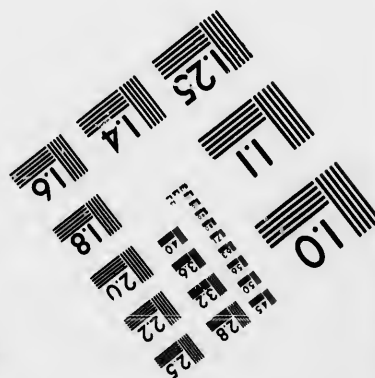
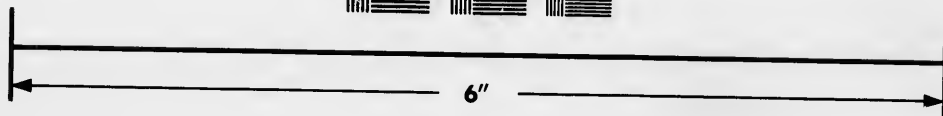
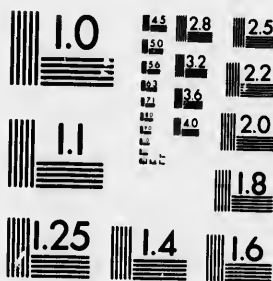


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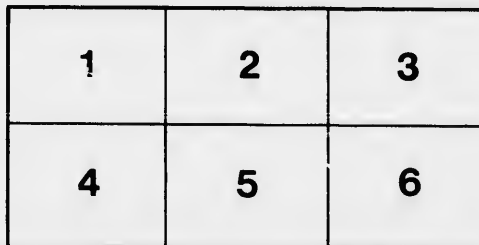
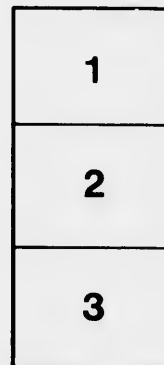
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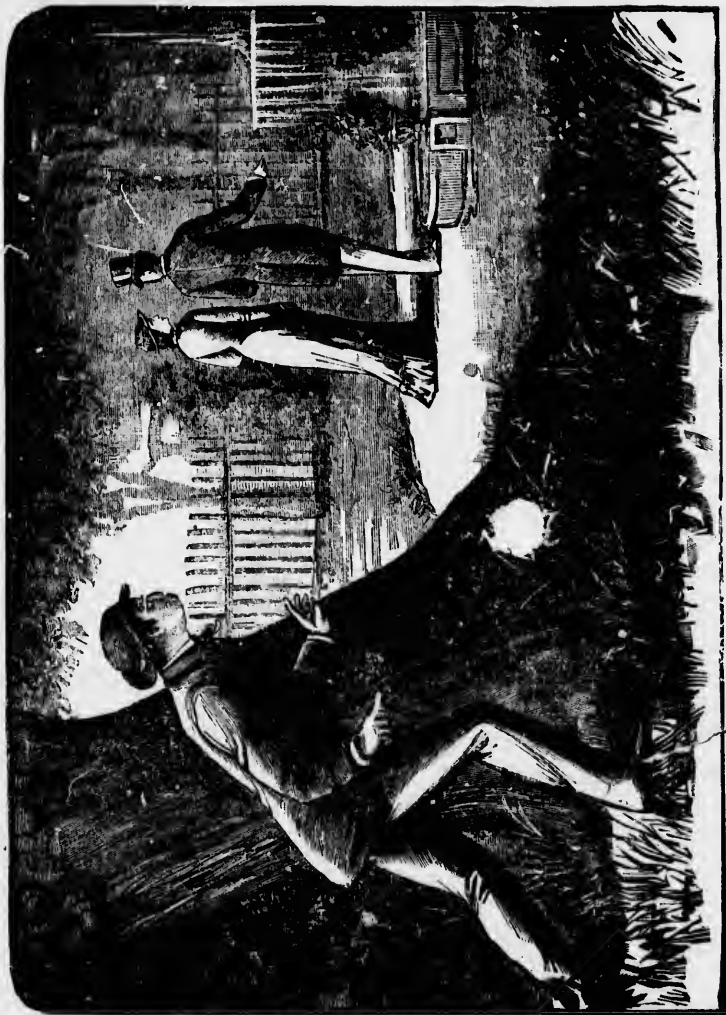
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The detective shadowed their every step.

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The detective shadowed their every step.

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OR,

THE DEAD MAN'S SECRET.

A THRILLING DETECTIVE STORY,

BY

EDMUND C. STRONG.



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MANACLE AND BRACELET;

OR,

The Dead Man's Secret.

A THRILLING CHICAGO DETECTIVE STORY.

By EDMOND C. STRONG.

CHAPTER I.

A TERRIBLE CRIME.

On the morning of the fourth day of July, 1880, a man traversing the lonely roadway that marks the western confines of the city of Chicago paused suddenly and looked down.

The purpling skies of morn reflected the first light of day over the broad prairie landscape; afar, the rapid reverberating echoes of firearms ushering in the celebration of the nation's independence disturbed the early calm in confused sound.

At the spot where the man stood, however, a weird, mystic silence and desolation brooded over the scene. Its somber influence seemed to oppress the lonely wayfarer, for, as he paused, his eyes became riveted, his mind absorbed in contemplation of some object at his feet.

"Blood!" he muttered, a shade of emo-

tion in his hoarse voice. "A fit place for a murder this, but the stain may simply mark the spot where a wounded animal has lain, or a trifling accident occurred."

Dismissing any further speculation on the discovery from his mind the traveler resumed his rapid gait, and began skirting the broad, artificial lake of water which lay between him and the inhabited thoroughfare of the metropolis.

He whistled a lively, careless tune as he went along the edge of the mere, little dreaming of the awful crime that was lying in wait for his discovery, soon to be revealed to his startled vision in a tragic and horrible manner.

At a turn in the beaten path of clay for the second time he came to an abrupt halt, and this time with an ejaculation of mingled horror and alarm, and a face blanched to ashen hue in a moment of space.

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"Horrible!" he gasped out, his trembling hands waving back some frightful vision suddenly revealed, his head turned involuntarily aside as if to shut out the memory of a momentary glimpse of a scene he would not forget till his dying day.

In the presence of awful death life had come to a pause.

For death was there—cold, impressive, terrible. It spoke in the fragments of rock streaked with lines of lurid hue, it called out for vengeance from the clefted grass where the bright emerald of nature showed through a sickly mask of crimson.

Most of all, it lifted its gory shield where the red-dyed waters laved the half-nude form of a man whose staring eyes were fixed like stone upon the rising orb of day, whose hands were clenched into the tufted sandy shore of the lake, betraying the death agony he had suffered.

Across the throat, from ear to ear, stretched a gaping wound from which the life blood still trickled to the earth. Death was there—the mute lips and staring eyes bespoke it, and the pose of the form, the marks of a struggle on the shore, told that the twin sisters of sin, mystery and crime, had marked this man for a victim.

The wayfarer did not have the courage to again gaze upon the frightful scene. He averted his glance, sped down the path toward the nearest house, and spread the first intelligence of a mysterious crime that, for long days afterward, filled with tragic details the criminal records of the commonwealth.

One hour later the electric telegraph flashed from the nearest station over many wires the first intimation of the newly discovered crime. Telephone bells jangled noisily as it was caught up and repeated; alarm bells were slowly traversed by index fingers spelling out the common legend in a word: M—U—R—D—E—R.

The machinery of the law was in motion. The hands of justice went groping forth toward victim and assassin. A network of trails were cast over the broad expanse of the city, as the various precinct commanders directed their men to pursue the rapid routine of official investigation of the crime. Less than sixty minutes after the discovery of the dead body at the artesian well, the silent victim of a mysterious tragedy had at his service the bravery, shrewdness, and intelligence of four hundred representatives of the best organized and most successful police force in the world.

At that time Carter Harrison, chief executive officer of the great metropolis, had already inaugurated that brilliant career of municipal reform which, later, crowned

him as the champion of a new and prosperous regime.

Its initial progress had seen the advancement of better police management, and experience, ability, and discipline marked the rule of such men as McGargle, Ebersold, Bonfield, Lloyd, Beidell, and Steele.

Bribe routine and detective operations had also been the rule in the district under the control of Ward, Stanton, Beard, McDonnell, Schuck, Baus, Buckley, Byrne, Hubbard, and Duffy.

On that eventful morning there sat in the Superintendent's room at police headquarters a man whose quick mind and unerring judgment directed the destinies of the most important branch of the department of justice—Edward Keating, Chief of Detectives.

Under his management had been centralized all the elements of progress and success in his especial field of action, and veterans grown gray in the service, under his appointment of detective labor, became parts of a marvelous machine, operating with dexterous system and accuracy the movements of a great police confederation.

It was the province of this remarkable and gifted man to investigate personally or through his aids all important cases of mysterious crime, and the early morning hour found him at his post of duty, gathering from telephone or report the minutest possible details of the newly discovered crime.

It did not take him long to possess the facts of the case. His brow grew somber and perplexed as by gradations succeeding reports from officers on the scene of the murder made more patent the discouraging truth that the tragedy was evolving another of the long list of strange cases in the investigation of which the detective finds himself face to face with a blank wall bearing the fatal legend of "Mysteriously murdered—a clueless crime."

Of a certainty there was no trace of the assassin, not even the weapon that had done the unknown to his death had been found. There was no apparent motive for the commission of the crime; worst of all, no knowledge of the identity of its hapless victim. Suicide had been whispered, but the idea was derided as impossible, and at last the police, after an attempt to have the throngs who visited the spot where the remains lay identify the murdered man, removed the body to the morgue, with the impression that the artesian well horror would be shelved amid the archives of mysterious cases too dark and inexplicable for human effort to fathom.

With the last detail of the case in his

possession, the Chief pondered thoughtfully over it. Then he sent directions for two of his detectives to be sent to him. They were his counselors and most trusted aids in all important and difficult cases, and the trio had built up a brilliant record for efficiency when they worked together in previous years.

Two men answered the Chief's summons a moment later—in nothing alike save a certain indication in the features of each of the possession of rare characteristics of courage and shrewdness. Both were already famous as detectives, having laid the foundation of a reputation which in after years became national, and invested each with the highest official authority possible in the municipal detective service.

The larger of the two, stalwart, powerful, and straight as an arrow, was a monument of perfect physical development. His name, John Shea, had been a terror to evil-doers since he first entered the police force, while his sagacity in tracing down a criminal was only equaled by his pertinacity, once engaged in a case involving endurance or hardship.

His companion, Joseph Kipley, was of lower build, his set head and broad, square shoulders giving him an aspect almost leonine. His eye was never still, and one quick flash seemed to take in every detail of vision presented.

As a keen, strategic worker this talented officer had no equal on the force. He was noted for deft handling of criminals under suspicion and arrest, and, less demonstrative than his confrere, was far more persuasive and magnetic where long, exhaustive "pumping" of a malefactor was required.

Together they were the strongest "team" of detectives Chicago ever knew, and a glance would have told the most casual observer that they were men whom no obstacles could daunt in the pursuit of a criminal, no adverse circumstances prevent their steady march to official usefulness and promotion.

From the reports on his desk and his own theories regarding the case, the Chief related the circumstances of the artesian well murder in a few graphic words.

"The case is a mysterious and difficult one," he said, but we must find a starting point and work rapidly. I detail you for the scene of the murder, Kipley. Make a search for weapons, and question the people in the vicinity. Shea and myself will visit the morgue, and he will rejoin you later."

The experienced Kipley needed no detailed instructions as to his duty, and left the room at once.

"Our first task should be to learn who the murdered man was," suggested Shea.

"Exactly," replied the Chief. "That once ascertained, we may trace him, learn who he was, his circumstances and his associates. The knowledge will be pretty certain to place us on the trail of his assassin. Come, we will go to the morgue at once. What is your theory of the case?"

"That it is a murder for gain or revenge, and that an acquaintance, possibly a warm friend, murdered the victim."

"Why do you think so?"

"Because this man was decoyed to the place he was murdered. No one knows him in the vicinity, and it is a secluded spot a stranger would seek to avoid. Some friend lured him to the place under pretense of a swim or a wash, say last evening. He was no professional thief, for he used a razor to kill him—a weapon no regular criminal employs. He even took away his clothes, so that they might not serve as a clue to his identity."

The two officers surveyed the body of the victim of the night's tragedy silently when they reached the morgue. For over half an hour they examined it closely. As they drew away from the slab their eyes met intelligently.

Intuitively each discerned that the other had made an important discovery.

"You have discovered something?" inquired the Chief.

"Yes. That man's throat was cut after he was dead," replied Shea.

The Chief started.

"Why do you start at that?"

"Because back of his ear the skull is crushed in. A rock or a cudgel robbed him of life, and his throat was cut to mutilate him or to distract suspicion to a plausible theory of suicide."

"The mystery deepens," remarked the Chief. "I also have made an important discovery."

"In what way?"

"I have learned the man's business."

Shea looked curious.

"Did you notice his feet?" inquired the Chief.

"Not particularly."

"They are stained a dark brown. Whenever this man worked, and that, too, recently, he was engaged in a task where some strong tanning solution was in use. We have done all we can do here. I shall give orders to have him photographed, and the body preserved in ice for possible identification."

"Shall I rejoin Kipley?"

"Yes, and report your success to-night." Shea found his industrious partner hard

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at work on the case at the scene of the murder.

Together they haunted the spot for hours. They secured a trace of two men who had visited a saloon a short distance from the well the night previous, and worked out the clew until nightfall. They kept widening their circuit of investigation hour by hour, and had formed a theory to work on which, in the light of later events, proved to be a correct one.

"The murderer will never be found by indiscriminate search," said Kipley that night, "for he has left no clew behind him. We must establish the identity of the victim first. There is no doubt but that he worked in some tannery. To-morrow we will start through the tanneries, most of which are located in the northwestern part of the city."

It was a monotonous task that the detective suggested, but its accomplishment was greatly facilitated by the Chief handing his trusty assistants photographs of the murdered man, he had caused to be taken the preceding day.

Slow routine work was irksome to these expert man-catchers, whose abilities were rarely required in this class of work, but the mysterious aspects of the case fascinated them and aroused their professional zeal, and they worked laboriously and with system.

"They visited a dozen tanneries, but the pictures they had of the murdered man were not recognized. At last they met a gleam of light. At a little tannery near the river the bookkeeper of the establishment started as they exhibited the picture.

"I know that man," he said, promptly.

The detectives looked gratified.

"Did he work here?" inquired Kipley.

