved Ashton-Kirk.

"So that's what I done after that," said Danny. "When I heard anybody open Quigley's door I looked out to see if it was the lady you wanted. After a while I heard somebody walk down the hall and stop outside my door. They didn't go in at the diamond place, and they didn't go on along down the hall, so I peeped to see who it was. I knowed it would be a man, because he walked so heavy.

"But he stood so close up to my door that I could see only a piece of his back; after a bit, though, he got across the hall, and I had a good shot at him; he was kind of bent over and was looking into Quigley's, too. While he was there I heard somebody else coming, and this time it was a lady, because she came click-click-click like ladies do with their high heels. And as soon as he heard the noise, the man at the door of the diamond place beat it along the hall in a hurry. And then the lady went into Quigley's."

"What sort of a lady?" asked Ashton-Kirk.

"I don't know," replied Danny, apologetically. "She had a veil on that covered over her face; but she was a young lady; I could see that by her dress and her shoes and her hat. She went into one of the little stalls, and Mr. Quigley commenced to talk to her. And then the man who had been looking in at the door came back and began to look in again, only this time he seemed like he was excited about something. He was afraid to stand up and look straight in like he did before; he only peeped in at one edge, and so I could see in, too. After Mr. Quigley talked to the lady a while I seen her hands, with gloves on them, reach out of the stall toward him, and they had a necklace in them that I'll bet was diamonds."

"A necklace! Was that all?"

"I didn't see anything else. So they talked about it for a long while; a couple of times Mr. Quigley give it back to her and shook his head like as if he didn't want to give that much money for it. But she always got it back to him, and then he put the necklace in the safe and gave her some money. The man that was looking in at the door blew away again as the lady came out. She still had her veil on, and as she went up the hall I opened the door, making believe I was just going out on an errand, or something, for my boss. And when I got in the hall I seen the man come from around a corner and stare after the lady like as if she was the only one in the world."

"Did you notice anything about this man that would make you know him again if you saw him?" asked Ashton-Kirk.

"Sure," said Danny. "I'd know him all right. He's got a broken nose—the flattest one I ever saw."

CHAPTER XXIII

A WOMAN!

When Danny made this declaration, Scanlon leaned back in his chair and drew a long breath of mingled surprise and satisfaction. So that had been the subject of Fenton's excited consultation with Hutchinson—a diamond necklace, pawned, or sold, by a woman. And from Fenton's own words, it was a thing he had been expecting.

Bat was about to break into a detailed account of all he had seen and heard since his last conversation with the investigator; but Ashton-Kirk was closely questioning Danny, so the big man held his peace. Finally the office boy had told all he knew and departed; then Bat, comfortably settled back in his chair, spoke.

"A flat-nosed fellow, eh?" said he. "Name of Fenton, I think."

He saw the keen eyes of the other flash him a look; it was the first surprise Scanlon had noted in Ashton-Kirk since the hunt began, and it filled him with immense satisfaction. He reached for a cigar and lighted it carefully.

"Lives in a tenement house, off on the other end of town," said he, after he had the cigar going well. "The same house where I ran across you—remember?"

Ashton-Kirk laughed.

"You are coming on," said he.

"Maybe," nodded the big athlete, "a little faster than you think, even now. I've had a few things happen to me in the last twenty-four hours that have lots of ginger in them."

And so, pausing now and then to draw at his cigar, he related all that had occurred both on that night and the night before. Ashton-Kirk listened with careful attention, and when Bat had finished, he said:

"You appear to have had quite a time of it. I am obliged to you for some of the points you have made; they throw light upon corners which up to now have been rather obscure."

"What worries me," said Bat, "is that——"

But the investigator stopped him.

"To worry in a matter like this is to admit that you are jumping at conclusions," said Ashton-Kirk. "And that only, so to speak, clouds the water; it makes it almost impossible to see any distance ahead, and spoils one's judgment of what is already in one's hand."

There was a short pause, and then the speaker went on:

"I grew somewhat interested in Gaffney's place at once upon hearing Dennison speak of it that afternoon at the Polo Club. After assuming the disguise you saw me in, I went there and engaged in a game at one of the tables. Inside of an hour I had the information that the Bounder had occasionally visited the place, and always to meet a man of the name of Fenton. Fenton was in the rooms at the time, and when he went home I trailed him. I rented the room almost across the hall from his, with the same idea in my mind as that of

your friend the burglar's."

"I got that at the time," spoke Bat Scanlon. "But what *was* the idea?"

"There were diamonds in question," said Ashton-Kirk. "The diamonds Tom Burton took from Nora Cavanaugh. It occurred to me, after considering the matter carefully, that Fenton might have them in his possession. But my search of his room, just finished as Bohlmier and Big Slim arrived, showed me that they were not kept there, at least."

"This whole business about those diamonds sounds kind of funny to me," said Bat. "Nora told her maid she put them away in a bank vault; how do you know she didn't recover them in some way and do just that very thing?"

Ashton-Kirk pressed one of the series of call bells.

"That brings us to a point upon which I think we can expect definite intelligence," said he.

In a few moments Fuller appeared, dapper and alert.

"How soon will you be ready to make a report upon the matter you have been working up?" asked the investigator.

"Right away," replied Fuller, as he spread some typewritten papers upon the table. "I put it on the machine while I was waiting to speak to you."

Ashton-Kirk took up the sheets, and his eyes ran quickly over them.

"This is about what I expected," said he, finally. "You are sure you missed no one?"

"Quite sure. I first called on those banks and trust companies which I fancied Miss Cavanaugh did business with. She had an account in several. But she had no box in the safety deposit vault, and she had deposited nothing save money. I went from one bank to another; some of them were disinclined to give any information, but when they were convinced it was police business, they answered my questions."

"The result, then, is that Miss Cavanaugh did *not* deposit anything in the vaults of any bank in the city."

"She did not," replied Fuller, positively.

The investigator looked at Scanlon, and the big man nodded his head, gravely.

"All right," said he; "that's settled. And now what comes next?"

"From what you have told me and from what Danny has said," replied Ashton-Kirk, "I rather think a little talk with Fenton would not be out of place."

"Good!" said Bat.

"First," continued the investigator, "we'll see what's to be had from his friend, Hutchinson. I'm rather of the opinion that he has some information which would be of use to us."

They rose, and as they put on hats and coats, Ashton-Kirk said to Fuller:

"Perhaps you'd better come along, Fuller. If things go as I think they will we are in for a rather busy night and may need your help."

The three boarded a street car not far from the investigator's house; after they had alighted, a walk of ten minutes brought them to Gaffney's place.

"Remain within call," said Ashton-Kirk to his aide. "We may need you at any moment."

"Right," said the young man, readily. "I'll be somewhere about."

Scanlon pushed open Gaffney's door and entered, followed by Ashton-Kirk. The place was crowded; the air was thick with the smoke of poor tobacco; the fox-like young men still made the skilful strokes at the tables, and the walls were lined, as usual, with men who either stared vacantly, or scowled with predatory longing.

Hutchinson, with his striped sleeves and his carefully waved hair, was in the back room engaged with an exceptionally clever gentleman who made shot after shot of almost miraculous character. Ashton-Kirk and Scanlon waited until the game was run through, then the former touched Hutchinson upon the arm.

"Could we have a word with you?" asked the investigator.

"Certainly." Hutchinson smiled agreeably. "Of course."

They took him aside, and Ashton-Kirk looked him steadily in the face while he said:

"We'd like to ask a question or two about a friend of yours—Fenton."

Hutchinson smiled once more, still agreeably, but with a little less genuineness.

"Oh, Joe," said he. "Yes, an old pal of mine. What about him?"

"He comes in to see you quite frequently, doesn't he?"

"Why, yes; pretty often." Hutchinson's hand smoothed at the waves of hair, and through the smile showed evidences of trouble. "But, then, most of the boys come in often. It's quite a hang-out for most of them."

But Ashton-Kirk refused to consider this last.

"Fenton often met people here, I think," said he, his keen eyes still fixed upon the other. "People who wanted to see him in the way of business."