"Yes."

"When?"

"Last week. He has been missing since the day before the Fourth of July."

"What is his name?"

"Aaron Johansen."

An exclamation of satisfaction swept Shen's triumphant lips.

"At last!" he breathed, fervently. "We know our man. You are sure it is he?"

"Positive. I paid him off the night of the 3d of July."

"How much?"

"Fourteen dollars. I remember distinctly the amount and the circumstances."

The silence of the detective encouraged him to proceed.

"There were two fives and two ones. One of the five-dollar bills was peculiarly marked."

"How?"

"It had been torn and pasted together."

"What with?"

"A yellow hair-oil label. The label was numbered, and I recall perfectly that the last three numbers were a recurrence of one figure: 4-4-4."

The detectives stored away all this valuable information in their minds, and began work in earnest. Within an hour they had learned where Johansen boarded, had found the landlord and questioned him, and gained some additional information which reawakened all their professional interest.

Aaron Johansen was a reputable Dane of good habits, and, when last seen, had some forty dollars in his possession, the landlord affirmed.

He had few associates and no intimate friends. Could he name any in particular? he was asked. Yes. There was a young man Johansen had helped considerably—a somewhat disolute character.

"What was his name?"

"Alfred Hultgren."

A further inquiry evolved another important fact. Hultgren had not been seen since the night of the murder, and Johansen had left that same evening, presumably with him, to visit a friend who resided "over beyond the artesian well."

"It's narrowing down—we have shadowed our man sure," remarked Shen, as they left the place.

That night's revelations corroborated this theory. It was learned that a man exactly answering Hultgren's description had been seen in a saloon about half a mile from the artesian well the day following the murder. He had shown quite an amount of money, and had exhibited a razor, with the drunken remark:

"I cut a man's throat with that last night."

Detective persistency likewise revealed the existence of an old man, a watchman on the railroad, also located near the artesian well. He knew both Johansen and Hultgren. They had visited him together the night of the 3d of July, and they had left together, going in the direction of the spot where Johansen's body had been found.

Kipley questioned this important witness closely.

"Did you see Hultgren again?" he asked.

"Yes."

"When?"

"The next day. He returned here and asked me to take charge of some money for him."

"How much was it?"

"Thirty dollars."

"Have you got the money yet?"

"Yes; he did not return again."

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The old watchman went to an old stove-pipe and drew forth a small roll of bills.

Kipley uttered a satisfied exclamation as he examined the money.

"What is it?" asked Shea.

"Look; our case is complete. We have now only to find our man to convict him."

Kipley's statement seemed correct.

There was a five-dollar bill among the money, and across its torn back was a yellow hair-oil label bearing the fatal numbers the tannery book-keeper had described: 4-4-4.

The chain of evidence was perfect. But where was the criminal? An ineffectual watch was set on the old man's house, but Hultgren never returned there.

His description was given to every police officer in the city, but the most persistent search failed to reveal his whereabouts.

"He must have left the city," suggested Shea, after a day of unsuccessful quest.

"I don't think so. He will return to his old haunts with the fatalistic persistency of the murderer," replied Kipley.

The ensuing day they secured Johansen's former landlord as a guide and explored the entire district where Hultgren lived.

It was almost dusk when the two detectives and their companion were scouted on the railroad track discussing the situation.

A visit to Hultgren's former friends and haunts had not produced a single trace of his present whereabouts.

Suddenly Shea sprang to his feet.

A solitary figure was walking down the railroad track.

"Ain't that our man?" he demanded of the landlord.

"Yes, yes, that's Hultgren," cried the other, excitedly.

In a moment the two detectives had reached the side of the man they had been seeking all that day.

It was, indeed, Hultgren. He resisted arrest, but Shea's strong hand held him in a grip like iron.

An hour later a patrol wagon drove the detectives and their prisoner to the Central Police Station.

The triumphant officers thrust him through the open window into the very presence of the Chief.

"There's the murderer!" they announced to the excited detectives and reporters who thronged the room.

Hultgren's face was a dead pall of terror and guilt. He could only speak a few words in the English language, but these he employed vociferously to deny the crime imputed to his charge.

In his pocket was found a razor with dry

stains on its blade, later pronounced by an analytical chemist to be human blood.

A hurried consultation among the detectives resulted in a decision to try one of the most ghastly of experiments on the prisoner, in the hope of making his stubborn denial give away.

Carriages were procured and a large number of detectives and reporters started for the morgue.

Here they found that on account of the extremely hot weather Johansen's body had been removed to the ice chest preservation box of a hospital farther south.

Midnight, silent and solemn, brooded over the dark and somber structure into which, without a word of warning, Hultgren was led.

In a damp room lit by a flickering lamp they held him before an immense box.

In this, packed in ice, was Johansen's body, a rope surrounding the waist running over a beam and behind the box.

One of the officers, amid a death-like stillness, went out of view and began drawing the rope.

Slowly, as if arising from the grave, Aaron Johansen's body came into view, the staring eyes and gaping throat confronting the horrified prisoner.

"Don't hang me—don't hang me!" shrieked the wretched man, tearing at his throat and reeling, white as marble and trembling in every limb.

One hour later the strong iron door of the County Jail clanged to on Alfred Hultgren.

Justice had been successful, the mission of the law so far executed. The murderer of poor Aaron Johansen was alone to appeal to the erring judgment of man and the mercy of the God he had disobeyed.

The great case of Detectives Kipley and Shea was terminated—a case in which they showed themselves prodigies of shrewdness and efficiency.

It is such men as these, faithful and unfaltering to a high public trust, who have taught the great criminal classes of the community that the wages of sin is death, and have secured to the reputable citizen protection and safety for his property and his life.

Let the warp of fiction, intermingling with the woof of reality, claim for the novelist his time-honored privilege of weaving from such tragic scenes as the artesian well murder a story that shall have the semblance of possibility.

Let the romancist continue in his own way the exploits of such men as Kipley and Shea, without exceeding in plot or in-

MANACLE AND BRACELET.

vident the dramatic interest of episodes of every-day occurrence.

CHAPTER II
ON THE TRAIL

"At last!"

The speaker was a dark, impressive-looking man, the hour noon, the scene that same fatal spot where the murdered Johnsen had met his fate.

The face of the landscape had somewhat changed since the reader last viewed it.

In a search for the instrument of death employed by the assassin the police had ordered that the vast lake of the artesian well be drained.

The city's fire engines had assisted in pumping out the water, and the person described in the beginning of this chapter had haunted the vicinity during the operation.

That this man had an object in his persistent presence there, his keen eyes riveted on the fast receding waters indicated.

He seemed to be absorbed in watching for some object that he believed the waters had covered, and which he hoped the laying bare of the bottom of the lake would reveal.

He had stationed himself on the remote bank of the mere, and finally springing from the bank traversed rapidly the exposed bed of the lake for some distance, stooped over and picked up some object.

"At last!" his lips breathed relievedly, triumphantly, as he retraced his steps and hastily secreted the article, which looked like a circular tin box, in his pocket. "It was worth the trouble of waiting and watching. I saw it flung in the water last night. It must be of some importance, or Harvey Talcott would not have taken the trouble to conceal it."

"What have you got there—what are you doing here?"

A uniformed policeman blocked the stranger's path, as he gained the shore, gazing suspiciously at him.

"Nothing wrong, my friend," was the careless reply.

"You picked up something there—"

"Yes, something that was lost last night. Nothing to do with the murder, I assure you. Look here."

The stranger turned back his coat. On its interior side there flashed upon the policeman's vision a star.

"Detective—Secret Service Corps," was the legend it bore.

"Oh, that's it—one of ourselves, eh? All right," the policeman hastened to say. "Why, I didn't recognize you with that

false black beard on—Langdon the Shadow?"

The man thus designated nodded affirmatively, and then, as if anxious to get rid of his interlocutor, moved away from the spot.

The policeman stood gazing admiringly after him, a kind of hero-worship in his glance.

"What is he doing here?" mused the officer, speculatively. "There's some fine work going on when he's on a case. If it ain't the murder it's something just as deep, for the Shadow never wastes his time on operations."

The policeman had given no undue praise to his late companion.

Langdon the Shadow, one of those fitting, mysterious attaches of a great police organization whose work is always secret and important, was a valued member of the metropolitan secret-service force.

His past and even his present movements were a mystery to even those who were engaged in the same line of work as himself, for he flashed hither and thither in the pursuance of his duties under a score of disguises, and never failing to hunt down the criminal on whose track he was placed.

He was accredited with the possession of remarkable sagacity, and, during two years' service, had made one of the most remarkable records of the times for shrewd, successful work.

In numerous cases of recent date this gifted man had been known to exercise an ingenuity, shrewdness, and courage almost phenomenal.

His keen eye flashed with satisfaction as he walked at a brisk rate toward the city.

"For over a month I have been on the trail of Harvey Talcott," he so eloquized, "Last night I lost him, but I shadowed him past this dreary spot. I saw him fling this tin box into the water yonder. What does it contain? Something dangerous to his evil plans, or he would not take this trouble to get rid of it."

The detective took the first street-car he reached, and, when it gained the business center, left it and started for his room.

This was located in a large business block, and was a perfect museum in the way of trophies of a long detective experience.

The walls were covered with pictures of noted criminals and various implements of the burglar's art.

The detective flung himself into a chair, took out a memorandum book and consulted it for some time, and then murmured, reflectively:

"The case against Harvey Talcott is a plain one, and is progressing finely.

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"This man is one of the most expert rascals in America, and when he shot and killed my brother officer, Arnold Martin, a year since, I swore to bring that crime home to him and ferret out his many evil schemes of gain and revenge.

"I believe that I shall shortly have the connecting link of evidence that will prove Talcott to be the leader in a counterfeiting scheme of enormous magnitude.

"Meantime, however, he is engaged on some new lot that interests yet puzzles me.

"Its significance I have not yet fathomed, but last night he met, in a restaurant, a veiled woman whose face I could not see, but who is evidently young and beautiful.

"She is his accomplice in his new plot, and she I traced to her place of residence.

"These two were joined by a third party, a woman, evidently a servant. The latter handed Talcott a small package, for which he gave her a large amount of money.

"It seemed to be soft and flexible, and he placed it in a circular box. The trio then separated, and Talcott walked west, passed the artisan well, and flung the box into the water, as if anxious to get rid of it.

"That box is now in my possession. Whether it contains a clue to the new mysterious moves of this man and his accomplice or not, it has some important bearing on the case in hand."

The detective drew the box from his pocket. It was still damp from its contact with the water, and some sandy clay adhered to its sides.

Langdon removed the adjustable top and curiously drew forth a flexible but bulky object, tightly folded.

"Cloth," he murmured; "no, canvas. Why, it's a picture and an oil painting."

His face expressed a growing wonder as he began to unroll the inclosure of the box, and at last it lay across the table.

It was a finely painted, full-length portrait splendidly executed, and bearing all those fine touches of harmony and color which show the work of a true artist.

Apparently cut hastily and roughly from its frame, neither this treatment nor its being folded in the box had destroyed its beauty.

Unfolded it presented to the critical eye of the detective the portrait of the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

It represented a young girl just blooming into womanhood, with a shy, innocent face, and clear, magnetic eyes that bespoke all the purity and brightness of happy youth.

She was simply dressed, only one ornament in the way of jewelry being present in the picture—a peculiarly shaped bracelet encircling a white tapering wrist, and

meeting where a single diamond flashed forth luminously.

The detective stood for some time regarding the portrait with the deepest admiration. A wave of indignation and pity crossed his heart as he realized that in some way the original of the portrait was concerned in the working out of Talcott's schemes.

He was intensely mystified as to the object of the probable theft and attempted destruction of the picture, but doubted not that he saw the face of an intended victim of Talcott's avarice and villainy.

"Who is this young girl? what her connection with the plots of these schemers?" spoke Langdon, as he replaced the picture in its case and arose to his feet. "I will soon learn. I lost track of Talcott last night, but I know where the veiled woman, his mysterious accomplice, resides. I will shadow her, and through her regain the lost trail of Talcott."

An hour later the detective paced slowly to and fro on the opposite side of the street to an elegant apartment house, located on a fashionable thoroughfare.

This house he had seen the veiled associate of Harvey Talcott enter the night previous, and he grew interested as he discerned, at one of the windows of the upper floor, the form of a woman he recognized at once.

She was dressed as if awaiting some one, and was veiled closely. The detective drew into the shadow of an opposite doorway as he noticed a movement on the woman's part that revealed intuitively to his practiced mind that she had noticed him, and that her suspicions were aroused.

"Can Talcott have recognized me last night, and have put this woman on her guard?" he muttered. "If so, I must assume a new disguise. Ha! what is the woman about now?"

He could see her without being perceived, and, glancing past the doorway which sheltered him, became the witness of some very peculiar and interesting play on the part of the woman at the window.

He saw her make a quick motion of her hand as if to wave back some approaching person in the street below.

Looking in the direction her warning gesture indicated the detective started as he saw pause and step into the street, so as to be out of his sight, the form of the man he was shadowing, Harvey Talcott.

From the motions of the woman at the window he at once read the true meaning of all these strange maneuvers.

She was signaling him to keep away from the house. The single glance she

MANACLE AND BRACELET.

had of Langdon had aroused her suspicions that he was a detective.

For a minute she disappeared from the window, almost instantly to return, however.

She bore in her hands a pile of square blocks, which the detective recognized as ordinary building blocks for children.

He saw her select one and then another, and then, deftly grouping six of them together, place them in intelligent order against the window pane.

Plainly visible to the watching detective, and, he reasoned, plainly observed doubtless by Talcott from his place of observation, a few yards farther down the street, the blocks formed an ominous word:

"D-A-N-G-E-R!"

Despite himself the detective felt a thrill of admiration for the shrewd, dauntless woman who thus deftly warned her accomplice in the very face of the detective she probably surmised was watching her every movement.

Again the nimble fingers selected a word from the blocks, again the window framed a new message:

"Don't come!"

A minute later a last and supplementary instruction to the recipient of her clever telegraphing was given. This time it was:

"Will write."

The woman swept the blocks aside with a careless, scornful movement as she left the window. It seemed to express her defiance of surveillance, for she had warned and instructed an accomplice, and yet had in no way committed herself.

"An ally worthy of Talcott's own subtlety," breathed the detective. "Talcott will retire. I might follow him, but if he sees me he will not be likely to betray the game he is playing. No, I'll watch the house for a time. The woman intends writing to Talcott. If I could only intercept that letter."

For half an hour he remained in the doorway watching the house opposite narrowly.

The lower door opened at last. It framed a vision of two figures, both women. One was the veiled telegrapher of the window, the other evidently a servant of the house, for she was listening attentively and deferentially to her companion who seemed to be giving her some particular directions.

Then the former handed a sealed envelope to the servant, the door closed, and the latter started down the street in the direction where Langdon was in hiding.

The detective quickly realized the importance of rapid and decisive action, and

he was at no loss to devise a means of procedure.

He slipped from the doorway and turned the next corner before the servant girl had got half way down the block.

"I must have that letter," he decided. "It may contain the entire scheme of these plotters."

In a twinkling he completed a most rapid metamorphosis in his personal appearance.

A twirl of his whiskers, the utilization of a false wig, a blow on his hat, and the assumption of an indescribable air of inebriety made the detective look like another person as he retraced his steps at an unsteady, staggering gait.

From beneath his bent brows he saw the girl approaching, holding the letter tightly in her hand.

Langdon got ready for the execution of a brilliant move in strategic detective work. As the girl neared him he feigned intense inebriety and staggered against her, apparently without design.

At the same moment he struck her hand a quick blow.

She dropped the letter with a slight cry of alarm and pain.

"My letter, give me my letter," she cried, anxiously.

The detective feigned to stumble forward, and deftly maneuvered to gain possession of the coveted missive.

A rapid slight-of-hand movement carried out a preconceived plan on his part, and he reeled unsteadily toward her, at the same time extending a letter.

"Iardon me dizziness," he hiccupped. "Didn't mean to slip down."

The girl snatched the letter from his hand and hurried on her way.

A grim smile overspread Langdon's features as he darted into a convenient court, his feigned drunkenness disappearing like a flash.

In his hand he held a letter directed to Mr. Harvey Talcott.

The secret of its possession was a simple one. Langdon always went prepared for contingencies, and while floundering around the sidewalk had secured the real letter and secreted it.

Then substituting a dummy letter in a blank envelope he had handed the latter to the girl.

"The deception will be discovered and the real letter must reach its intended destination," said the detective. "I have no time to lose, and I must know its contents."

He managed to moisten the flap of the envelope and withdraw the inclosure without tearing it.

Then his eagle eye scanned the contents rapidly, comprehensively.

It read:

I have carried out my part of the programme to remove troublesome obstacles from our path for the attainment of a million of money.

The picture affair is all settled—thanks to Marie, who will not fail us to-night.

The carriage and myself will be on hand, and you must not fail to scale the outside wall of the Clifton mansion, on Lakeside Terrace at eight o'clock precisely.

The girl will arrive then. Everything is arranged. Simply carry out agreed instructions and we cannot fail.

Use extreme caution, as I believe we are being watched.

The letter bore the signature of a single name—Viola.

The detective did not pause to analyze the contents of the missive just then.

He reread it and again reached the street.

Glancing ahead he saw returning slowly to the spot where he had left her the servant girl.

She was scanning the blank envelope in her hand and the pavement alternately, with a bewildered air.

"The transformation of her letter to a blank envelope has been discovered," commented Langdon, grimly.

Instantly he assumed his drunken role. By the time the girl had reached the place where he was the detective had seated himself on the curb.

He sat there swaying to and fro unsteadily, holding the letter in his hand, and muttering over a dismal song.

"You're the man," cried the girl, as she recognized him. "Say, where's my letter?"

Langdon looked up with drunken unsteadiness.

"What letter?" he hiccupped.

"A letter you made me lose. There it is in your hand. Give it to me, give it to me," insisted the girl, excitedly.

"Certainly, certainly. Oh, give you wrong letter; this is mine," continued Langdon, as the girl seized the real letter and flung down the blank envelope. "Made a terrible mistake. Had instances of dizziness. Wouldn't lose it for worlds. Got a ten-thousand-dollar check in it."

The detective chuckled with satisfaction as the girl disappeared, evidently entirely unsuspecting of the trick that had been played upon her.

He became serious and thoughtful again, however, as he ruminated deeply over his recent discoveries in the case in hand.

"I am on the right track at last," reflected Langdon. "The schemes of these people are directed against a certain Clifton

mansion, on Lakeside Terrace. I will transfer my attention to that place, and be on hand at eight o'clock to-night to shadow Harvey Talcott's latest game."

Long before that hour, however, the detective was in the vicinity designated, one of the most fashionable portions of the city.

He learned that the lonely occupant of a certain magnificent mansion with fine grounds, and surrounded by a high stone wall, was a secluded and eccentric millionaire named General Clifton.

The old man had lost an only son some years previous, and since that time had resided alone in his gypsy home, with only two servants—an old woman, the cook, and a housemaid named Marie.

The latter, vague gossip narrated to the detective, had come quite recently, and was to be maid to a young lady, a distant relative of the master of the mansion, whom it was reported he intended to make his heiress.

Her name was Ethel, and she had been at school in Europe. Farther than that the gossips knew nothing, except that she was expected daily, and was to be adopted by General Clifton.

It was further remarked that the General had lately received a beautiful portrait of the young lady, which had been recently sent from Europe, and which he allowed no one to see, having it curtained away in his library, a sort of shrine of worship for the beautiful being he had sent for to cheer his lonely life.

Shortly after dusk the detective skirted the wall surrounding the mansion, and at a convenient spot sprang over it.

Then, ensconcing himself in the dense shadow of a clump of lilacs, he prepared to watch and wait for developments.

Here, undoubtedly, the initiatory steps in some mysterious tragedy were to take place that evening.

The mansion was gloomy and dark, except where the shaded library windows showed a light within that apartment.

A few minutes later the sound of carriage wheels echoed in the stone-paved court at the rear of the mansion.

Almost at the same moment a stealthy form sprang over the stone fence.

But this the detective did not notice. Just then he was absorbed in watching the front of the mansion.

A carriage had driven up, and a woman's figure alighted from the vehicle.

She ran up the massive steps of the mansion and rang the bell.

The door opening cast a full shower of light over a face divinely fair.

"The original of the beautiful portrait," breathed Langdon, intensely absorbed in

regarding that face of rare and exquisite loveliness.

There was a suspicious sound behind him, and the detective started quickly.

Too late to evade a crushing blow on the head, he saw the dark, sinister face of Harvey Talcott scowling down upon him. Then, with a sickening sense of insensibility, he sank motionless to the ground.

Under the calm stars, amid the beauty and serenity of the lovely scene, disaster had marked the first step of the detective in shadowing down one of the most tragic schemes of fraud and crime of modern times.

CHAPTER III.

ETHEL.

The beautiful being who was the original of the mysterious picture the detective, Langdon, had rescued from destruction that very day was indeed the Ethel already referred to.

A cry of joy and welcome greeted her ears as the servant who admitted her closed the door, and she stood revealed in all the radiant beauty of youth and grace under the soft light of the hall chandelier.

"Ethel!"

The accents of utter longing and love were expressed in General Clifton's tremulous voice as he folded her to his heart in a warm embrace.

The contrast between his white, sad face and her own happy smiles was lessened as she clasped his thin, aged hand with ingenuous effusiveness.

"I am so glad to get home—for it is home to me now, uncle."

"Always, my darling, I hope," was the fervent response. "I have counted the moments for months, thinking, dreaming, living only for the hour when your dear face should appear to brighten my lonely life."

He led her to the library, and watched her with devoted glance as she removed her wraps and seated herself on an ottoman at his feet.

"Tell me all about yourself, dear uncle," she pleaded, folding his hand in a soft caress. "How came you to send for me—when did Ernest die?"

She had spoken the name of his son. A convulsive tremor parted the old man's lips, and he started from his chair a prey to the most poignant emotions.

"I thought myself strong, schooled to face the misery of that hour when Ernest died and my heart broke," he cried, huskily. "It comes back too vividly to-night, and I cannot speak of it. To-morrow I will tell you all, my heirress, my adopted child. You must be wearied from the long

journey. Seek rest for to-night. To-morrow we will weave bright plans for your golden future, my beautiful Ethel. It will be new life to me to make you happy."

He rang for the maid to show her to her room before she could demur. She kissed him affectionately as she noted the deep furrows of grief and care that clouded his brow, but she asked him:

"The picture and the portrait I sent you—you received it?"

"Yes; it has been a companion and a memory that has brightened all my lonely hours."

"And he saw it?"

Ethel Clifton blushed like the crimson-mantled rose as she timorously ventured the query.

"Ah! traitress to my jealous love already," bantered General Clifton, with assumed lightness of manner.

She pouted prettily.

"Can I forget Vincent Morton, my affianced husband?" she murmured reproachfully. "Think, dear uncle, it is two years since I saw him—two long, waiting years, and he is not even here to welcome me—he may have forgotten me."

"Forgotten you! My child, a nobler friend to myself, a truer friend to his troth, never lived."

"And yet he is absent?"

A shade of the deepest anxiety crossed General Clifton's features.

"It is because I wished it so," he said, in a low, pained tone of voice. "I have had deep trouble of late, Ethel, and he is even now working in my interests, clearing the way for the future, that all may be bright and happy and peaceful for his beautiful bride and her fond, foolish old uncle. Good-night, my darling. To-morrow Vincent Morton shall devote all his time to you; to-morrow a flowery life shall begin for all of us, for your presence fills this gloomy old house with sunshine and delight."

His trembling hands waved a benison to the fairy creature he cherished so fondly. As the door closed upon her, a hectic flush of love and pride crept momentarily to his pale cheek.

Then, with a weary moan, he sank to a chair, and, his eyes fixed on the floor, he sat motionless, a prey to bitter and absorbing emotions.

Once the door opened cautiously, slowly. The dark, cunning face of Marie, the maid, appeared for a moment, and as stealthily was withdrawn.

Once, too, above the edge of the vine-embowered window a pair of sinister eyes, strangely like to those of Harvey Talcott,

glared within the apartment with the searching, venomous glitter of a serpent watching its expected prey.

Of all this the mute figure of the old millionaire took no note. He only aroused himself when a quick ring at the door-bell awoke the echoes of the silent mansion.

The library door opened and closed on a man whose open handsome face beamed eagerly, longingly into that of General Clifton.

"She has come?" he asked as the hands met.

The old man bowed assentingly.

Vincent Morton uttered a cry of delight unbounded.

"And she is as charming as ever—the same innocent, loving girl I have not seen, it seems, for ages? When shall I see her?"

"Not to-night. Nay, Vincent, do not cross me in my will to-night," he said hurriedly, as a shade of disappointment crossed his visitor's face. "Remember the perils that have menaced my reputation and my fortune—remember your promise to a dead man, remember that Ethel Clifton's young life must never be shadowed with the knowledge of the fatal secret that has robbed me of a son and has clouded my existence so darkly."

"As you say then," replied Vincent, resignedly. "But hours seem weeks after waiting for two years. Our love came like a flash when we met in Italy in the long ago. Since then our letters have woven anew the chain of regard we mutually experienced. Why, I have almost forgotten how she looks."

"As beautiful, as radiant as a flower of morn. Ah, Vincent, I tremble to think that, in making her my heiress, in bringing her here, we may expose her to trouble or grief. She is like a tender bud—storm and shadow would break her pure heart in a night."

"She shall never know either," cried Vincent, impulsively. "It will be my task to shield and protect her. But I see you are anxious about the result of my mission."

"You sought the man at the place I directed?"

"I sought the vile blackmail and scoundrel you so fear and dread, Harvey Talcott, yes."

"And the result?"

"Was failure—utter failure and defeat. A moan of pain and concern broke from General Clifton, and his white face grew paler still."

"You directed me to find Harvey Talcott," resumed Vincent, as the old man sank to a chair and his head dropped on his breast in apparent despair. "I did so. It was at the office of a pettifoggingascal

of a lawyer. The sleek, self-possessed knave refused to commit himself. I imparted your proposition. Then he delivered up to you certain papers compromising the honor of your dead son. I offered him fifty thousand dollars to do so and leave the country."

"And he refused?" inquired General Clifton, in a low tone.

"Absolutely. He laughed in my face; said nothing less than half your entire fortune would buy him off, and intimated that if that was not soon paid he would have all. Oh, my blood boiled. I could have struck down his evil, mocking face as he stood there. Why do you fear this man? What is this terrible secret he possesses that makes you his slave. Tell me all—do not make me work in the dark. I surely deserve your confidence."

"No, no. I cannot tell you—I will not burden you with a secret you have no right to share. That man, Harvey Talcott, assassin, thief, and perjurer, holds me in his power. Let that suffice. He is a distant relative of the same evil brood as Viola Dale, the cousin of Ethel, who tried years since to inveigle my son Ernest into an alliance of marriage to secure my wealth. Those two may be plotting together, she with her intimate knowledge of my affairs, he with the secret in his possession which would dishonor my dead son's memory, bring reproach on my reputation, and shadow and blight all the future prospects of the woman you love."

He paced the floor like a madman as he spoke.

"You will not tell me the import of this secret?" pleaded Vincent.

"I cannot, I dare not. But listen," cried General Clifton, with sudden energy. "I am aroused at last. I have sought to temporize with this scoundrel Talcott, and it has been in vain. I will now defy him. Promise me, if you wish to aid me in my dilemma, to obey my instructions blindly as in the past, and I may foil him yet."

"I promise, dear old friend. Have I ever doubted the wisdom of your actions?"

"Never, never," cried Clifton, fervently. "You have been like a son to me—heaven bless you for your fidelity amid my hours of grief and dark despair. The compromising papers Harvey Talcott holds are in a measure useless without he obtains possession of this."

The old man had stepped to a large safe standing in one corner of the apartment. As he swung open its ponderous iron doors he revealed lying in the bottom of the safe a heavy wooden box.

This his index finger pointed out. "There," he said, tremulously, "are the

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additional proofs of a secret in the past that Harvey Talcott has twice sought to obtain."

"And you still retain these dangerous evidences of a mystery you fear?"

"Aye," cried Clifton, a bright gleam in his excited eyes, "because while they compromise they also incite the very man who menaces me. You are mystified. Think no more of it, but obey me implicitly. I have reason to believe that my enemies are watching this house and its inmates. Two ineffectual attempts have recently been made to break open the safe and secure that box. I wish it taken away. I wish you to remove it, to secrete it where all Harvey Talcott's cunning can never reach it."

The puzzled Vincent was silent, owing mentally to a bewilderment in all this mystery past his comprehension.