"Why, no," said Hutchinson; "no; I never knew Joe to meet a soul——"

"There was an acquaintance of his named Burton—Tom Burton—sometimes called the Bounder, who called here at times to talk to him." Hutchinson's smile disappeared completely, and a glassy look came into his eyes. "One night, just a week ago, Burton came here; he had some trouble with Fenton; some hours later he was found murdered."

Hutchinson gasped brokenly; reaching out one trembling hand he touched Ashton-Kirk's sleeve.

"I didn't have anything to do with that," he said. "I didn't know anything about it, even, until I saw it in the papers on the day after."

"You *do* know something about it," said Ashton-Kirk; "so suppose you tell us—but wait," a new thought apparently occurring to him. "First call up Fenton, and get him here; we'll want to talk to him, too."

"But I don't know where he——"

"He's at home," said Ashton-Kirk, briefly; "and there is a telephone in the hall, not a dozen yards from his room."

This precision was too much for Hutchinson; so he went, with scared face, to a telephone at one side, and asked for a number. The talk between the two men had been carried on in low tones; none of the players at the table was aware of its nature. There was a slight delay in procuring the number asked for, but finally a small, inquiring voice was heard.

"I want to speak to Fenton," said Hutchinson. "Get him on the 'phone, will you?"

The small, far-off voice seemed protesting, but Hutchinson urged, persistently:

"Well, what if he is in bed? This is important. Kick on his door; tell him Hutchinson wants to speak to him right away."

There was a delay much longer than the first, then another small voice came over the wire.

"Get a move on you," said Hutchinson. "I want you here right away. A couple of people want to meet you. Important? Of course it is. Would I be dragging you out of bed if it wasn't?"

After a little more of the same style of urging, Hutchinson hung up and turned to Ashton-Kirk.

"He'll be here in ten minutes," said he.

"Very good," said the investigator. The three walked to the out-of-the-way corner they had occupied before, and the speaker went on: "I see you understand this is a serious matter, and so nothing but straightforward answers are expected of you."

"Joe's a pal of mine," said the pool-room manager, "but I don't know nothing about his affairs. If he's in on croaking this guy, I don't know anything about it. I'm on the level, and——"

"We are not greatly interested in that," said Ashton-Kirk. "What we want just now is information as to what happened on the night of the murder."

"I tell you I don't know anything——"

"You were here when the Bounder came to see Fenton, were you not?"

"Yes—I was." The man made the answer with the greatest reluctance, and his manner said plainly that he'd gladly have lied had he been sure as to the extent of his questioner's knowledge. "Joe had been out somewhere, and when he came in he said he had a date with a party. It was then ten o'clock and after. We talked a while, and then this man Burton came in. Joe took him to one side and they began to talk. I didn't pay much attention to them, except that they were having a little argument over something. Then I heard a kind of a smack, and I looked up and saw Joe standing with his hand to his face, and the other fellow turning his back on him just as cool as anything you'd want to put your eyes on. For a second I thought Joe was going to take the thing and say nothing; and then——"

The man paused here, and Ashton-Kirk said:

"And then he was about to draw a revolver, but you stopped him."

Hutchinson stared at the speaker; the desire to deny this was strong in his face, but the certainty of the keen eyes was so great that he said, weakly:

"Joe was only a little wild, that's all. He didn't mean any harm. When I spoke to him, he was as quiet as a baby."

Ashton-Kirk asked a dozen more questions regarding the relationship between the Bounder and Fenton; Hutchinson answered them all hesitatingly and with many qualifications. Finally, the front door swung open and Scanlon, who was watching it, said:

"Here's your man now."

Fenton, frowning and evidently in bad humor, entered the back room. Hutchinson greeted him with:

"Hello, Joe. A couple of people who want to talk to you."

Ashton-Kirk nodded to the broken-nosed man, who looked at him, inquiringly.

"What do you want?" asked he. "It ought to be something bright to rout a man out of bed."

"I'd like to ask you one or two questions," said Ashton-Kirk, smoothly.

"Questions!" Fenton's eyes narrowed. "What kind of questions?"

"About Tom Burton," replied Ashton-Kirk. "I'd like to know what happened after he left this place with you on his track."

Fenton gave a quick, hunted look around; for an instant his eyes rested upon the street door, but Scanlon's big body was between him and it in a twinkling.

"It'll be easier to answer the questions," said Bat, unconcernedly. "We'd get you in a minute or two."

The man's glance went to Hutchinson accusingly, and the manager of the pool room at once began to protest.

"Honest, Joe, I didn't say a word. They came in here and wanted to see you, and I thought it best to get it over with."

"You followed Tom Burton to Stanwick," said Ashton-Kirk. "A person who saw you there has made a direct accusation against you."

The face of the broken-nosed man went white.

"What did they say?" he demanded. "They're liars. What did they say? I didn't do a thing!"

"Well, if you didn't, the best thing to do is to clear yourself of suspicion by telling all you know. I have had it from two different sources that you had business with the Bounder that night. What was its nature?"

Fenton hesitated a moment; his furtive mind was working desperately for a way to avoid admitting light upon his doings; but apparently he could think of none, for he said, slowly:

"I'd been acquainted with Tom Burton for years; sometimes I wouldn't see anything of him for a long time; and then," bitterly, "I'd know he was flush. He never came near me unless he was broke and wanted something done. A couple of weeks ago he showed up and handed me the details of a little game that looked like easy money; I was to work it and we were to split the proceeds, fifty-fifty."

"And this, I suppose, is the matter he came to see you about on the night he was killed?"

"Yes," answered Fenton, and he laughed as he said it. "That's the thing. He came around like a lord and put his mitt out for his cut of the plunder. He had an easy way of doing things—so easy that he often took people by surprise and got by with it. But this time he was in wrong; I'd been dumped by him so often that I was cagy. I'd looked over the game he'd handed me—give it a good, careful look, mind you, and I found there was about twenty per cent. profit and eighty per cent danger. He was to cut the twenty with me, but I was to take all of the eighty."

"Just like them kind of people," said Hutchinson. "They're always looking for somebody to take their chances and feed them pap."

"So I called off on the thing," said Fenton; "and when he came around on the night he said he would, I laid him out—strong—for trying to get me into such a thing. When he found I'd side-stepped him and there was no easy money for him, he pulled back and hit me, and then walked out, expecting to get away with it. I dipped for my gun, I was so sore, but Hutchinson, here, stopped me. Then I knew that to gun him would be a boob play; but I meant to get back at him, so I followed him for a chance to lay him out."

The man paused for a moment or two; the balls clicked about the tables; the clouds of tobacco smoke drifted among the bright white lights overhead; the players talked monotonously among themselves.

"He went to an old-fashioned part of the town," said Fenton, "and before I had a chance had gone into a swell-looking house. He was inside for about half an hour and I waited for him. When he came out he'd no sooner hit the sidewalk than I knew something had happened to him. And it was something good. Before he'd gone in he pulled along pretty slow with his head down; but now he was chipper and feeling good. As he passed where I was hid I heard him laugh. I wondered what it was that was doing it, and in a couple of minutes I found out. He stopped under a light and took something out of his overcoat pocket. I was near enough to get a slant at it, and saw he had a whole handful of diamonds."

Hutchinson drew in a long breath; Ashton-Kirk looked at Scanlon, and that gentleman nodded his satisfaction with the apparent straightforwardness of the story.

"So, after he had flashed a thing like that," said Fenton, "I altered my mind a little; I wouldn't do any strong-arm stuff; I'd try and stand it on the sparks. At first Burton didn't seem to know what to do; he stopped a couple of times as if he was thinking; then he seemed to grab at an idea and started off for the railroad station. He bought a ticket and boarded a local train, and I followed him. He got off at Stanwick and went at once to the house on Duncan Street.

"I walked into the side yard, for it was pretty dark there at first; but then the moon came out from behind some buildings and flooded all over the place, and I had to stick close to the side of the house where the shadows were."

"Didn't you go to the other side at all?" asked Ashton Kirk.

"Yes; a couple of times, but I couldn't stay long, for I was afraid some one would see me. Once I looked in at a window that was lighted up, and there was the Bounder talking to some one, and he was laughing and showing her diamonds."

"Is that all you saw?"

Fenton shook his head.