"When you leave here do not leave the neighborhood, but in about an hour return and secretly enter the grounds. I will leave the library window open. Enter, and secure the box which will be left ready for you on the desk. It will be heavy, so have a carriage somewhere in the vicinity. Be careful that you are not followed, for with the contents of that box in the possession of my enemies I am indeed lost."

"Why all these precautions?" asked the perplexed Vincent.

"Ah, you do not know the depths of Talcott's scheming and crime. When the box is safely hidden away I will feel relieved. You will wed Ethel and go away. I will remain and defy or settle with my enemies. Failing in both, I will dispose of all my property and join you in some other city or country. Swear to me, Vincent, added the old man, earnestly, "that if I die, if any trouble comes to me, you will at any sacrifice shield my pure, innocent Ethel from the slightest shadow of shame or sorrow."

"I swear it," solemnly asseverated Vincent.

"Then go, now, for I have some papers to look over, among them a will leaving Ethel my entire fortune. Remember my instructions to return in an hour, secretly, cautiously, for the box."

"I will not fail you. But you seem to fear a lurking foe?"

"I do, more than you imagine."

"You are armed? You have some weapon of assault or defense?"

"None. Against the knife of the patier, stealthy assassin there is no defense."

"There is. You succumb too easily to a real or fancied danger. There is a stiletto—a toy in appearance, but a dangerous weapon in skillful hands," and the young

man flung a sheathed blade with a jeweled handle upon the desk.

He retired from the apartment as he spoke, mystified vaguely over all he had heard, and the iron gate c'anged after his retreating form a moment later.

Once alone, General Clifton seemed to arouse himself from his former lethargy of spirit.

He removed the wooden box from the safe, and, staggering under its weight, carried it to his desk.

Then he selected a package of papers from a drawer in the desk, and, seating himself, began to peruse them.

"The will is signed and witnessed," he murmured, as he replaced it in the desk. "Ethel's future will be assured, while I—I will defy this villain, Talcott. Vincent will soon be here, and the box removed to a safe place. One last look at Ethel's picture and I will retire."

He advanced to a little alcove where a curtain hung. Drawing its folds aside, he glanced with loving contemplation on the magnificent full-length oil portrait held in a heavy gold frame.

But as he looked his gaze grew to startled bewilderment, his hand grasped the curtains wildly, he recoiled with a cry of consternation.

"Great heavens!" he ejaculated, hoarsely, his eyes riveted on the portrait, "that is not the picture. Help!"

His voice gurgled in his throat, his hands clutched wildly at the empty air, he staggered back and fell heavily to the floor.

For, unseen by him, a stealthy form had crept over the window sill. The sinister eyes that had noted every movement in that room for an hour past now shadowed the millionaire's footsteps.

The low-comer had gained the desk without a sound, had grasped the stiletto left by Vincent, and, unsheathing it, guided to where the millionaire stood.

The bright blade was raised over the head of the unsuspecting victim of the assassin's purpose, it described a single rapid, cruel curve, and then General Clifton sank to the floor with a groan.

His assailant gazed only a moment at the prostrate form. Then he sprang to the chandelier and turned off the light. For five minutes in the darkness the rustling of papers and sounds as of the breaking open of a box were audible in the room.

Then a form bearing some heavy burden emerged through the window, returned, bore away what seemed to be the form of the insensible millionaire, and then all was still.

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peared at the window, crept in, took up the
box still on the desk, and then went away.

There was the sound of the low rum-
bling of carriage-wheels leaving the vicinity.

A low, quick whistle echoed on the si-
lent air of the garden.

It was followed by a piercing scream
within the house.

A minute later the front door opened.
With pale face and flying hair the maid
Marie dashed down the marble steps, fill-
ing the air with the awful cry:

"Murder!"

At that moment Langdon the detective,
lying insensible in the garden from a cow-
ardly blow in the dark, returned to con-
sciousness, opened his eyes, and sprang to
his feet.

CHAPTER IV.

UNDER ARREST.

In a single instant the detective was all
alert, and every nerve and energy aroused
to action.

That ominous cry of murder had assailed
his ear with waking sensibility, and he re-
alized that it was the warning cry of the
culmination of some direful tragedy.

While he lay a helpless victim of Har-
vey Talcott's assault, the plots of the
schemer had been progressing, he felt as-
sure it, and he powerless to prevent them.

Perhaps that hour of unconsciousness
meant the loss of important links in the
chain of intrigue being forged about the
millionaire and his devoted friends.

The present demanded his attention. He
dashed from the garden to the front of the
house.

He caught the terrified housemaid by the
arm as she screamed forth the announce-
ment of some tragic crime.

Already her cries had aroused the street,
for a policeman and several citizens came
rushing to the spot.

"Stop!" ordered the detective, striving
to silence the girl's frantic cries. "What
has happened?"

She turned a pale, frightened face upon
him.

"It's murder," she wailed.

"Where?"

"In the house—in the library. My mas-
ter—General Clifton—they have murdered
him—they have murdered him."

"Who have murdered him? Come, my
girl, try and speak coherently."

Amid wild cries and sobbings the house-
maid told her story.

She had heard her master cry out for
help, and had heard him fall.

Terrified, she had crept to the window of
the dining-room, and had seen a man drag-

ging a body toward the alley in the rear of
the mansion.

She had alarmed the cook. They had
gone to the library and found the room in
disorder and covered with blood, and her
young mistress, Ethel Clifton, just arrived
that evening, fainted dead away on the
staircase.

In a moment Langdon was the alert de-
tective. He dispatched the policeman to
the rear of the house, while he himself
hurried to the library.

The servant had spoken the truth. Evi-
dences of a ghastly crime were scattered
on every side. The desk was in disorder,
the safe ransacked, the carpet and window-
sill covered with blood.

A dagger-sheath lay on the floor. The
detective picked it up, read upon it the ini-
tials, stamped in gold, "V. M.," and placed
it in his pocket.

Langdon returned to the hall. The
housemaid, Marie, sat on the stairs, rock-
ing to and fro, and moaning bitterly.

"See here, my girl, where is your mis-
tress?"

"Oh, sir, you mean Miss Ethel?"

"Yes. You say she knows something of
this crime."

"She must, sir; we found her in a faint
almost before the library door."

"I must see her."

Marie sprang to her feet with an alacrity
that was almost suspicious, and barred his
progress.

"Oh, sir, you can't," she cried.

"Why not?"

"She's fairly frantic with terror and
grief, and we've sent for the doctor for her."

"Very well. I will see her when she's
calmer. Now, then, could you recognize
the man you saw leave the library window?"

"No, sir. I was so frightened I only no-
ticed it was a man ordinarily dressed."

The policeman Langdon had sent to the
rear of the house returned at that moment.

"There's no sign of the murderer or the
body that way," he reported, "except blood-
stains leading to where carriage-wheels be-
gin."

"Hurry to the nearest patrol-box and
telephone the occurrence," ordered Lan-
gdon, as he exhibited his official star. "Let
the police be on the lookout for all car-
riages traversing the streets."

At that moment the patrolman whose
beat was in the vicinity entered the gate.

"I know something about this," he re-
marked to the detective.

"What?"

"A suspicious movement an hour since."

"What was it?"

"About an hour and a half ago, as I was

passing the house, I saw a young man come down the steps."

"Did you know him?"

"Yes; it was Mr. Vincent Morton. Half an hour later, while patrolling my beat, a carriage drove up about half-way up the block and stopped. The same man got out. He entered the gate very stealthily, and I saw him go around to the library window. I knew he was intimate at the house, and passed on. When I got to the next corner he came out of the gate, carrying a large wooden box."

"Did he get into the carriage?"

"Yes, and it drove away very rapidly."

The detective did not stop to theorize. He simply took in all this information as it came to him, and he looked inquiringly at a man carrying a whip, who elbowed his way through the crowd outside in an excited manner.

"They tell me there's been a murder here," he began.

"That's the man," suddenly interrupted the patrolman.

"What man?" demanded Langdon, sharply.

"The one who drove the carriage Mr. Morton went away in."

"If you mean the man with the box, yes, I am. What of it? He did not have anything to do with it, did he?"

The detective drew the cabman aside and questioned him closely.

From the first he had suspected the agency of Harvey Talcott in the crime, but circumstances seemed to implicate quite a different person in the affair.

"How far does the man you drove away from here live?" he asked the cabman.

"About a mile."

"Can you take me there quick?"

"Of course."

"Hurry up, then."

Langdon hastened to the carriage, and the driver sprang to his box and whipped up the horses.

After traversing one of the avenues for some distance, he paused in front of a fashionable private hotel.

"Here's the place," he said.

"Wait for me till I return," ordered Langdon.

He entered the structure, and learned that Mr. Morton occupied a suite of rooms on the second floor.

He was knocking at the door of one of them a moment later.

"Come in."

The detective entered a splendidly furnished apartment. The occupant was Vincent Morton, who looked inquiringly and curiously at his visitor.

The detective was a keen student of hu-

man nature, and was rather favorably impressed with Vincent's appearance.

"Mr. Vincent Morton?" he said, inquiringly.

"Yes."

"I have come to ask you a few questions, Mr. Morton, relating, to be plain with you, to your possession of that wooden box in yonder corner."

The keen-eyed detective had taken in the room at a glance, and, half-covered by an overcoat in one corner of the apartment, had caught sight of an object corresponding in appearance to the box the patrolman had described.

Vincent Morton started violently, paled slightly, and then flushed with apparent confusion.

"That box," he repeated, vaguely. "I cannot understand—"

"That you shall know later. You were a visitor to the residence of General Clifton this evening?"

"Yes."

"You left the house, and returned surreptitiously with a carriage half an hour later?"

Morton was silent.

"You climbed into the library window, and returned to the carriage with that box yonder, did you not?"

Vincent Morton's mind was in a whirl of doubt and uncertainty.

"By what right do you ask these questions?" he asked, with a slightly resentful haughtiness of manner.

"As an officer of the law on the track of a great crime," came the grim response, solemnly spoken.

Vincent reflected for a moment or two.

Then he said:

"You seem to be perfectly informed of my actions. I was at General Clifton's twice to-night, and the second time I brought away that box."

"Lift it to the table here; I must examine it."

A cry of dismay broke from Vincent's lips.

"That cannot be done," he cried, excitedly.

"It must be done. The interests of justice demand it."

"But it is a sacred trust; it contains a family secret even the police have no right to know."

The detective walked over to where the box was standing, lifted it to the table, and then, observing that the cover was loose, said:

"You have opened this box?"

"I? Never. It was intrusted to my charge to be put in a place of safety."

"There are fresh marks of blood on it."

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Vincent started.

"Your coat is also stained."

"I did not know it before," murmured
Vincent, a manifest agitation coming into
his manner. "Speak, sir," he cried, sud-
denly. "Something has happened—what
is it?"

The detective fixed a searching eye on
his companion.

"Do you not know?" he demanded,
sternly.

"I certainly do not."

"Nor surmise?"

"No."

"It is murder. Mr. Morton, is that
yours?"

He had suddenly revealed to Vincent's
view the dagger-sheath found on the floor
of the library.

"Yes," came the choked utterance of the
dumfounded Vincent.

"And this—look?"

The detective had torn off the lid of the
box.

It was filled with bonds, deeds, and notes,
and across them, still dripping with blood,
was the fatal blade which had dealt the
millionaire his death blow.

"Merciful heavens! my stiletto. Gen-
eral Clifton—speak, I implore you—Gen-
eral Clifton—"

"Has been murdered, and I arrest you,
Vincent Morton, for the crime."

A white horror came into the young man's
expressive face.

"You arrest me!" he repeated. "You ar-
rest me, his friend, his confident—"

"Stop. I am simply doing my duty. You
see the proofs against you—"

"Great heavens! you cannot suspect me.
Oh, I understand it all. He warned me
his enemies—"

He stopped abruptly. The detective's
eye was bent upon him. He realized now,
more than ever, that it was necessary to con-
ceal all evidence of the secret General Clif-
ton had so long cherished.

But what meant the ghastly contents of
the box? Surely this was never what Gen-
eral Clifton intended him to conceal.

A glimmer of the truth, that the enemies
of General Clifton had secured the real
contents of the box, mingled with the grief
he experienced over the death of his be-
loved friend, well-nigh overwhelmed him.

Mechanically he followed the detective.
The latter took the fatal box with him into
the carriage and gave the order to the
driver to return to the Clifton mansion.

"I am innocent of this crime. I was ig-
norant of its commission, I swear it,"
broke forth Vincent after a long lapse of
silence.

The detective did not reply.

"It is the work of enemies—for General
Clifton hid enemies, and they have threat-
ened his welfare and security for years. I
beg of you to waste no time in following
down a false clew, for I shall establish my
innocence. The real assassin will escape."

Langdon made his way through the
throng at the gate, and led his prisoner
into the house.

Vincent had grown terribly pale, and his
face expressed the deepest anguish, as he
thought of the stricken Ethel Clifton.

"There is a young lady here, my affi-
anced bride," he ventured to say to the
detective. "I implore you to allow me to
see her. This terrible occurrence will
break her heart."

"You mean Miss Clifton?" asked Lang-
don.

"Yes."

"It is her evidence that will convict you
or establish your innocence," said the de-
tective, ominously.

In a room at the rear of the house on
the second floor the detective paused, beck-
oned to an officer in uniform, and request-
ed Clifton to remain in the apartment
until he returned.

At the door of another apartment where
the maid Marie was guarding, the door the
detective paused.

"I must see your mistress," he said, sim-
ply.

"Oh, sir, the doctor says she is in a dan-
gerous condition—"

"I must see her; the interests of justice
demand it."

The girl opened the door. The room
was darkened, but the outlines of a figure
crouched in moaning misery on a couch
met the detective's vision.

He did not approach her, for her hyster-
tical grief afflicted him. Through the
maid he directed a few pointed questions,
and heard the sobbing replies without even
seeing the face of the stricken heiress to
all General Clifton's wealth.

Then Langdon returned to the room in
which he had left his prisoner.

His face was set in a mask of sternness
and decision.

"Mr. Morton," he said, calmly, "you say
you are the affianced husband of Miss
Ethel Clifton?"

"Yes."

"And she would have no object in accus-
ing you unjustly?"

"None," replied the mystified Vincent.

"She was a witness to the crime com-
mitted in this mansion to-night."

"Then she knows the assassin?"

"Yes, she even knows his name."

"Ah," cried Vincent, hopefully, "then

justice will be vindicated at last. The name—tell it to me."

"Vincent Morton. She swears positively that she saw you murder her uncle."

"Merciful heavens! this must be some horrible dream."