"No," said he, "it wasn't. I saw a woman a little while later; she was snooping around in the dark, and

then she hid behind a kind of a thing that they grow vines over and watched the window."

"What else did you see?" There was a silence after this question; as Fenton squirmed and shifted his eyes like a trapped tiger, Ashton-Kirk went on: "Remember, there has been a direct charge against you—that you killed the man you followed from this place."

"That's a lie," said Fenton. "It's a lie! I didn't! It was that woman killed him. And I saw her do it!"



CHAPTER XXIV

MR. QUIGLEY IS INTERVIEWED

For a moment there was a halt; Ashton-Kirk, Hutchinson and Scanlon looked at the broken-nosed man without speaking, and the heart of the big athlete turned sick at what he had heard.

"You saw her strike the blow?" asked the investigator.

"Yes—with a big brass thing. I thought it was a poker; but the papers said afterward it was a candlestick, and I guess it was."

"What did you do after seeing this?"

"It got into my head that Duncan Street was no healthy place for me, and I'd have jumped out of sight, only for seeing the woman take the diamonds."

"She took them, then?"

"It was the first thing she did. I hung to the outside door waiting for her. But she fooled me. She must have gone out some other way, for I heard the gate click, and saw something in the shadow of the trees on the sidewalk. I hurried out there, but she was gone; I didn't get another peep at her."

Ashton-Kirk smiled.

"That is," said he, quietly, "not until to-day, at Quigley's."

Fenton's lower jaw dropped, and he stared at the investigator vacantly.

"At Quigley's!" said he.

"You saw her come down the hall while you were at the broker's door," said Ashton-Kirk. "And while she bargained with Quigley for a price on a diamond necklace, you were looking in once more. She wore a veil, but veils are not always dependable disguises."

"I don't know how you got that," said Fenton, at last, "but it's true, all right. I spotted her as soon as I saw her; the veil might as well not been there."

Ashton-Kirk drew on his gloves.

"Perhaps to-morrow you'll be called upon to repeat what you've said to-night. So hold yourself ready."

"All right," said the broken-nosed man, sullenly. "You know where to find me, I guess."

"Oh, yes." The investigator turned to Hutchinson, and continued: "I'm obliged to you: you have facilitated matters greatly, and perhaps saved Mr. Fenton from something rather serious. Good-night."

Followed by Scanlon, Ashton-Kirk left the place; a score of yards away the investigator gave a low whistle and a shadow flitted across the street to his side.

"There's a man inside there I want you to keep in sight, Fuller," said the investigator. "The name is Fenton, and he has a broken nose."

"Oh, yes, I know him," said Fuller, readily. "Used to be a tout in the old Sheepshead Bay days."

"Good!" said Ashton-Kirk. "Don't let him slip you. It's important."

Fuller at once started toward Gaffney's; and the investigator and Scanlon made their way out of the back-water into the swirling, high-colored avenue. At a druggist's Ashton-Kirk paused, and the two went in. A telephone book was flipped over until the letter Q was reached.

"Ah, yes," said the investigator. "Mr. Quigley lives at the Doric Apartments." Then as he closed the book: "I trust we shall find him at home."

Scanlon said nothing while the other called a taxi, and when the vehicle arrived, they got in, Ashton-Kirk giving the driver the address wanted.

The Doric Apartments was a new and pretentious place upon a wide street and directly opposite a small, green park. There was a great deal of brass and marble and show about the entrance, and a uniformed attendant announced them by means of a telephone. In a few moments the man turned.

"Mr. Quigley says he does not recognize your names," said he. "And will you kindly state your business."

"Tell him it is very important. That we must see him at once. That it will be to his interest to do so."

The hall porter repeated these words almost as they were given to him, but apparently the man above was not convinced.

"He says that he cannot be seen to-night; that he has retired," spoke the hall man, turning once more. "Can you not call at his office in the morning?"

Ashton-Kirk stepped inside the brass rail.

"If you please," said he to the man as he took possession of the instrument. Then in a sharp, decisive tone he spoke into the transmitter. "Mr. Quigley, I am very sorry to inconvenience you to-night. To put off the matter of which I have to speak until morning would perhaps place you in a rather hard light. The police always make such a muddle of these things."

There was a pause, then came a shrill piping over the wire, startled and inquiring. Scanlon saw the investigator smile.

"Very well," said Ashton-Kirk. "We will come up immediately." Turning to the hall man, he asked: "Where is Mr. Quigley's apartment?"

"Twelfth floor, sir. Take the elevator. Number 1203."

The glittering cage swept smoothly up through the shaft, and at the twelfth floor stopped.

"Third door to your right, suh," said the black man in charge.

Ashton-Kirk was about to knock at the door indicated when it opened, and they saw a man in a dressing gown, a long side growth of hair brushed over a bald head and a white, puffy face.

"Sir," said he, agitatedly, "I really must protest against this sort of thing; it is very late. And I have had a trying day."

"I repeat, Mr. Quigley, I am sorry to disturb you; but, as I have also said, the matter is very pressing. The police——"

"Come in, come in," said Quigley, hastily. "This way, gentlemen. I suppose a man in my way of business must expect certain unforeseen contingencies."

They passed into a room which seemed packed tightly with glittering things; everything gleamed; not a foot of the wall but had a painting, and each held within a gilded frame; small marbles shone as though they had been polished; each piece of furniture had been rubbed to the ultimate; the rugs were of the brightest and the floor threw off a sheen of varnish that was appalling.

"Take chairs," said Mr. Quigley. "Be comfortable, now that you are here." And when he saw them seated, he stood before them, an injured look upon his puffy white face. "The police, you said, sir. Now, just what of the police?"

"About a week ago," said Ashton-Kirk, quietly, "there was a murder done at Stanwick. Perhaps you recall it; the victim was a man of the name of Burton."

"Burton!" Quigley nodded and pursed his lips to hide a tremble that was there. "Yes, I recall that deplorable affair. The son was taken for the crime, I think." He looked at the investigator with uncertainty in his eyes. "But why do you speak of that matter in connection, as it were, with me?"

"By an odd train of circumstances," spoke Ashton-Kirk; "there was a robbery committed at the time of the murder. Some diamonds were taken."

"Diamonds!" Quigley's mouth dropped open, and his pale face became positively ghastly. "Why, in my reading of the newspaper accounts of the case, I saw no mention of a robbery."

Ashton-Kirk nodded.

"That is true, because this phase of the matter is one of which neither the newspapers nor the police know anything as yet." He leaned forward in his chair and continued in his smoothest tones: "Among the things taken was a diamond necklace. And this was sold to you to-day."

"No, no!" protested the man. "It is not true, sir! No, no! I am very careful. I never purchase or lend money on things of which I am not altogether sure."

"The necklace was brought to you to-day between twelve and one o'clock," said the investigator. "It was brought by a woman who wore a veil and you haggled with her as to the money she was to get for it."

"Sir," said Quigley, lifting one hand, "I must insist that you are mistaken; I must insist that this is a——"

But Ashton-Kirk stopped him.

"When I had the man send up my name a while ago," said the investigator, "you replied that you did not know me. Surely, Mr. Quigley, your memory is much better than that. I would hesitate to accuse a man in your line of effort of being so forgetful. Only three years ago I transacted a little business with you—the matter of Senator Donaldson's collection of Revolutionary autographs. They had been taken by his younger son—since dead—and sold to you. If it had not been that the Senator was anxious to hush the matter up, you would have had some trouble on your hands, Mr. Quigley."

The broker choked and gasped, and when he came out of this his whole manner had undergone a change.

"Mr. Ashton-Kirk," said he, "I beg your pardon. I do recognize you now. But, sir, you had entirely slipped my memory; if you had not mentioned that unfortunate Donaldson episode I would not have recalled you. That was one of those things in which even a very honest man might become involved. I was deceived in that case, and——"

"Let us agree, then, that you were deceived. And that being so, is it not possible that it might have happened again?"

Reluctantly, Quigley agreed that this was so.

"However," said he, "I take all precautions. I ask questions; I delve into the history of every valuable thing offered me. But I admit that I have been misled once or twice, in spite of all I could do."

"Suppose," said Ashton-Kirk, "you allow us a look at the necklace and——"

"But it is not here!" exclaimed Quigley. "It is at my office, locked away in the safe."

"Very well," said Ashton-Kirk. "We have a cab outside. Let us go to your office."

"It is late," expostulated the broker. "I had retired for the night. Why not morning, sir? The morning will find us fresh and wakeful, and we can talk things over at our leisure."

"The morning has one drawback," said Ashton-Kirk. "The police may, in the interim, learn something; and if you are not arrayed on the side of the law by the time they reach you, you may be decidedly inconvenienced, not only in this matter, but in others as well."

This seemed powerfully to impress Mr. Quigley.

"I shall do as you request, Mr. Ashton-Kirk," said he. "I put myself entirely in your hands. If you will give me a few moments to dress I will go with you to my place of business, and permit you to examine the necklace. I am always ready to demonstrate my integrity; no one has ever found me unwilling to comply with every requirement of a reputable business man."

With that Mr. Quigley disappeared, and within fifteen minutes he emerged from the rooms beyond fully dressed, including a most respectable top hat; they descended and got into a cab, and in a little while brought up at the Chandler Building, where the broker had his office.

A night man sleepily ran them up to the required floor, and Quigley unlocked his office door.

"Now, gentlemen," said he, "it is fortunate that I still have what you desire to see here in the office. I have a very good safe, but never trust anything to it of extreme value unless I am compelled to do so. This necklace came too late for me to place it in the vault I use for such things, so I had to keep it here overnight."



THEN THE DOOR SWUNG OPEN

He turned the knob of a formidable looking safe until he had effected the proper combination; then the door swung open. The inner door was then unlocked and Quigley pulled out a drawer; from this he took a magnificent necklace of diamonds which gleamed resplendently under the lights.

"This is the article you spoke of," said he. "Quite handsome. But I feel sure that it is in no way connected with the unhappy affair at Stanwick."

Ashton-Kirk took the jewels in his hand and examined them keenly. Then he held them out to Scanlon.

"What do you think?" he asked. "I have only a description to go by, but you must have seen the stones frequently at close hand. Are they the same?"

Scanlon needed only one glance.

"They are," returned he; "I'd know this necklace among a thousand."

"The lady who left them with me," said Quigley, still hopeful, "was quite respectable. I'd vouch for that at any time. She is a widow and was once in good circumstances."

"You know her, then?" said Ashton-Kirk.

"Oh, yes; we have had a number of small——" But here the man paused abruptly; then he began a fit of

coughing which was unquestionably intended to cover the break. "Oh, yes," he resumed, "I know her quite well."

"You were about to say," spoke Ashton-Kirk, coolly, "that you have had a number of small transactions with her. How recent were these?"

Quigley blew his nose violently and cleared his throat, as though the coughing spell had left him in an obstructed condition.

"Why," he gasped, trying to assume a most confidential manner, "that would be rather difficult to say. You see, I keep a very neglectful run of these people, and my memory is really very poor."

"The necklace was not the only jewel stolen at Stanwick," said Ashton-Kirk, quietly. "There were a number of other pieces, and I must really insist that you cudgel your mind for the facts. You must have entries somewhere in your books. I am asking this as a favor; of course, if the police were requested to appear in the matter they would use methods entirely different from——"

"It is barely possible that my clerk has some record of these things," said Quigley, hastily. "Just one moment, please, and I will ascertain."

He went into an inner office, took a book from a desk drawer and began turning the leaves with a moistened thumb. Scanlon, catching the eye of the investigator, winked knowingly.

"Why, to be sure," said Quigley. "Of course! Here it is, fortunately. She has been in the office three times in the past week."

Ashton-Kirk stepped behind the counter and into the inner office, and coolly looked over the broker's shoulder.

"Do you see?" asked Quigley. "Right here. There are three rings in one item; and there is a brooch in another. And then, of course, the necklace."

Ashton-Kirk examined the entries and made some memoranda in a small book; then he began asking some questions in a voice so low that Scanlon caught only a word here and there. He recognized "woman," also "veil," and in another place "this afternoon." It were as though Ashton-Kirk were urging the man to accompany him somewhere, which Quigley seemed loth to do. Then the investigator took something from his pocket and showed it to the other. Bat caught a flash of it; it was a photograph—of Nora Cavanaugh, and the broker was now nodding his head eagerly as he gazed at it.

"They're going to Nora's," was what flashed through Bat's brain. "This hound of a pawn-broker'll try and put something on her whether it's true or not." His mind seethed with this for a moment, and then came another idea. "But they'll not take her by surprise; I'll get there before them, and tell her."

And silently Mr. Scanlon slipped through the hall door and was gone.

CHAPTER XXV

NORA TALKS AND SCANLON LISTENS

As Bat Scanlon stepped out of the street car which took him to Nora Cavanaugh's house, he looked at his watch. It was almost midnight.

"She'll have had time to get home," he said to himself, "but maybe it'll be too late to see her."

But he set his jaw at this thought, and shook his head with a bull-like motion. He sprang up the steps and pulled at the bell viciously. To his surprise the door opened at once, and he saw Nora in her coat and furs, a veil over her face, standing in the hall.

"Bat!" she said, and stood staring at him.

"Just come in?" he asked.

"No," was the answer. "I—I——"

"Just going out, then. I see."

There was something in his manner and tone which caused her to look at him steadily. Then with a little gesture she said:

"Will you come in?"

He entered and she closed the door; as he stood there turning his hat about in his hands, he looked very big and stubborn—and, if you understood him very well, as Nora did—very much afraid.

"It is late," she said. "Is anything wrong?"

"There will be," said Bat "There will be unless something is done to head it off."

Without a word she led the way into a room at one side; and after they had sat down, she asked:

"And now, what is it?"

"I've just been with Ashton-Kirk to see a man of the name of Quigley—a sort of pawnbroker." His eyes were upon her, but she continued to regard him steadily without any change of expression. "A necklace had been taken to him to-day by a woman—a diamond necklace." Her eyes wavered at this, and an expression of fear came into her face. There was a pause, and then Bat leaned forward and said in a lowered voice: "What made you say that you had put your jewels away in a vault?"

She arose and went to his side.

"Bat," she said, "I felt sure your friend Mr. Ashton-Kirk would find me out. I knew from the first that I was not cunning enough to conceal anything from him."

"Nora," said Scanlon, as he, too, arose, "why did you try?" Again there was a pause, and again the big athlete broke the silence. "As I have told you more than once," said he, "I believe in you; nothing can shake me from that. There are a great many things you have said and done that I do not understand; others of them I see through, though you did not intend that I should. Why was all this? Why didn't you tell me the

facts as they stood?"

"Bat," she said, "I didn't dare; I was afraid."

"Afraid? Of what?" He looked down at her; her face was pale; her gloved hands were clasped, tremblingly. "That night when Tom Burton came here, he struck you. We saw the mark, but you said it was caused by something else. He also stole your jewels, but you said nothing. Nora, was there any good reason why you should have misled us like that?"

She reached out and touched his arm.

"I can see," she said, "that it will be useless to carry the thing any further. I did think I could manage it myself, but I see now that it was hopeless from the start. Will you sit down?" There was a certain sweet humbleness in her voice which turned the big man's heart to water. "I'll tell you everything now, and so you may judge me for yourself."

Once more they sat down; Nora drew the veil still further from her face and began to speak in a low voice, but steadily, and with no hesitation.

"Tom Burton did strike me that night, and I would not tell the truth about it, Bat, because I was ashamed. I could not bring myself to admit that the man I had chosen for my husband would do such a thing. Other misdoings of his I could speak of—but that one I felt I must always keep to myself. His taking of my jewels I would not have held from you if I had not been afraid—afraid as I never was before."

"Of what?" asked Scanlon.

"Tom Burton was killed in his son's house; I knew that son; I knew what he had suffered all his life because of his father. I had heard the story in all its pitiful details. As a child he had been affronted and mishandled—as a boy—as a young man. He could never forget what his mother had been forced to endure; in his mind was always the fact that his sister was an invalid, perhaps for life, owing to the poverty brought on them by their father's neglect. With all this before me, can you wonder that I was afraid—afraid that the boy, in a moment of madness, had struck his father down?"