Vincent Morton staggered back, his face the color of marble.

The detective, with a whispered word to the officer to guard his prisoner closely, left the room.

Overwhelmed, dumfounded, the miserable victim of a terrible mistake realized the awful position circumstances had forced him into.

"I see it all," he cried. "A plot deep as hate has been woven about the murdered man and the woman I love. She has been deceived, half-crazed by the murder, and the assassin, with fiendish deftness, has built around me a wall of apparent crime I cannot remove."

He saw for himself the prison, the misery of an accused murderer, while poor Ethel Clifton was left defenseless at the mercy of her uncle's pitiless enemies.

A prisoner, he was powerless to aid her, to even disabuse her mind of the error she had made, as he supposed, in adjudging him guilty of killing General Clifton.

Free, disguised, he might yet trace down the assassin whom blind justice was allowing to slip through its hands.

"Escape!"

A wild thrill pervaded his being as he gasped forth the word.

He glanced at the policeman carelessly lounging at the door of the apartment, and then at the garden below.

Beneath the window stood the family carriage, the driver on the box evidently pressed into service by the police.

The window was open, it was a jump of less than ten feet to the waiting vehicle.

Acting on a sudden impulse he sprang to the window sill.

The next moment, as a cry of alarm rang from the policeman's lips, he was flying through space.

His feet struck the top of the vehicle, his hands swept the amazed coachman to the ground as he tore the lines from his grasp.

And then, as a shot whizzed by his head, he directed the frightened steeds to the court, and, traversing its length with the fleetness of the wind, disappeared in the darkness and gloom of the night.

CHAPTER V.

A DARK MYSTERY.

For the space of ten minutes after the escape of Vincent Morton, the Clifton

mansion and its vicinity was a scene of bustle and excitement.

Langdon, apprised at once of the episode, directed and led an immediate pursuit of the fugitive, but half an hour's assiduous search failed to reveal a trace of the whereabouts of Morton.

Immediately, however, the patrol telephone informed police headquarters of the escape, and Morton hoped that the fugitive would be apprehended before morning.

He set at work himself to close the investigation of the case in hand, and an hour later sat in the library where the supposed tragedy had taken place, looking at a large brilliant, with a center diamond setting, a watch chain which he had found on the floor.

With him was another detective the department had dispatched to aid in ferreting out the mystery of the affair, a man named Howard.

"The case seems to be plain to me," said the latter. "For purposes of robbery and interest combined this man Morton has murdered General Clifton."

"Robbery of what?" inquired Langdon. "The safe and his contents. You say the box contained deeds, bonds, and notes—"

"But they were valueless to the thief, for they were not negotiable."

This announcement staggered Howard a little, but he said:

"Still, by removing the millionaire he would at once enrich the heiress Ethel Clifton, whom he intended to marry."

So far in the case Langdon had not expressed an opinion as to the guilt or innocence of the prisoner.

Now, however, he said, calmly:

"I arrested Vincent Morton. I have found almost irrefutable proofs of his guilt. I remember that even the millionaire's heiress, his affianced wife, claims that he is the assassin, and yet I tell you, confidentially, Vincent Morton never murdered General Clifton."

Howard stared at his companion in incredulous amazement.

"You are mad!" he gasped. "There is enough evidence to send Morton to the gallows."

"Then they would hang an innocent man. No sane man would commit a murder and leave the house as openly as Morton did. Furthermore the housemaid's story does not agree with the facts in the case. She says she heard General Clifton cry out and fall, and saw also the assassin drag the body of his victim through the court."

"Well?"

"Miss Clifton says she saw the crime

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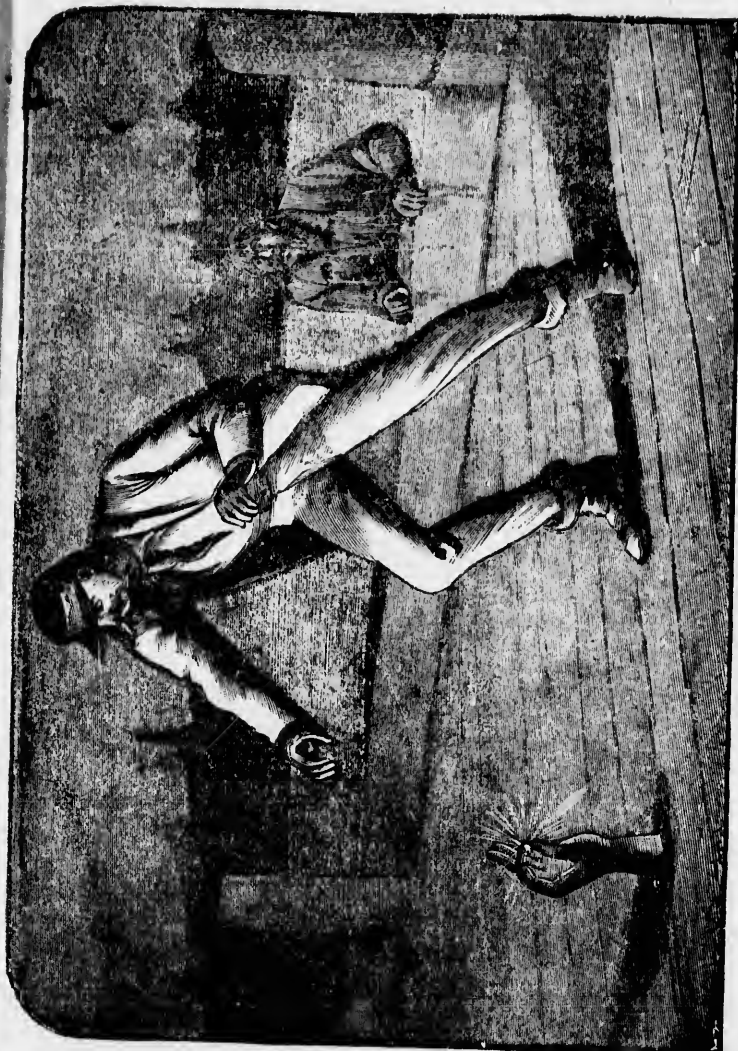
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committed. If their stories are true Morton never did the deed, for the alarm was not given until long after he left the place."

"But he may have returned later and taken the body away."

"No, for he can account for every minute of his time through the coachman and patrolman, excepting the few moments he was in the library."

"He may have had accomplices."

"That may be, but there is no use following a blind trail when a plain clew exists under our noses."

"In this house."

"Yes."

"What do you mean?"

"That, purposely or through the error of careless plotters, a mistake has been made in telling a story which is part of the scheme surrounding this tragedy."

"A mistake?" echoed Howard, vaguely.

"Exactly. *The housemaid, Marie, and the heiress, Miss Clifton, have not told the truth.*"

As he spoke this ominous sentence, involving a terrible suspicion of a conspiracy against an innocent man, and revealing the keynote to his theory regarding the crime, Langdon rose to his feet.

His companion seemed to be studying over his words, but he asked:

"Then you are pursuing a new line of action based on that theory."

"Yes."

"Can I be of any service to you?"

"Not at present. I shall personally begin an outside investigation. Later, if I need you, I will apprise you of the fact."

The detective walked from the room, leaving his companion considerably mystified over his revelations.

Langdon did not remain about the house, but went briskly down the street, his head bent in profound thought.

He had formed a definite theory in his mind as to the case under consideration.

Going back over the earlier events of that evening, he recalled the line of incidents which had combined to bring him upon the scene of action.

The note he had intercepted from the woman "Viola" to Harvey Talcott had almost predicted the tragedy of the evening.

Talcott it was who had knocked him insensible at a vital stage in the game.

Was it inconsistent to suppose that the crafty Talcott might not have prepared a deft scheme to accomplish some hidden object by removing the millionaire from his path and cast the crime upon an innocent man?

With the same clever trick of artifice might he not have deluded Ethel Clifton into believing her lover guilty?

In so doing he robbed her of two friends at one blow, and left her wealthy, innocent, unsuspecting, at the mercy of the plots he had formed.

One startling discovery had aroused the detective's suspicions in this direction.

In watching the housemaid, Marie, he had become positively assured that she was the same woman he had seen meet Viola and Talcott and give them the portrait he had found at the artesian well.

"Underlying all this is a plot—a motive I have not yet fathomed," murmured Langdon in an intense tone of voice.

"The improbable story of the crime the housemaid tells shows her to be in league with these others. The woman Viola wrote that the game was for a million. I must look beyond the escaped prisoner for the hidden clew to this most mysterious crime."

He determined to retrace his way step by step to the garden episode. Talcott had been there and Viola had said she would join them. Something deeper than robbery was involved, but what?

"To trace down Talcott and Viola, to shadow them step by step till I connect them directly with this case, must be my task," decided Langdon. "The woman first. I will lose no time. The uncle murdered, the lover a fugitive from justice, wrongfully accused and driven to madness and despair by the apparently certain evidence of his guilt, the unprotected Ethel Clifton, with her millions, is to be the victim of these human ghouls who have timed their nefarious plots to the fraction of a second. Good. I will take the trail. I will deliver this poor child of misfortune from their baleful power. I will not rest night or day until I have learned the entire truth of the great Clifton mystery."

He aroused himself with all his old energy and confidence. He rapidly formulated his plan of action like a general marshaling his forces on the field of battle.

It was one man against another, he thought. He little dreamed what a formidable confederation of deft, unscrupulous schemers would oppose his way to success.

He did not know it then, but the task he undertook was destined to prove the most tragic and difficult of all his eventful life.

CHAPTER VI.

TRACED DOWN.

One hour after daylight Langdon the detective paused before the same house in which he had the day previous seen the woman whom he knew to be Viola.

MANACLE AND BRACELET.

He had determined to confout her boldly and accuse her of complicity in a plot against the Clifton household as an accomplice of Harvey Talcott.

The detective had assumed a disguise which had metamorphosed him into a respectable-looking gentleman of middle age.

The same housemaid from whom he had intercepted the letter the day previous answered his summons at the door.

"I wish to see the lady on the second floor," remarked Langdon. "Miss Viola—I have a message for her."

The girl shook her head slowly.

"She's gone, sir."

"Gone where?"

"I don't know. She'd only been here a day or two."

The detective looked disappointed.

"When did she leave?" he asked.

"I don't know, sir; some time early yesterday afternoon. I took a letter for her and brought an answer. Then she began to pack up. All she had was a satchel. She burned a lot of letters in the grate, and when I came to her room again she was gone."

From the girl's candid manner the detective discerned that she was undoubtedly speaking the truth, and was not in league with the schemers.

He took a dollar bill from his pocket and tendered it to her.

"See here, my girl," he said, persuasively; "I'm very anxious to find a trace of the lady."

"I'm sorry that I can't help you."

"But you can."

"How, sir?"

"By keeping the money, showing me the room she occupied, and answering a few questions."

"Follow me, sir."

The girl led the way to a room on the second floor of the apartment house, and ushered the detective into it.

His keen glance swept the place comprehensively. It had evidently not been disturbed since its last occupant had left it.

The room was in considerable disorder, and upon the floor lay the self-same picture blocks Viola had employed to signal so deftly to Talcott.

Several dresses and pieces of lace and books lay on the floor, abandoned by the woman in her packing.

"It must be a strong motive and a hurried resolution that causes a woman to discard her finery," mentally commented Langdon.

The fireplace bore evidences of the recent combustion of quite a quantity of inflammable material.

The light cinders the detective inspected

critically, and drew forth several charred remnants of letters.

"Now, then, my girl," he said to the servant, who stood regarding his rapid maneuvers in mute wonder, "I want to ask you a question."

"Yes, sir."

"You took a note to a gentleman for Miss Viola—I have forgotten her last name."

"Miss Dale."

"Yes, yes; Miss Viola Dale. You took a letter addressed to a Mr. Harvey Talcott?"

The girl nodded assentingly.

"You saw the gentleman?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where?"

The girl mentioned a number of a room and building on the lower end of a city boulevard.

"I have located my man," muttered Langdon, grimly, "provided he hasn't moved, too. I'm much obliged, my girl."

He did not stop to gratify the keenly aroused curiosity of the girl with any explanation of the meaning of his questioning.

Once in the street he proceeded to examine the bits of charred paper he had fished out from the fireplace.

They were only fragments of letters which the detective decided had passed between Talcott and Viola.

One of them bore the words: "I have been compelled to secure some trustworthy outside help, and have found two useful allies, named Barton and Pearson."

The only other intelligible words he could make out were evidently part of a recent letter, and ran: "Barton and Pearson are becoming suspicious and exorbitant in their demands. I shall have to get rid of them after we have carried out the Clifton plot."

Langdon put the papers in his pocket-book and walked rapidly toward the place the servant at the apartment house had designated.

It was a building with stores under it, and was occupied mainly in the upper floors by doctors' offices and as rooms for lodgers.

Langdon ascended the stairs, and located the room to which the servant had directed him.

In the shadow of a side corridor he paused. At the very door of the room a man roughly dressed was going through a strange maneuver.

He had leaped to the knob with one foot, and was peering over the transom into the room.

After a leisurely survey of the interior of the apartment, he leaped to the floor again,

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and then began pacing up and down the
hul restlessly.

"If he's given us the slip after all our
hard work for him, I'll give the whole
scheme to the police as sure as my name is
Barton," the watching detective heard the
man mutter to himself.

For some time the latter continued his
silent promenade, pausing, finally, as a man
came up the stairs.

"Pearson!" ejaculated the man. "Well,
did you find him?"

"I think I know where he is."

"Good. You think he's trying to get rid
of us?"

"No; I think he's staying away from the
room here for fear it's being watched."

"By the police?"

"Exactly."

"Then he's foolish."

"Why so?"

"He's left his plunder in there."

"How do you know?" inquired Pearson.

"I climbed to the window and looked in.

You know that iron casket we always sup-
posed he kept his money in?"

"Yes."

"It's in there. I saw it. Let's force the
door and be sure of that much, any way."

"No, no. It won't do to break until we
see if Talcott intends to act square on last
night's affair."

The detective smiled grimly as Talcott's
name was spoken. He had struck a pro-
gressive trail, it seemed.

The two men descended to the street,
and he followed them. It was not a diffi-
cult task of shadowing, for they were so
engrossed in discussing their affairs that
they never turned to observe the tireless,
cautious detective on their track.

At last they came to an alley, and entered
the side-door of a down-town saloon.

Langdon was close upon their heels, and
saw them pass down a corridor and through
a door.