Bat drew in a long breath; in it there was a vast relief and a certain wonder.

"No," said he. "No; did you think that?"

"The idea was agonizing, and I made up my mind to do all I could to save him; that is why I appealed to you to get me all the intimate details. Then he was arrested; the body had been examined by the coroner, but no word was said of my jewels. It was then that a second thought came to me; suppose the murder had not been done, after all, in a sudden mounting of fury? Suppose the boy had seen the diamonds and had been tempted? Suppose he had killed Tom Burton in order to get possession of them? I was appalled at the notion, which with each moment became more and more a conviction. But I still held to the resolve to help him. What if he had done the thing? Was it altogether his fault? Was it not a part of an inheritance from a tainted father?"

"So I said nothing of my loss of the jewels; the dread was in me that if the facts concerning them were known, suspicion would fall upon him—they might discover the stolen things on him and so he would lose his life, as well as his life's happiness, because of that man. I felt that no part of the truth must come out, that I must not even tell of my husband's visit to me that night; and when, in talking with you at your office, I permitted the fact to slip, I was startled."

"I remember that you were," said Bat. "And I wondered what it meant." He sat for a space and looked at her; and then, as she said nothing more, he went on: "You do not know it, but for days things fell in such combinations that more than once it looked as though *you* would be accused."

"Bat!" She cried out his name, frightened, and her wide brown eyes opened to their fullest extent.

"Even an hour ago I saw and heard some things which seemed to point to you. Maybe if my nerves weren't keyed up as they are I wouldn't have thought so. But, anyway, I did, and that's what brought me here."

"But surely," and her voice was broken by the shortness of her breathing, "surely you never thought this of me?"

But Bat did not deny it.

"What else was I to do when things piled up as they did? Some of them I don't understand at this minute, and maybe I'll never understand them. But there are others," and he looked at her with frank inquiry in his face, "that you can explain; and, Nora, I'm looking to you to do it."

And with that he told her of the things he had heard from Big Slim and of those he had seen at Bohlmier's hotel. She listened with many little gasps and surprised gestures.

"To think of that man being so near to me that night," she said, when he had done, "and watching me with such an intent. And now, poor Bat," with a little sound in her voice which was part a sob and part a laugh, "because he saw so much and understood so little, and told it all to you, I will have to speak of something I never expected to make known to any one. You know how I have always dreaded and detested divorce; how the thought of it almost sickened me? Well, Bat, two years ago I felt I could endure Tom Burton no longer, and had all the preliminary papers for a proceeding made out."

"What!" said Scanlon. "You, Nora!"

"I did. But then all my old feeling against the thing overtook me, and I laid the papers away in a little silver box which I kept in a drawer in my room. When Tom Burton struck and robbed me that night, I was in a perfect whirl of feeling. I resolved to be free of him forever. And I'd do it at once. What I was seen to take from the drawer, Bat, was the little silver box holding those papers; I rushed from the house meaning to go to my lawyer. And I was a half dozen blocks away when I came out of the state I was in, realized the hour and the impossibility of the whole situation, and returned home."

"That's it," said Bat, with the sigh of a man relieved of a heavy burden. "That's it. I might have known that it would be something of that sort. Then you did not go to Stanwick at all that night?"

"I never dreamed of such a thing. And when I first heard of this man you call Big Slim," went on Nora, "it was in a letter he wrote me after the murder, and of which he spoke guardedly. I felt that this was a clue that if followed I might be able to show poor Frank Burton to be innocent after all. So I did what I otherwise would never have done; I went to the place mentioned, which was the hotel kept by that fiendish old man Bohlmier."

"What did they want?"

"It was blackmail. They, too, fancied I was at Stanwick that night. They knew about the diamonds, though I did not then know how they came by the information. They thought to frighten me into paying a sum of money. The tall man's threat was of the police whom he said would be sure to connect me with the crime."

But I laughed at him, and dared him to do anything he had in mind. The old man, I think, would have threatened my life. I had heard some of his talk in the next room; that is why I took up the revolver from the table; and when I listened at the wall it was to hear what more he might say."

"They keep your house under watch," said Scanlon.

"I know; I see them loitering in the street almost constantly. And they write me threatening letters. But I've never been afraid of them until last night. After you had gone—oh, please, Bat, forgive me for keeping it from you, when you were so worried for my sake and so good to me—but I went to Stanwick; I felt that I had to—there was something I must know.

"These men followed me, Bat; I did not know it until I had left the house after my visit. Then the old man came up to me in the dark. He drew out a knife; I saw it quite plainly somehow; and then some one seized him, and——" She stopped and looked at the big athlete intently; the expression upon his face was one not to be mistaken. "It was you," she said. "Bat, it was you."

He told her how he came to be there and also of what he saw afterward—of how Mary Burton went so strangely through the house, and of the words of the old man who scouted the idea of the girl being ill, and who had protested he had seen her leave the house more than once since the crime in a sort of disguise. As Nora listened to this, her face grew rigid with apprehension.

"When you returned from your first visit to Stanwick," she said, after he had finished, "and told me of the way young Frank Burton acted and spoke while being examined by the police, an idea came into my mind which I at once put away from me. I knew Mary Burton, because of her illness, had moments in which she was not quite herself. Suppose it were not Frank after all who did the thing I so feared—suppose it were she?"

"Ah!" said Scanlon. "You got that, too, did you?"

"But I refused to consider it. The idea of Frank was bad enough, but that of Mary was so much worse that I could not bear it. But when the papers came out saying that a woman was suspected I could bear it no longer; I got permission to see Frank and told him of what was being said. He denied it furiously, and it was then I knew he, too, though neither of us mentioned her name, believed his sister guilty. He had taken suspicion and imprisonment to attract the attention of the police from her; and now he was ready to confess the crime if his other sacrifices failed."

Bat Scanlon looked at her and marveled how he had ever permitted the real truth behind this situation to escape him as it had; and as he looked, little incidents, fragments of conversations came to him, and he realized that his state of mind had not been so extraordinary after all.

"Tell me," said he, the talk between Ashton-Kirk and Burgess strong in his mind—a conversation which seemed to point so directly toward Nora, "has Mary Burton ever traveled much? Has she ever held positions of any kind in other cities?"

"There have been periods when she has been almost well," said Nora. "And she has been in other cities at these times and perhaps has had employment."

"By George!" said Bat, with a sigh, "things do work out queerly. I was almost sure that you were——" But he stopped there. The scene in Quigley's office, an hour before, suddenly flared up in his mind, vividly. "I guess," he went on, "it's all up with that poor thing, in spite of her brother and everything else. Ashton-Kirk's hard to fool, and he must have had an eye on her and been tracing her doings from the first.

He knows she's been selling the diamonds, and he has a witness who says he saw her strike the blow that did for her father. And just before I left I heard him planning for a little journey somewhere; at first I thought it was here, and so I came to warn you. But I see it was Stanwick he had in view. He'll take the police, maybe, and arrest Mary Burton."

"Oh, no, no!" Nora was standing wide-eyed before him. "Oh, no! If I had reason to try and protect the brother, I have a double reason for protecting her, for she has suffered even more and is much more helpless." She stood looking at him for an instant and then went on: "Bat, you came here, in spite of your friendship for Ashton-Kirk, to warn me of what you thought a danger; will you go with me to warn Mary Burton of what you *know* is one?"

He was silent for a moment, and then he said, slowly:

"I haven't the same reason in her case, Nora; but if you ask me to do it, why, I will."

"I was about to go to her as you rang the bell," she said. "I don't know why, but just felt that I had to. I ask you to come with me," and held out her hand.

He grasped this eagerly, and then without another word they were upon the street and hurrying away through the night.



CHAPTER XXVI

CONCLUSION

Scanlon and Nora Cavanaugh were hurrying through the vast waiting-room at the railroad station when the big athlete felt a touch upon his arm.

"Not that way, old chap," said a voice at his side.

It was Ashton-Kirk, smiling and unruffled, and near by stood the broker, Quigley. Nora gave a gasp of despair, and Scanlon felt her cling to him, tremblingly.