He reached the door ere it closed after
them, and held the knob for an instant.
Then he opened the door.

It closed to after him with a slam, and
he found himself in a little dark hall.

At its other end was a door leading into
the rear yard.

A small window looked into a room in
which a gas-jet was burning, and he saw
the two men in this apartment.

Stationing himself at the window, he
prepared to watch and listen.

Pearson waved his companion to a seat
at a table.

"I'll go and find Talcott," he said. "I
think he's up-stairs in the gambling-rooms."

A minute later Pearson returned; follow-

ing him was the man the detective so de-
sired to see—Harvey Talcott.

The latter wore a disguise that the ex-
pert detective instantly penetrated. There
was an angry glare in his eyes, and his
brow was gathered in a deep scowl.

"See here," he said, irritably, "what are
you fellows hounding me around for?"

"We ain't hounding you around," replied
Barton, sullenly. "We're only looking for
our rights."

"What rights?"

"You know well enough—our pay for
work done."

"You'll get it, never fear."

"When?"

"To-morrow."

"You promised it to-day. You told us
to come to your room this morning, and you
weren't there to meet us as agreed."

"Have you no sense? How do I know
but what the police are watching the place?"

"They ain't."

"How do you know?"

"Because we were just there. Now, see
here, Mr. Harvey Talcott, is this a square
deal or not?"

"Certainly it is."

"Then why don't you do the fair thing?
You got some plunder last night?"

"About four hundred dollars; there it is."

Talcott flung a roll of bills on the table
between the two men. Neither of them
touched it, but sat glaring sullenly at it.

Finally Pearson brought his fist down
on the table with an echoing thump.

"It won't do," he ground out. "Mr.
Harvey Talcott, I'm going to be plain with
you. Me and my partner didn't risk our
necks last night for no four hundred dol-
lars, and you didn't get an old millionaire
out of your way for any such amount."

Talcott's face was pale with rage.

"It's all I got, I tell you," he began.

"Mebbe; but you're banking on future
results, and we're entitled to a share in it.

You can't fool us. One woman wasn't
drugged and carried away, and another let
into the house, for nothing. We know
your game. You're playing for a million.
It's a share, or more money cash down,
or—"

The man paused ominously.

"Or what?" demanded Talcott, clenching
his fists.

"You know we'll spoil your play as sure
as fate."

For some moments the rage-filled Tal-
cott and his sullen, determined accom-
plices confronted each other.

The watching detective in the corridor
without, intensely startled and interested
at a new element of mystery, stood regard-
ing them fixedly.

At last Talcott spoke. With a careless gesture that poorly concealed his anger he said:

"Well, well, we won't quarrel. Take the money, and I'll agree to meet you to-night and make a larger payment, or let you in as partners in the scheme."

"Where will you meet us?"

"Here."

"Agreed. Play us fair and we're true as steel."

"But don't come hounding me," concluded Talcott, irritably. "The detectives once on our trail, we are lost."

He left the room as he spoke. Langdon decided that to enter the room and arrest him then and there would precipitate a most unequal conflict.

He glided to the door at which he had entered, to leave the place and intercept or follow Talcott as he left the saloon by the front entrance.

To his consternation he found that the spring lock had caught as he closed it, and that he could not open it.

He sprang to the rear door; that, too, was tightly secured.

"I can find him later," murmured Langdon. "The crows are closing about Harvey Talcott; but what did his accomplices mean about one woman being taken from the Clifton mansion and another admitted to it?"

The detective little dreamed it at that moment, but he was gradually nearing the true mystery of the Clifton tragedy—a mystery which had so far been obscured even from his keen powers of perception.

Barton and Pearson were conversing again, and he listened intently.

"Do you believe him?" the latter was asking of his companion.

"No; he is only putting us off. He threatened once to expose a past crime and send us to jail. He intends doing it now."

"You believe that?" asked Pearson.

"He is capable of it. See here, partner, we'll visit his room, get what we can, and get a third party to see him. If he don't pay handsomely, we'll give away the whole story to the police."

"Agreed."

The two men started to leave the place as they had entered it, but, finding the door locked, went out the way Talcott had departed.

A minute later the detective followed them. They passed through the bar-room of the place, and retraced their steps toward Harvey Talcott's room.

Here Pearson remained below, and Barton went into the house.

The detective crossed the street and trod close upon their heels as Barton reappeared.

He had an overcoat on his arm, but this seemed to conceal some heavy object beneath it.

"What did you get?" Pearson asked, eagerly.

"Some gold pieces in a drawer and the iron casket. It's heavy enough to be full of lead."

"Maybe it is."

"No; it's where he keeps his money. We're so much ahead, any way. Let us get into some out-of-the-way place and open it."

The men made their way to the lake front and walked out on a little pier, where, behind a pile of timbers, they seated themselves.

The detective had crept upon them almost unawares, and, peering over the timbers, could observe all their movements.

He had decided to await the opening of the casket, and then to arrest them, satisfied that they could give some very important evidence in the Clifton tragedy case.

The casket Barton had spoken of was a conical-shaped mass of iron and tin.

"It's locked, and we've got no key," he was saying. "It reminds me of the dynamite shells we used to have when we were in the mines."

"Break it open."

"All right; hand up a rock."

Pearson did so.

"Now hold it while I strike."

The heavy rock descended on the iron case.

A deafening explosion rent the air.

CHAPTER VII.

A MYSTERIOUS FRIEND.

The detective was a man of strong nerves, but he experienced a cold horror as, a moment after the sudden explosion, he realized what had occurred.

The iron casket, as Harvey Talcott's two accomplices had chosen to term it, was not, as they believed, a receptacle for money, but an infernal machine—a kind of dynamite shell.

Talcott had prepared it either for just such an occasion as the present, or to employ it in some equally desperate manner.

He had always encouraged Barton and companion to believe the casket contained money.

Had he hoped they would carry it away, and in so doing, imperil or end their lives?

At all events, his secret wish expressed in the letter to Viola Dale had been accomplished.

The men he had no further use for were at last removed from his path.

For, as the explosion occurred, Langdon witnessed a sight he never forgot.

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The terribly fatal power of the explosive
wrought death and destruction on every
side.

A sickening sense of horror overwhelmed
the detective as he saw the two men blown
with awful force across the pier.

Shreds of human flesh and shattered
projectiles filled the air. The detective
himself was buried beneath a heap of lum-
ber which the shock of the explosion had
overturned.

When he crept forth he saw the maimed
forms of the conspirators, torn and ma-
tulated, lying on the pier, into which a large
hole had been blown.

They were both motionless. Death,
sudden and terrible, had overtaken them in
a moment of time.

An example of the base treachery which
crime invariably awards its votaries, it also
indicated the full depths of Talcott's deadly
schemes.

"The evidence of these men would have
convicted Talcott," murmured the detec-
tive. "Their removal makes the trail more
difficult, but I must have no delay in fol-
lowing it afresh."

He left the spot at once, and to the first
policeman he met reported the fact that
two men in opening some explosive on the
pier had been instantly killed.

Then he hastened to the place where he
lived, and, arranging a disguise suited to
represent an ordinary laborer, took up the
trail anew.

There was now no doubt in his mind
that Talcott and his accomplices had been
the actors in the tragedy at the Clifton
mansion.

He was less anxious on this score than
in probing the real motives underlying the
commission of the crime.

Why had murder and intrigue been
wrought? Why had so deep a tragedy oc-
curred? Surely not to secure what small
amount the safe in the library of the man-
sion contained.

No. Langdon reasoned that a bold, hid-
den scheme for a million was involved in
all this, but how did the plotters hope to
obtain the fortune of the murdered mil-
lionaire?

Little did the detective imagine the deft
plot soon to be revealed to his inquiring
mind.

Without knowing it, he stood on the
threshold of the discovery of one of those
bold schemes which, in their intricacy and
dexterous operation, once in a while be-
wildered and startle the country.

His first move was to locate Talcott
again.

He had thought it would be an easy task.
A visit, however, to the place where he

had last seen Talcott revealed no trace of
him.

He learned, further, that his man had
visited his room, and, securing a sachel,
had settled his account with the landlord
and left for good.

All that day he visited every place to
which in days past he had traced Talcott.

At last he seemingly struck the broken
trail. About a week previous he had one
day seen Talcott enter a little shop located
on a down-town street near the river.

The proprietor was an old man who
seemed to keep a store for the sale and
purchase of old stamps and coins.

He had noticed Talcott in earnest con-
versation with this man, and at the time
set them down for familiar acquaintances.

To this place, a little store which ap-
peared to be the entrance to a large, wan-
dering brick structure in its rear, Langdon
wended his way.

Night was just falling, and he boldly ap-
proached the windows and glanced in, pre-
tending to be examining the trays of coins
on exhibition.

The same old man he had seen before
was seated at the counter, writing some
kind of a letter.

From where he stood the detective by
straining his vision could plainly make out
the first word, written upon it:

"Viola—Talcott will sail on the boat
this—"

This was what had been written so far,
and it revealed to Langdon the fact that
the old coin-dealer was without doubt a
go-between of the plotters.

If so, he knew of Talcott's whereabouts,
and the detective determined to act boldly.

He entered the shop as if in great haste,
having taken a letter from his pocket be-
forehand.

Approaching the counter where the old
man was, he leaned over and in a myste-
rious whisper uttered the single word:

"Talcott!"

The coin-dealer started and arose to his
feet. His keen, small eyes sweeping Lang-
don's face searchingly, he demanded:

"Who are you?"

"A friend—a messenger. I have a letter
for Talcott."

"Who from?" demanded the coin-dealer,
suspiciously.

"Viola."

The old man extended his hand.

"Give it to me. I'll see that he gets it."

"No. It's a matter of haste. I am to
hand it to him only, and at once," and
Langdon made a great flourish of show-
ing the pretended missive in question.

"He'll be here in an hour."

"When does the boat sail?"

This question, based on what Langdon had seen in the note, completely settled the question of his being a friend to Talcott and familiar with his secrets.

"You needn't wait. Go right down to the boat," said the coin-dealer.

"Where is it?"

"Almost at the end of the street and the river. You'll find him. Did you come from the Clifton place?"

"No; from Viola."

"Well, ain't she—oh, I see; she sent the note by Marie. Right down to the river. You'll find him there."

A thrill of the utmost perplexity filled Langdon's mind as he pursued his way.

What did the old coin-dealer mean about the Clifton mansion and Marie?

"This scheme is a dark mystery yet," decided the detective; "but the clues will soon be in my hands."

The broad wharf at the river was entirely deserted as Langdon reached it.

A large number of all kinds of ships and boats were moored at the dock.

Langdon walked up and down, trying to decide on which one Talcott would be likely to be, but discontinued his observations as a form came toward him in the darkness.

He drew aside and waited until the man had come directly opposite where he was.

Then he stepped forth, caught the other by the arm and peered closely into his face.

"Harvey Talcott, I believe?" he said, instantly recognizing the other, despite his disguise.

Talcott started violently.

"That is not my name, sir," he began.

"Oh, yes, it is. I have been looking for you, Mr. Talcott, for some time. Will you accompany me to the office of the Chief of Police, or must I take you there by force?"

"Trapped!" hissed Talcott, struggling to break away from his captor. "It is Langdon the detective."

"You have guessed right, my friend."

"What do you want of me?"

"A little conversation."

"About what?"

"Viola Dale, for one thing."

Talcott clenched his hands ragefully.

"A stolen picture, for another."

The plotter grew deathly pale.

"And a confession regarding the Clifton murder, for another."

A dead silence followed the detective's last words. They seemed to completely overwhelm his prisoner.

Neither had noticed a stealthy form glide down the wharf and secrete itself where there was an opening under the planks, as

if for the purpose of overhearing their conversation.

Talcott finally broke the silence.

"What do I know of the Clifton murder?" he began, roughly.

"Everything."

"I do not even know the victim, except from what I have read."

The detective momentarily relaxed his grasp of Talcott's arm.

He drew from his pocket the brilliant with its diamond center, which he had found in the library of the Clifton mansion.

Then he suddenly seized the watch chain lying across Talcott's vest.

A few links with an empty catch dangled from the guard.

"Harvey Talcott," he said, calmly, "this stone, found in General Clifton's library, exactly fits this chain. It is your property and you lost it in the death struggle with the victim of your crime."

Talcott fell back with a cry of terrible amazement and dread.

He seemed, however, to quickly recover himself.

In a flash he had drawn a knife.

The detective saw it flash in the air and heard his enemy utter a vengeful cry.

Quick as a flash, too late to draw a weapon and defend himself, he made a movement of assault instead.

One blow of his fist sent Talcott staggering back.

The knife went whirling over the pier and he followed it.

There was a splash as he disappeared from view, and Langdon, rushing to the edge of the wharf, looked blankly at the dark waters.

"Gone down, as sure as fate," he muttered, concernedly.

Accident had apparently robbed justice of its legal prey. Not a trace was visible of the accomplice of Viola Dale.

In the affray the detective had dropped the brilliant belonging to Talcott's watch chain.

"The stone—the evidence of his being in the library of the Clifton mansion last night," he spoke aloud. "I dropped it. Can it have fallen into the water?"

He began looking over the pier searchingly. Familiar as he was with surprises and unmoved at strange occurrences, he started back dumfounded at that moment.

From a hole in a plank of the wharf a human hand suddenly appeared.

Between its fingers, tightly held in place so that its diamond center flashed like an immense star of light, was the missing brilliant.

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beneath the wharf whither it had rolled, it
was now extended toward the transfixed
detective invitingly.

Langdon took a step forward and seized
the gem.

The hand was suddenly withdrawn, as
if its possessor, having accomplished the
mission of an unknown friend, wished to
disappear with it.

CHAPTER VIII AT THE MANSION.

Langdon, the detective, was intensely
startled.

For some moments he stood transfixed,
bewildered at the strange incident which
revealed the presence of a friend.

No one but a friend to his interests and
the interests of justice would thus have re-
turned the valuable brilliant.

It could not have been Talcott who acted
thus, in some mysterious manner drifted
under the wharf.

No. Talcott was probably drowned, the
detective reasoned, and, his curiosity fully
aroused, he began to investigate the hiding
place under the wharf to endeavor to locate
his strange friend.

Had he glanced back at the river at that
moment he would have been still more
startled.

A man, his face and form dripping with
water, was clinging with both hands to the
edge of the dock, and, with staring eyes
fixed on the detective, had been a startled
witness to all the strange scene that had
occurred.

It was Harvey Talcott, and he dodged
back out of sight again as Langdon began a
hurried inspection of the wharf.