"Fenton is outside there," resumed the investigator, nodding his head toward the train shed. "I have a notion that he's on his way to Stanwick. If you go out, he'll see you."

Bat gave a sigh of relief; after all, his own mission and that of Nora was not suspected.

"Is Fuller trailing him?" he asked.

"Yes; he just gave me the word as he passed."

Quigley, as he stood waiting, had a most uncomfortable expression upon his face; he stood first upon one foot and then upon the other; evidently what was in prospect for him was not at all to his liking.

"Mr. Quigley and myself had intended taking the train for Stanwick," said Ashton-Kirk. "But I think now that we'd better not."

"Not go?" It was Nora who spoke, and there was eagerness in her voice.

"Not by train," smiled the investigator.

"What's your idea of going there to-night?" asked Bat, with an assumption of ease.

"Why, I might ask you that, old chap," said the other, thoughtfully, "but I won't. But my errand is no secret. It's a little matter of identification."

At this moment Quigley advanced, and with a bow to Nora said:

"If I have been an innocent instrument—perfectly innocent, mind you—in the hands of a designing person, Miss Cavanaugh, I beg your pardon. I was assured that the jewels were honestly come by; and when Mr. Ashton-Kirk told me a while ago that they were really your property, I immediately placed myself in his hands, most anxious that complete justice should be done."

Nora made a vague answer to this, for at the moment she was watching the investigator, who stood with narrowed eyes, a thoughtful wrinkle between his brows, and one hand stroking his chin. And as she watched him, he spoke to Scanlon.

"It may be," said he, and there was a slow, curious smile about the corners of his mouth, "that Fenton's blundering into my plans will not be serious, after all. Indeed, it may be turned to account." The singular eyes went to the girl. "You are interested in this case, Miss Cavanaugh, and so is Scanlon. Why not go with Mr. Quigley and myself, and witness its solution."

"Fenton will spot us," said Scanlon. He had still a hope of doing what he and Nora had set out to do, and the pallor of her beautiful face and the misery in her eyes urged him to lose no chance. Once out of sight of the keen eyes of the investigator, he and the girl could take a taxi and make for Stanwick with all speed.

"Not if we go by motor," said Ashton-Kirk, in answer to his objections. "We can do that and make as good time as the local."

"Taxicabs are so small," said Nora, as they descended a long flight of steps to the street. "Four will crowd one so."

In her mind was the same thought as in that of Bat's. Once let them divide into two parties—she and Scanlon making one—and she was quite sure that *their* cab would be the first at No. 620 Duncan Street. But the investigator dashed this hope by leading the way, when they reached the street, to where some touring cars were to hire near the station.

"These," said he, quietly, "will be comfortable."

There was a businesslike young man in charge of the first of the cars, and he made his bargain, cranked his engine, received his orders and started off in an amazingly brief time. Inside of twenty minutes the suburbs, with their long rows of villa-like buildings, and their wide and smoothly paved streets, began to swing past them.

"I have your interest to thank, Miss Cavanaugh," said Ashton-Kirk, "for bringing this case to my attention—as a participant, that is. There has been a simplicity in it which has attracted me from the start, and, at the same time, a curious interweaving of threads which, under almost any other set of circumstances, would have been as wide apart as the poles. Scanlon has gone partly over the route with me, and because of this interweaving I have had considerable trouble in preventing his jumping at conclusions—in taking appearance for granted without waiting for proof. I am not sure how far I kept him from error," with a nod and a laugh, "for several times I believe he has gone the length of suspecting you."

Nora made no reply to this, but Scanlon said:

"I have believed she did it; everything pointed that way. But I never blamed her, for she had cause enough, even for that."

Ashton-Kirk nodded gravely.

"Cause, yes," said he. "And that is the heart-breaking thing connected with crime of a certain sort. Sometimes the criminal is much more innocent than the victim." He sat thoughtful for a space, while the car bounded forward over the well-kept roads; then he resumed: "I could see, Scanlon, where and how your thoughts flowed as they did; but I could do nothing more at the time than tell you to make no snap judgments. The agitation of Miss Cavanaugh caught your attention in the first place, and so when we saw a woman's footprints by the rose arbor you concluded they were hers; we found a small revolver by the fence; that also made you think of her. When, by means of the particle of mortar on the bar of the cellar grating at Stanwick, I discovered that the same person who had prowled about the lawn on the night of the murder had scaled the scaffolding outside Miss Cavanaugh's window, you fancied this to be almost positive proof. What you saw at Bohlmier's hotel, and the story told you by Big Slim, made it almost damning.

"If you had waited, as a man more experienced in such things would have done," and the investigator smiled at his friend, "you would have saved yourself a state of mind. The prints at the rose arbor were

made by a certain sort of shoe—a kind which I felt sure Miss Cavanaugh never wore. Later, in a second visit which I paid to No. 620 Duncan Street, I found the shoes which made the prints, and still with particles of soil clinging to them."

Bat caught a little moan from Nora, and he held her cold, limp hand in his strong, warm one.

"You're sure of that?" said he, to Ashton-Kirk.

"Quite positive. And the matter of the little revolver picked up on the lawn: that belonged to Fenton; he probably dropped it in scaling the fence. By means of a strong glass I saw a number scratched on the metal of the butt. I at once knew this to be a pawnbroker's mark. Fuller, inside three hours, had located the pawnbroker, and the records of the place showed the weapon had been sold to Fenton only a little while before."

"Good work!" admired Bat. "Nice!"

"And speaking of Fenton," went on Ashton-Kirk, "it rather puzzled me at first how he had been over the ground about the house and left no trace. But a little attention and look at his feet showed me that I had seen his tracks all over one side of the lawn—the ones of the man walking on his toes—and that I had supposed them to be those of Big Slim before he put on his 'creepers.'"

"Tell me," said Scanlon, "have you ever, in the course of this affair, believed young Frank Burton guilty?"

"At first I did not know. But after my second visit to Duncan Street, and a little talk with the colored maid, who is an honest imaginative soul, I was convinced that he was innocent."

"What did the maid tell you?" asked Bat.

"After the Bounder had been admitted to the house that night, she had gone back to the kitchen to her work. She heard Frank come in, but she did not catch anything of the altercation which followed. A little later, her duties finished, she started for her room which was at the top of the house. As she passed along the hall, on the second floor, she noticed the door of the bath room standing open and remembered she had not supplied it with fresh towels. The linen closet is in a room at the far end of the hall; she went there and procured what she wanted, and as she came into the hall once more she saw young Frank Burton come quickly out of his room, stand at the head of the stairway for a moment as though listening, and then hurry down to the floor below."

"That must have been after he had taken his sister to her room," said Scanlon.

But Ashton-Kirk shook his head.

"No; a few minutes later the maid saw him ascend the stairs once more, and the sister was with him then."

"But," cried Nora, a vague fear as to what this might lead to in her mind, "when the maid was questioned by the coroner's physician she said——"

But the investigator stopped her.

"As I have said, the maid is an altogether unimaginative creature, and it never occurred to her that anything short of blows or outcries could have anything to do with the crime. It was plain to me, as I talked to her, that she had even then no notion of the importance of what she was saying. She was simply answering questions. However, added to what the nurse had told Dr. Shower, her information was vital,

indeed. Miss Wheeler had gone into the kitchen, if you recall her testimony, at a time when the three Burtons, father, son and daughter, were in the sitting-room. She said she had gone to tell the maid she might go to bed, and found she had already gone; also she remained in the kitchen for a space, attending to some duties of her own.

"During this interval young Burton must have gone to his room, probably sick at heart with the wrangling. His haste in emerging from the room, when the colored girl saw him later, and his pause to listen at the head of the stairs seem to indicate that something had attracted his attention below."

"Have you any idea what that was?" asked Scanlon.

"I am not yet sure. But this is how it builds up in my mind. When he reëntered the sitting-room he found his father dead and his sister in a faint. Having, of course, a full knowledge of certain nervous seizures to which his sister was subject, it rushed upon him that, in a moment of frenzy, she had killed her father."

"No!" cried Nora Cavanaugh. "Oh, no!"

"He's only supposing," said Scanlon, soothingly. "That's nothing at all."

"The young man's brain is a quick one," proceeded Ashton-Kirk; "any one who follows his work in the *Standard* knows that. He at once began to cast about, so it seems to me, for a way of concealing his sister's guilt. He took her to her room, and came down once more to the sitting-room. Allowing for a proper passage of time, he then asked the nurse to call in the police. To them he told the story which he afterward repeated to the coroner's physician: that his father had met his death in the space which had elapsed between his taking his sister to her room and his return to the sitting-room."

Bat looked at Nora; in the semi-dark of the car her face was drawn and despairing. There was not a ray of hope in Scanlon's own breast, and patiently he listened as the quiet voice of the investigator went on:

"The by-play between the young man and the girl, during their examination by Dr. Shower, which you reported so graphically to me, took my attention. He must have seen suspicion heading his way, and yet he took no real steps to prevent it. And then there was something else. You reported that he had appeared in the sitting-room after you had gone there with Osborne and Dr. Shower to examine the body; and his anxiety then concerning the nature of the instrument used in the commission of the crime struck me as being a bit unusual. He seemed to dread, apparently, that this would be shown to be something caught up on the spur of the moment, something belonging in the room. Without putting it in so many words, he seemed to insinuate that a regulation weapon, such as might have been brought into the house by an unknown, had been used. In this I seemed to detect not only a desire to throw the police off the track, but also the existence of an element of hope. In the back of his mind was the thought that, after all, his sister might not be guilty. If the weapon used was not one that had been ready to her hand, there was a chance that she was innocent.

"However, the finding of the candlestick must have dissipated this hope, and when they charged him with the crime, he merely denied it; he, I think, feared to do or say anything which might direct the attention of the police definitely away from himself; for, in doing this, they might chance to think of his sister."

"But," said Nora, "you have no proof that all of this is true."

"Not proof," said Ashton-Kirk, smiling. "But there are certain almost unmistakable indications. One of these I brought about by my confidence to the police regarding the possibility of a woman being connected with the case. I felt that if he believed his sister guilty that this would stir him to some further action. It

did, as you know. He instantly canceled his denials, and admitted the crime."

"Tell me," said Scanlon, "haven't you ever thought that maybe some one else had done this thing? Has your mind always been fixed on these two? For example, didn't you, also, once think Miss Cavanaugh had a part in it?"

"Not for a moment," smiled Ashton-Kirk.

"Not even when I told you how I'd seen her at Bohlmer's?"

"Not even then. Of course I didn't know the explanation of that, and at once set about finding one. Fuller was put to work looking up Bohlmer, and in one day had his record complete. The man is a skilful blackmailer; he has practiced in many cities and has served more than one term in jail. I knew at once what had occurred; the two men fancied they 'had something on' Miss Cavanaugh regarding this murder, and had endeavored to extort money from her. I leave it to you," with a smiling nod toward Nora, "to tell how near I am to the facts."

The girl made a low-voiced, unintelligible reply, and then they ran on for some distance in silence. Suddenly Ashton-Kirk signaled the driver and the car came to a stand; the investigator pointed to some buildings at no great distance; a locomotive with a few cars trailing behind it was panting laboriously away from these, its headlight glaring morosely into the darkness.

"I think," said the investigator, "that is Stanwick Station."

"It is," agreed Scanlon.

"Then, more than likely, that is the train which carried Fenton and Fuller. I suppose it would be as well if we got out here and walked the remainder of the way."

Accordingly they alighted, and the driver was instructed to wait where he was. Then they proceeded toward Duncan Street, reaching which they turned into it, and soon were in the neighborhood of No. 620. They paused in the shadows in which Bat Scanlon had spoken to the old resident; the house opposite seemed dark and silent.

"No one stirring," said Bat. "This whole section can be as quiet a place as I know of when it takes the notion."

Ashton-Kirk, who had been straining his eyes through the darkness, now placed his fingers to his lips and gave a peculiar whistle. After a moment there was an answer to this, and then a figure emerged from the shadow of the Burton house. In a very little while longer Fuller crossed the street to them.

"What news?" asked the investigator, briefly.

"Fenton is in the house," answered Fuller. "I followed him from the train; he went to the front door, rang in the regular way and was admitted by what looked to me to be a nurse."

"Had he any idea he was followed?"

"I think not. He made no show of it, anyhow."

"Suppose you stay here and keep Mr. Quigley company for a few minutes," suggested Ashton-Kirk. "We'd like to look around a bit."

"I am not accustomed to the night air," complained the broker. "It has a bad effect upon my breathing."

"We shall be only a very little while," he was assured.

Ashton-Kirk crossed the street with Nora and Scanlon at his side. Quietly they entered at the little iron gate and stood for a space examining the house.

From the fan light above the front door came a dull glow, as though a subdued light burned in the hall.

"All the shutters are closed," said Bat, as he noticed this fact. "They may be brightly lighted inside and we not know it."

The keen, searching eyes of Ashton-Kirk caught a sort of glow upon the grass at one side; he moved in that direction and the others followed him. At the second floor a light flickered dimly in a window; it was a wavering, uncertain sort of thing, and Bat Scanlon recognized it at once.

"It's candle-light," said he. "Remember, I told you about seeing the girl——"

Here he felt Nora's cold hand close upon his wrist; at the window appeared the figure of Mary Burton, in the same loose gown as before and holding a candle in her hand. The light was full upon her face as she bent forward as though intent upon catching some sound. And the face was white and rigid with fear.

"Have you looked through the upper part of the house?" Ashton-Kirk asked Scanlon.

"No," replied Bat.

"I have," said the other. "That window is right at the head of a stairway. Something is being said or done upon the lower floor which rather upsets her."

He moved forward as he spoke; beneath the dimly-lighted window above was a square, heavily made shutter different from the others in shape, and marking a hall window. As they were about to pass it, Ashton-Kirk uttered a low exclamation and stopped suddenly. The shutter was badly fitted, having swollen with the weather, so that it could not be completely closed. The slim, strong fingers of Ashton-Kirk gripped its edge; slowly, carefully, with never a creak it opened. There was a white curtain inside, but a pendant light made all things in the hall visible. A flight of stairs led to the second floor, and at the foot of these stood Fenton, one hand upon the rail, and the nurse, with frightened face, was pleading with him, as though not to do something which he had signified his intention of doing.

"Ah!" Scanlon heard Ashton-Kirk breathe. "So that's your game, is it?" Then to Bat: "Stay here; keep an eye on that fellow, and be ready to act."

With these words he slipped easily away into the darkness, and Scanlon and Nora were left alone at the window.

"He is demanding to be allowed to see Mary," said the trembling voice of Nora in Bat's ear. "And the poor nurse is terrified. See how she tries to stop him!"

With a sort of snarl, the broken-nosed man threw off the detaining hand of the nurse and turned a threatening face upon her, at the same time gesturing toward the upper floor and signifying his intention of ascending in spite of anything the girl might say.

"But she's got grit," said Bat, in a low tone of admiration. "She hangs to him. The girl up-stairs is her

patient, and she'll not have her frightened. It's part of the training they get, I guess."

Fenton let go the stair rail and made a step toward the nurse; his ugly face was distorted, and his hands were clenched. He began to speak; what he said could not be heard by the watchers outside the window, but the nurse seemed terrified and shrank from him.

"He's down to cases now," said Scanlon, as he deftly freed his revolver, and held it ready, but in such a way that Nora could not see it.

"Look!" whispered Nora, thrillingly. "Look, Bat. On the stairs!"

Bat Scanlon shifted his eyes from the threatening figure of Fenton, and the shrinking one of the nurse; upon the stairs, coming slowly down, her loose dressing-gown held about her by one slim hand, was Mary Burton. She had reached the foot of the stairs before the broken-nosed man saw her; then he whirled about, and his hands gripped her delicate throat.

Scanlon's revolver arose to a deadly level, but before he could fire, Ashton-Kirk was seen to leap into the hall like a panther. There was a short, sharp blow, with all the power of the lithe body behind it; Fenton's grasp relaxed and he fell to the floor. The watchers saw Mary totter, and noted Ashton-Kirk catch her in his arms, at the same time gesturing to the nurse to bring a restorative. The nurse had vanished, and Ashton-Kirk was placing the sick girl upon a hall lounge when Nora and Scanlon hurried from the window and around to the door.