The detective was forced to abandon the
task of locating the person he had reason
to believe was secreted beneath the plank.

The darkness and his unfamiliarity with
the spot prevented his making an extended
quest.

Besides, whoever the person was who
had returned the diamond, he evidently did
not wish to be known.

Perplexed over the episode, Langdon left
the place slowly.

His mind revolved every incident in the
case of deepening mystery he had deter-
mined to follow out to its end.

His investigations of the day had re-
sulted in confirming his suspicions formed
the night previous, after the escape of Vin-
cent Morton.

The murder of General Clifton was part
of a scheme formed by Harvey Talcott.

The latter, if drowned, as the detective
now supposed, had dropped out of the
case, and the interest must center on his
accomplice—Viola Dale.

He had so far been unable to locate this
woman, but he doubted not that she was
working out her share in the scheme.

Langdon adjudged her the far more dan-
gerous plotter of the two.

"I will have the river business investi-
gated in the morning," he soliloquized.
"Meanwhile I must make a visit to the Clif-
ton mansion. I have remained away from
there too long already.

His step was a brisk one as he hastened
to carry out his expressed intention.

He stopped abruptly as, looking up, he
saw the detective he had left at the man-
sion the night previous—the officer he had
called Howard.

The latter volubly detailed the occur-
rences of the past few hours.

No trace of the body of the murdered
millionaire or of his assassin had been
found.

The officers, at the request of Miss Ethel
Clifton, had concluded their investigations
at the mansion, and had withdrawn.

There was but one object in view for the
police now. Howard stated—to search in
every direction for the escaped murderer,
Vincent Morton.

Langdon smiled grimly at the mistake of
justice in assuming an innocent man guilty,
as he left the detective.

He proceeded straight on his way to the
Clifton mansion.

The place was dark and gloomy-looking,
and presented a decided contrast to the ex-
citing spectacle of the previous night.

Langdon wished to examine the house
before entering it, and springing over the
stone wall, gained the grounds.

As he glided around to the side of the
mansion he saw lights in that portion of the
second floor where the apartments of Miss
Clifton were located.

The shades were only partially drawn
and through the clear plate-glass window
he could plainly make out the interior of
the room.

Distinctly visible, sitting about either
and thither, was the housemaid Marie.

She appeared to be conversing ani-
mately with some other person, probably
her mistress, seated outside of the detec-
tive's range of vision.

A moment later, however, the other oc-
cupant of the apartment crossed its length.

As she came between the light and the
window Langdon fell back with a cry of
utter incredulity and amazement.

"That form!" he uttered in an intense
tone; "that face! It is not the person I
saw enter this house last evening. It is
not Ethel Clifton at all!"

He could not be mistaken. Plainly re-
vealed in the light from the hall chandelier,

MANACLE AND BRACELET.

twenty-four hours previously, the detective had seen the heiress of the millionaire enter that mansion.

He recalled her golden hair and clear, innocent face, her light, supple form, and the girlish grace of her every movement.

The original of the picture still in his possession, he recalled the mental photograph vividly.

But the woman now at the window—there was not a trace of resemblance in her face or form to the other.

No; this one had recalled a still more cherished memory—the scene at the apartment house, where the veiled accomplice of Harvey Clifton had so deftly telegraphed him a signal of danger with the building-blocks.

Light had dawned on the detective's mind at last—a revelation of the true depths of the scheme for the attainment of General Clifton's coveted millions was manifest now.

He went boldly to the front of the mansion and rang the door-bell sharply.

After some little delay it was opened slowly.

The housemaid Marie answered his summons, and as her shrewd glance swept his face he observed that she did not recognize him as the detective of the night previous.

As an officer of the law, however, he wished to appear, and he said simply:

"I come from the police to see Miss Clifton."

There was a remarkable dissimulation of concern manifested by the girl, wonderfully contrasting with her vivacity as witnessed at the window by Langdon a few minutes previous.

"Miss Clifton is very ill, sir," she said, in tones of apparent anxiety and grief.

"I must see her, nevertheless. I would like to obtain some information that may set us on the track of Vincent Morton, her uncle's murderer."

Marie showed the detective to the library and stated that she would inform her mistress of his wishes.

Once alone, Langdon walked straight to where the curtains concealed the picture before which General Clifton had been standing when struck down by the assassin.

Amid the excitement of the previous evening the detective had not attempted to follow out any investigation as to the repository of the portrait he had heard from the gossip of the neighborhood he cherished so secretly and tenderly.

A word from the detective Howard when he met him, however, had informed him that a full length portrait of Miss Clifton was in the library.

Langdon drew back the curtains and gazed at the portrait behind them.

He was neither amazed nor startled, as he found it to be not the picture of the girl he had seen welcomed home the previous night by General Clifton as his niece but the portrait of the woman he had just seen from the garden at the upper windows.

"I thought so," he murmured, his face growing stern and satisfied. "I now understand the scheme of these plotters."

He allowed the curtains to drop and glided to a seat as he heard the sound of footsteps descending the stairs.

The library door opened and a woman entered the room slowly, sobbing.

The maid paused at the door and retired, closing it after her, with the words:

"Miss Ethel Clifton, sir."

With every indication of the most poignant emotion well assumed, the woman—the same person he had seen at the window—sank to a chair.

"You wished to see me, sir," she murmured.

"Yes, madam," replied the detective, his eye watching every movement of the woman before him.

"About—about this terrible bereavement?" faltered his hostess.

"Yes. I wished to ask you if you know of any motive for the crime that has robbed you of—an uncle."

He spoke the word grudgingly, his conviction that this woman was an impostor ever a moment growing stronger.

"No, sir, I do not," spoke the woman softly. "He had no enemies. He lived all alone, awaiting my coming, and, he told me, with my picture, which I had sent him from abroad, as his only daily companion."

"I am not mistaken. This woman is indeed Viola Dale," murmured Langdon in an intense tone of voice.

"Ah, your picture," he remarked, with affected interest. "You sent it to him from abroad you say."

"Yes, only a few weeks ago. Oh, to lose him so soon, so unexpectedly; it is terrible."

She broke forth into violent sobbings, but, checking herself, walked to the alcove and drew aside the curtains.

"See," she said, "this was the picture my dear uncle cherished so fondly."

Langdon got ready for a sudden denouement.

He drew stealthily from his pocket the oil painting he had rescued from the artist's well, where Talcott had thrown it.

Holding it ready to unroll at a moment's notice, he remarked:

"It resembles you very much, Miss Clif-

ton, but your uncle had another picture he also valued highly."

"Indeed. What was that?" inquired the woman, somewhat surprised at the detective's ominous manner and tone.

"This!"

With a quick movement, the detective flung open the rolled oil portrait in his hand.

The woman staggered back, paled to the color of marble, and stood transfixed—dumfounded—completely taken off her guard.

"That picture—that portrait," she gasped, "and how came you by it? It is—"

"The one General Clifton possessed until it was stolen from him and yonder one substituted in its place. Madam, I know you. Your evil schemes are revealed. I demand to know at once what have you and your accomplices done with the original of this portrait, the real Ethel Clifton?"

CHAPTER IX.

THE TWO PORTRAITS.

For some moments the woman whom the detective had so suddenly and startlingly confronted with the portrait of the real Ethel Clifton, seemed deprived of the power of motion or thought.

She could only stare blankly at the picture in the detective's hand and realize that she had been completely unmasked, and that her game was a losing one.

Langdon did not speak a word. He stood silently, fixedly regarding her, and studying how, having confronted her with an evidence that he was master of the situation, he could induce her to confess all the details of the plot she was working.

He could see from her cruel, scheming face that this would be no easy task, and that when she recovered her self-control she would be a crafty and defiant foe to deal with.

Suddenly the stony mask of mingled terror and amazement on her dark face was broken.

Her eyes were withdrawn from the picture, and wandering beyond the detective, rested on some object that attracted her attention.

Glancing sidewise into a mirror that stood at one end of the room, the detective saw the cause of her distraction.

He could witness an active pantomime going on at the door of the library.

This had been cautiously opened by the housemaid Marie, who undoubtedly had overheard all that had been said.

She was now making expressive motions to her mistress of encouragement and counsel.

They plainly said, as the detective translated them:

"Defy him—all is not lost yet!"

Then the door closed, and the woman fixed her eyes on the detective's face.

A hard look of hatred came into their depths, as if she could kill him where he stood had she dared.

"Who are you?" she demanded, in a hoarse, harsh voice, struggling hard to regain control of her emotions.

"A detective, as I have announced to you. Madam, I think we understand each other. Be seated."

He dropped the curtain over the portrait in the alcove, and rolling up the picture in his hand, restored it to his pocket.

The woman's eyes followed his movements, and her hands worked nervously, as if she would tear from his possession this terrible evidence of the plot he had hinted at.

She had sunk into a chair. The detective followed her example, and faced her unflinchingly.

He saw that she was preparing herself for a desperate combat against all the shrewdness and power he had at his command.

"In a word, madam," he said, "I know you."

The woman's lip curled with pretended scorn.

"You know me," she repeated. "You have never seen me before until this moment."

"You are mistaken. I saw you two nights since."

"Where?"

"With your two accomplices, Harvey Talcott and the housemaid here, Marie."

"That night the picture I have shown you had been out from yonder frame and your own substituted."

"I traced that picture to the place where it had been thrown away, and recovered it."

The woman did not speak, but Langdon discerned that she was overcome at his rapid statement of facts.

"Later, I was a witness to your clever telegraphing from your window to your accomplice Talcott."

The woman started violently. Evidently, up to this moment she had not known the identity of her visitor.

"Yes, Viola Dale, for that is your name, I witnessed that episode. I even saw you send a letter to Harvey Talcott, which I read. I can even repeat its contents to you."

Not a word from his awed listener, only her breathing grew quicker—her dark face paled slowly, steadily.

"Later still," continued Langdon, coolly,

"I recovered, from the ashes of your burnt letters in the grate of the room you abandoned yesterday, the fragments of two letters. I can also recite, if you like, what Talcott wrote you about getting rid of your allies in crime, Larton and Pearson."

As Langdon told the story of his shrewd, rapid work of the past few hours, the woman regarded him as if he were some necromancer.

"You will observe that I have possession of every detail of the plot leading up to the murder of General Clifton."

"Now, I will show you that I am not ignorant of the culmination of your plans."

"Last night Harvey Talcott came to this place, and murdered the millionaire, General Clifton."

"At the same time you arrived at the rear court in a carriage."

"Immediately after the murder, the real Ethel Clifton, who had arrived a few hours previous, was drugged and carried away. You took her place."

"It was your intention to fasten the crime of murder on Ethel Clifton's lover, which you did."

"The body of General Clifton was taken away, so that attention would be distracted from the house, and no inquest be possible where you would have to appear publicly."

"The portrait I have shown you was replaced by one of yourself. You thought, Ethel Clifton being unknown, that you would be accepted as that person."

"She is the heiress of all General Clifton's enormous wealth. To this you hoped to succeed. I have defeated your purpose. Now, what do you say?"

Succinctly, graphically, the detective had laid bare all the plots and motives of the conspirators.

Unmasked, defeated, the dangerous plotter before him did not break.

"I say this," she spoke at last, in a harsh, unnatural tone—"what of it?"

"This of it. Your accomplices are run to earth, every one. To-morrow, justice shall have my report."

A wild gleam of triumph and hope flitted into the woman's eyes.

"To-morrow!" she breathed, intensely; "then you alone know this—this romance."

"Do not delude yourself," replied Langdon, coolly, "with the hope that, because I have not yet reported this case, you will escape me. I shall not lose sight of you, believe me, until I have secured my object."

"And that is?"

"First, a complete confession on your part."

"I have none to make. I deny complicity in this affair. Others may suffer, but I am secure."

"We will see. I will not trifle with you. I have one primary demand to make."

"What is it?"

"The restoration to this mansion of its rightful mistress—the real Ethel Clifton."

"And then—"

"Then the proofs of Vincent Morton's innocence, which your confession can furnish."

"And if I refuse?"

"The jail."

The woman shuddered at the ominous word.

She arose to her feet and touched a bell. The housemaid instantly appeared.

"Marie," she said, in a calm tone of voice, "bring me my wraps."

"You are going out?" asked the housemaid, in surprise.

"Yes. He has discovered all; but all is not lost yet. He shall die."

She hissed the words into Marie's ear with vengeful intensity.

The detective never ceased watching her every movement.

He was well aware that she would kill him if the opportunity presented itself.

He even read in her face the fierce determination of a baffled but hopeful plotter to evade him if possible.

But he was confident of his own skill to defeat her designs.

Langdon realized that, even with what proofs he possessed of the existence of a plot in which she was concerned, vital interests were at stake at the lightest word of this dangerous woman.

He could not punish her for the murder of General Clifton, and she might refuse to say any more, and practically defy him.

The innocences of Vincent Morton might be readily enough proven, but what of the victim of all these plots—the innocent Ethel Clifton.

Toward her the detective's great heart, tender as that of a woman where beauty or worth or poverty was in distress, went out in sympathy with the original of the Clifton portrait.

Amid schemes of crime and avarice, his honest nature was ever alive to the keenest pity for the suffering and the unfortunate.

At all hazards the whereabouts of Ethel Clifton must be ascertained, and she must be rescued and restored to her home.

Marie brought her mistress her wraps, and assisted her in donning them.

The woman turned abruptly to the detective.

"Come," she said, simply and peremptorily.

"Where?"

"You wished to find the original of the portrait you have."

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"I have told you that."

"You make it a condition of my liberty.
I agree."

The detective followed the woman from
the room and down the steps of the mansion.

"Is it far?"

"Yes."

"Then I will hail a cab when we meet
one. A single word, Viola Dale. I know
that your plotting heart is a volcano of
hated for me, that you are scheming to en-
trap and baffle me. Be careful. I will not
be unprepared to act summarily against
you or your accomplices."

The woman was silent. Even after the
detective had hailed a cab and sat by her
side on the seat she did not speak a word.

She had herself given the order to the
driver—a vague direction as to streets.

Its delivery seemed to indicate that she
was still wavering in her determination to
lead Langdon to where Ethel Clifton was.

They had proceeded about half a mile,
when the detective started.

He had observed a peculiar odor in the
air of the cab, which was becoming heavy
and tainted.

He suddenly reached forward and seized
the hand of his companion, tearing a tiny
pial from its clasp.

Coolly opening the window, he flung it
out into the street.