This stood wide open, and they encountered Fuller and the pawnbroker, Quigley, as they entered. In the hall they saw Fenton rising sullenly to his feet, one hand feeling at his jaw; Ashton-Kirk was bending over the white, fragile creature upon the lounge.

"There she is," said Scanlon, pointing to Mary and looking at Quigley. "There she is. Pile it all on her shoulders. She's strong and can stand it. Say your say, and then beat it; for by George, I won't be able to stand the sight of you afterward."

Quigley looked at the speaker in surprise; then his puffy eyes went to Mary with a deepening of their astonishment, and finally to Ashton-Kirk.

"Is this the lady you had in mind?" said he. "If so you have made a mistake. She is not the person who sold me the diamonds."

Nora Cavanaugh gave a gasping sort of cry and stood staring at the pawnbroker, her wide eyes full of joy—of bewilderment. At that moment a set of hangings were pushed aside and the nurse came into the hall, a glass in her hand. Silently Ashton-Kirk touched Quigley upon the arm, and pointed to the nurse. The man started, and then regarded her intently.

"Yes," said he. "Yes! That is the woman! I can take my oath on that in any court in the land."

The woman stood motionless for a moment; she drew in a long breath; the glass fell to the floor and smashed. Then she disappeared once more through the door by which she entered.

"Fuller," said Ashton-Kirk. But he had no need to speak, for that brisk young man was already after her. Dazed, Bat Scanlon looked about. Nora was upon her knees beside the sick girl, sobbing and chafing her pale hands; the investigator was at a telephone summoning the police. Scanlon's glance then wandered to Fenton, and there rested.

"You told us a couple of hours ago," said he, "that a woman killed Tom Burton and that you saw her do it. Has he," and he nodded toward Quigley, "got it on the right party?"

"Yes," replied the broken-nosed man, "he's got it right; it was the nurse. You don't have to look any further than that."

"But," said Bat, a last doubt in his mind, "what was the idea of you wanting to go up-stairs a while ago, if you didn't want her?" pointing to Mary.

"It was the sparks I wanted," said Fenton. "I thought if any were left they were in the nurse's room."

Next morning Nora Cavanaugh, still very pale, but with a light in her eyes such as had not been there for many days, sat snugly in the corner of a sofa at her home, wrapped about in a beautiful old shawl. Near by sat Bat Scanlon; and standing before them, his hat and stick in his hand as though about to leave, was Ashton-Kirk.

"I'll admit," the big athlete was saying, "when the thing was finally brought down to a woman and Nora was eliminated," with a smiling nod toward her, "I could see nobody but Mary Burton. The nurse never occurred to me."

"And yet *you* seem to have suspected her from the start," said Nora, her eyes wonderingly on the criminologist. "Why was that?"

"It began with the candlestick—the weapon used in the commission of the murder. Candlesticks go in pairs, usually. I found the mate to it on a shelf in the room across the hall from the sitting-room—that in which the nurse sat reading when Tom Burton was admitted to the house. That one of a pair of candlesticks should be in the sitting-room, and one in the room opposite, struck me as being unusual; later, I spoke to the maid of this. She said they both belonged in the room—on the shelf—where I found the second one."

Nora gave a little gasp, and her hand went to her heart.

"It is horrible," she said.

"While on my second visit to Duncan Street, I was at pains to note one of the nurse's shoes; it was of a peculiarly comfortable make—the same as those which made the prints at the rose arbor.

"These two things rather centered my attention upon her; and I began to pry into her record. Burgess, one of my men, went as far as New Orleans, looking her up. A number of things were found against her, a few rather startling. She seemed a woman given to criminal impulses, and just the sort who would perpetrate a thing such as the Stanwick affair."

"And she had a good face," said Nora. "I had specially noticed it. To think," and the girl shivered, "that she should have been a suicide, locked in her room, when the police came!"

"Fuller made a mistake in waiting when she refused to open the door," said Ashton-Kirk. "He should have broken it in."

"Her story of how the murder was done would have been interesting," said Scanlon.

"I think I can, with Fenton's statement to help out, supply the main points," said the investigator; "but of course they will lack the personal touch. As I have worked it out, she sat reading, just as she said; and she heard a greater part of what was talked of in the sitting-room between Burton and his daughter, and afterward the son. I have learned why the elder Burton went there that night. It was to call up and confer with a shady dealer in diamonds—just such another as Quigley. I have talked with this man. He said he'd had a call from the Bounder, who told him he had a rich haul to dispose of. The time of this call and the time of the Bounder's presence at No. 620 Duncan Street was the same. But the place where they were to meet was never given to the dealer, for the call terminated abruptly in a confusion of voices, and then a blank silence which told him that the receiver had been hung up. I explain this by reasoning it out that young Burton, indignant at what was going forward, had torn his father away from the instrument before the conversation had ended."

"But, if this is so, why did the Bounder ever go to No. 620 Duncan Street to carry out a deal for stolen diamonds?" asked Scanlon. "There were many perfectly safe places he could have picked."

"The answer to that probably lies in the nature of the man. He hated his son and daughter; he knew his rascally doings gave them pain, and it may have occurred to him as a delicious piece of humor to do this particular thing before their eyes, depending upon their shame to keep them silent afterward."

"All this talk of diamonds attracted the attention of the listening nurse. She finally stole out of the house, took up the position at the rose arbor and watched what was happening in the sitting-room. While she was doing this, I think young Burton must have gone up-stairs, where he was afterward seen by the maid. From what Fenton has told the police, he was looking in at the sitting-room window when he saw Mary Burton faint. No one was then in the room but the girl and her father; and as the latter bent over her, Fenton saw the door open and the nurse steal into the room, the brass candlestick in her hand. The jewels were upon the table where the Bounder had placed them at the moment his daughter fell. The nurse snatched them up, and as she did so the man turned his head and saw her. He leaped toward her, and she struck him to the floor. Without a moment's hesitation she lifted the window, and dropped the candlestick within two feet of where Fenton was crouched. Then she left the room."

"The sounds made by these happenings are probably what young Burton was listening to at the head of the stairs when the colored maid saw him. And my version of what he did after he descended the stairs you have already heard. The brother thought the sister was the criminal, and when the sister came out of her swoon—I heard her admit as much to her brother this morning when he was released from prison—her mind was burdened with the belief that *he* was guilty. And so both were silent for each other's sake."

"But Mary's prowling about the house with the candle as I saw her that night?" said Scanlon. "What do you make of that?"

"Mary Burton has a good mind—though she lacks self-assertion. When the jewels were not found upon her father's body, or in the room where he was killed, she realized they had been stolen. But by whom? She knew her brother too well to think he was the thief, and I think from that moment she began to suspect the nurse. Once, as a report of one of my men states, as the nurse left the house secretly and with a veil over her face, Mary was seen at a window, the curtain partly drawn aside, looking after her. I think her going about through the rooms with the candle was an effort to locate the possible hiding place of the diamonds."

Nora gave a deep sigh.

"Poor thing! And to think how very brave she was."

"Well," and Ashton-Kirk showed unmistakable signs of going, "I suppose their troubles from that source, at least, are over."

Nora arose and held out her hand.

"That it is," she said, "is due to you. And I thank you for the peace you have brought to us all."

Ashton-Kirk released the hand after a moment.

"It was one of those things which would probably have unraveled itself," said he. "However," with a nod and a smile which showed his flashing white teeth, "you never can tell. So it's just as well, perhaps, that it wasn't permitted to run its course." He paused in the doorway, the trim maid waiting to show him out.

"That you are a friend of Scanlon's means a great deal to me," said he. "I'd do a great deal for him, for, you know, he's one of the very best fellows in the world."

And the last thing he saw as he vanished through the doorway was the undoubted blush which colored the face of Scanlon, and the light in the beautiful eyes of Nora Cavanaugh, as she turned to look at him.

FOOTNOTES:

[\[1\]](#) For the details of the Campe case, see the volume entitled: "Ashton Kirk, Special Detective."

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