His companion, evidently prepared for
such contingencies as the present one, had
attempted to rob him of consciousness by
means of a powerful anæsthetic.

He could see her hands clench fiercely
as she realized that her captor was keenly
watchful and shrewd as herself.

At a street near the river she told him to
order the cabman to stop.

"We will walk the rest of the way," she
said, shortly.

Langdon paid and dismissed the cabman.
The woman led the way down the street,
and paused finally.

Langdon started as he recognized the
building.

It was the same place that he had visited
that afternoon—the store of the old coin-
dealer.

The windows and doors were secured
with old-fashioned outside shutters, and no
light was visible within the place.

"Is this the place?" asked her companion.

"Yes."

"And Ethel Clifton is here?"

"I do not know that."

"Then why do you come here?"

"I wish to obtain some information of a
friend."

"Oh, the old coin-dealer?" remarked
Langdon, carelessly.

Viola Dale started.

"Do you know everything?" she hissed
out, angrily.

"I know that he is a mutual friend of
yourself and Harvey Talcott."

"Perhaps."

"Oh, I am certain of it. He was writing
you a letter this afternoon. Ah! I see by
your face you received it."

"What letter?" stammered the woman.

"The one beginning, 'Viola—Talcott will
sail on the boat.'"

The woman recoiled aghast, as Langdon
repeated what he had read that evening of
the coin-dealer's letter to her.

Was there some diablerie in this man's
movements? She almost tottered as she
gave a peculiar rap at the door.

It was opened a moment later. The old
coin-dealer appeared, a lamp in his hand.

"You, Viola!" he cried, in a tone of the
deepest surprise. "Talcott has just come."

The detective started as if dealt a quick
blow.

"Talcott alive and here!" he murmured.
"It's too late to retreat now. This case
will require some skillful handling in the
next hour."

He was not wrong in his surmise. As he
crossed the threshold of the old coin-dealer's
store, unwittingly, unconsciously, he
was entering upon one of the most start-
ling and perilous episodes of his eventful
career.

CHAPTER X.

IN DEADLY PERIL.

The detective had kept back in the shad-
ow of the doorway, and the coin-dealer
had not yet noticed him.

He was about to address some further
remark to Viola that would have thrown
still further light on the fact so surprising
to Langdon, that Talcott was still alive and
in the place, when Viola made him an im-
perative gesture to silence.

At the same moment the detective stepped
into the room.

The coin-dealer stared keenly at him,
and then started back with an ejaculation
of amazement.

"Why, it's the man who was here this
afternoon."

"What of it?" demanded Langdon,
coolly.

"Why, Talcott said that—that—"

"What?"

"Oh, he must have been mistaken. He
got mixed up in telling about some trouble
he had at the river. It's curious, though."

Viola Dale looked suspicious, but the
detective's eye was upon her, and she re-
membered his warning.

This strange man, who seemed to know
her very thoughts, impressed her with a

MANACLE AND BRACELET.

terror her cruel heart had never experienced before.

The coin-dealer read a gloomy care and anxiety in her face, and looked perplexed and uncertain at her companion. Langdon comprehended in a flash that Talcott had escaped and returned to this very place.

He had undoubtedly told the coin-dealer of his meeting the detective, and had described him as the same man who had imposed upon the latter with a pretended letter from Viola.

The coin-dealer, however, upon seeing Langdon with her, was half inclined to believe that there had been some mistake.

The detective determined to gain what information he could of the man before he suspected the truth, or Viola could convey an injunction of silence.

The coin-dealer had led the way into an inner room.

It was a strange looking place, having numerous doors of exit and entrance and panels in the wall.

The furniture itself was peculiar, and the floor seemed to be unusually well supplied with trap doors.

Langdon decided that the coin store and this apartment were simply entrances to some mysterious establishment beyond.

"You say Talcott is here?" he asked of the coin-dealer, in a tone of assumed carelessness and familiarity.

"Yes; he's gone back to the bar to get a drink. He was chilled with a dip in the river."

"How is the girl?"

Langdon ventured this allusion to Ethel Clifton. He saw Viola start. The coin-dealer noticed it also, and did not reply.

"Beware—no treachery!" whispered the detective, warningly.

Then aloud, he said:

"You needn't hesitate about answering. I'm all right and in the scheme. A'int I, Viola?"

Under the menacing magnetism of the detective's glance, the woman choked out a furious assent.

"Oh, she's all right. The boat ought to sail to-night."

Viola Dale sat nervously tapping her gloved hand on a little table near where she sat.

Upon it the coin-dealer had placed the lamp.

Near it was a box of matches, and as she took up one of them she looked significantly at the coin-dealer.

At a glance Langdon discerned that a signal had passed between the two, but was unable to determine its meaning or its extent.

The coin-dealer, however, became more guarded in his replies to Langdon's rapid questions, and finally told him that Talcott would tell him all about the girl when he returned.

Meantime, Viola had placed the match between her lips.

Thence she had conveyed it to the table and seemed to be abstractedly scribbling fanciful imaginary circles and lines upon its surface.

Not a movement on her part, however, escaped the watchful eye of the keen-witted detective.

He traced a system in her movements, the more so when the coin-dealer took a spectacle case from his pocket.

"The light hurts my eyes at night," he said.

As he spoke, he put on a pair of enormous spectacles made of darkened glass.

The detective saw Viola's hand move more slowly over the surface of the table.

He understood now what his shrewd prisoner was about.

She was writing intelligible words and sentences with the wet end of the match.

To ordinary vision, this writing was invisible, but to the old coin-dealer, through his black glasses, it was perfectly luminous.

The detective was about to interfere, when the old man rose to his feet.

"See here," he said to Langdon, "I want to speak to you."

"What about?" asked the detective.

He placed his hand in his coat pocket, clasp the revolver he had there ready for instant use, fearing some treachery.

"Sit down, and I'll tell you."

The coin-dealer dropped into a chair, and Langdon did the same.

He sought to use his revolver the next moment, but could not.

A quick, metallic snap had warned him of impending danger.

Immediately, as the coin-dealer seemed to kick a spring under the chair, its arms clasped Langdon in a vise-like embrace.

He could not move nor release himself. His arms tightly pinioned, he felt himself moved rapidly forward.

The chair was wheeled straight toward the wall by the coin-dealer.

A trap in the floor was released as if by magic.

And down into the dark void it revealed, the chair and its helpless occupant plunged as Viola Dale cried out, triumphantly:

"That is the last of Langdon the detective."

CHAPTER XI
NEW MYSTERIES.

Splash!

A chilling shock, as the chair came in contact with a dense volume of water, told the detective that his intended fate was by the same means Talcott had so narrowly escaped at the river.

The chair overturned as he fell, was submerged, and then seemed to float upon the surface of the water.

Utter darkness and silence pervaded the gloomy place, except for the involuntary cry Langdon uttered as he fell.

"Who is that?"

A human voice certainly spoke, and the despairing voice seemed illumined with the light of hope.

It appeared to emanate from a spot near at hand, and struck the detective as familiar, despite the peril and excitement of his position.

"A fellow-being, in danger," he replied.

"Where are you?"

"In the water, secured to a chair, and unable to help myself."

"Wait."

There was the sound of a match being struck, and the damp, fetid atmosphere of the place became pervaded with a pale, dim luminosity.

The light revealed to the detective's vision the face and form of a man a few feet beyond him, leaning over the edge of what seemed to be a large artificial pit filled with water.

The match went out suddenly. Then there was the sound of the water being splashed, and Langdon felt the chair move forward. It was lifted up, dragged out of the pit, and the arms of the chair torn apart.

The detective uttered a fervent sigh of relief as he found himself free.

His hand caught that of the man by his side in a grateful clasp.

"It is dark and I cannot see your face, but I welcome you as a friend in need."

"Who are you; how came you here?"

"I am a detective."

Langdon felt a quick tremor agitate the man at his side.

"Your name?" was the hoarse query.

"Langdon."

The speaker seemed to utter a half-muffled ejaculation of surprise.

"You know me?" asked the detective.

"I—I have heard of you. How came you here?"

"Through a woman's shrewdness and a man's cunning."

"Then they meant to kill you?"

"Can you ask it? But for you I would

never have got out of that terrible pit. Are you, too, a prisoner here?"

"No."

"How came you here, then?"

"By accident. I traced a man to this place, and could not gain an entrance. In searching around at the rear of the house I found a barred window. I broke the bars and climbed through."

"Then we can escape by the same way you came."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because it is fully twenty feet from the floor to the ground here. I miscalculated the distance, and fell to the cellar."

"Then we are penned in?"

"No; there is a stairway leading up to a heavy oaken door."

"We can force the door?"

"I think not."

"Have you tried it?"

"Yes."

"And could not break it down?"

"It resisted my strongest efforts."

"Then it has no lock?"

"Yes, and is evidently also barred on the other side."

"Where is it?"

"I will show you."

The stranger took hold of Langdon's arm and led him across the cellars.

"Here are the stairs," he said.

"I feel them."

"Shall we ascend?"

"Yes."

Both men felt their way up a rickety flight of steps.

When they reached the top, Langdon examined the door critically from a sense of touch.

"Have you matches?" he asked of his companion.

"Yes."

"Then light one."

The detective had taken a little case from his pocket, which he always carried.

It contained, among other things, a set of burglar's tools, most exquisitely made, and often very useful to him in cases like the present.

In ten minutes' time he had turned back the lock.

Then, boring a hole through the door, with a looped wire he pulled back the bolt.

The door opened at their touch.

"Go slowly and cautiously," warned the detective as they found themselves in a large apartment.

It apparently had no windows, and seemed to be used as a store-room, for it was full of all kinds of boxes and bales.

Langdon reached the outer door it contained and opened it stealthily.

A long stairway, circular and winding, was presented to his view, at the top of which was a door.

A light showed through the glass transom. Langdon told his companion to remain where he was, and, removing his boots, ascended the stairs.

A window looked out upon the court below. Climbing to its inner sill, the detective peered cautiously over the transom of the door.

A sight that interested him deeply met his vision.

He could see into a well-furnished apartment, in which there were two men.

Both of them he recognized at a single glance.

One was the old coin-dealer, and he stood with his hand leaning on a little table in the center of the room.

His eyes were fixed on a companion, who was talking animatedly.

This latter was Talcott, recovered entirely from his plunge in the river, for he was neatly dressed, and had abandoned his former disguise.

He now appeared in the role of a Frenchman, and wore short-cut clothes, a long mustache, and a pointed goatee.

On the table between the two men was a jewel-case, and within it and scattered about it was a superb set of diamond jewelry.

The flashing gems in the necklace alone seemed to the amazed detective to represent a fortune in money value.

To Langdon's satisfaction he found that he could overhear every word they spoke.

The coin-dealer appeared in an entirely new role, and soon verified the detective's suspicions that his seeming employment was assumed to divert suspicion from his real business.

"There are the gems," Talcott was saying, "and they are worth a fortune."

"Perhaps," was the equivocal reply. "You do not doubt their genuineness, Barnet?"

"Not at all."

"Then why not do as I wish?"

"You ask too much money."

"The value is there."

"Provided they are not traced to me."

"How can they be?"

"How did the detective trace you here?"

Talcott looked glum.

"You see, my dear friend Talcott, there's an element of risk in all stolen goods."

"But these won't be missed."

"Why not?"

"Because no one knew that General Clifton had them."

"How is that?"

"He kept them secretly, as a wedding present for his niece."

"Ah! I see. Well, I'll give you the five thousand dollars."

Talcott's eyes sparkled avariciously.

"But only as a loan."

"All right."

"And only on the agreement that you use a part of it to further our scheme."

"Regarding the Clifton fortune?"

"Yes."

"That will soon be ours."

"Provided the police don't get on your track."

"How can they?"

"How did Langdon do it?"

The name of the famous detective usually had the effect of silencing Talcott, but he said:

"We're through with him, any way."

"It seems so," replied Barnet.

"You must search his body for papers and a brilliant belonging to my watch-chain."

"All right. Now, see here, Talcott, the coast seems clear, so make no mistake. I do not believe that any of the police but Langdon knew of your connection with this case."

"No; the others all believe Morton to be the murderer."

"And he'll keep out of the way and not trouble us. No one will suspect Viola of being other than Ethel Clifton, and in a short time, as heiress to the Clifton fortune, she will be a rich woman."

"And then we'll divide."

"Meantime, about the girl?" continued Barnet.

"You mean the real Ethel Clifton?"

"Yes."

"We'll get her away from here."

"When?"

"To-morrow night; perhaps before then. If I hadn't met with the accident at the river I'd have been away by now."

"Is she tractable?"

"Yes."

"And will go with you?"

"I have frightened her so that she believes her lover guilty of her uncle's murder, and his reputation in my power."

"What do you propose to do with her?"

"Take her to some distant town."

"And then?"

"Keep watch over her for a time. When the fortune is secured she shall have her liberty."

"That's the plan. I see no obstacle to plane sailing and a fortune in port at the end of the game."

"Nor I, either. Now, Barnet, the money."

"You want it to-night?"

"Yes."

"You won't get to gambling, and fling it away?"

"I promise you, no."

"Very well, I'll get it for you."

"Has Viola returned home?"

"Yes."

Barnet left the apartment, and Talcott began arranging the jewels in the box.

The detective got down from the window and crept down the stairs.

His companion was where he had left him.

"Is there a means of escape that way?" asked the latter.

"Not for the present. I am going to enter that room as soon as it is vacated."

"And I?"

"Remain here till I return. It is because I may not return that I speak to you. You know my business?"

"Yes; you have told me—a detective."

"I came here on the track of a very important case."

"The Clifton murder? Yes."

Langdon started violently.

"How did you know that?"

"Because I myself have had something to do with it."

"You?" murmured Langdon, in profound surprise.

"Yes."

"In what way?"

"I restored to justice a clew against the murderer."

"What clew?"

"A brilliant watch-guard, lost at the wharf to-night."

Langdon could scarcely conceal his curiosity.

"Who are you? We have met before. I remember your voice."

"Do not question me now. When we leave this building I will tell you. Proceed with your directions. If you should not return here—"

Langdon would have liked to have questioned his strange friend more closely about his mysterious connection with the case in hand, but the latter seemed to desire to avoid it.

"If I should not return here in an hour, endeavor yourself to escape."

"How?"

"That I cannot tell you, but you might escape where I fail."

"And if I do?"

"Go at once to the police and have them search this building."

"I will do as you say."

"Very well; remain quietly here till I return, or the hour has passed."

Langdon returned to the landing at the top of the stairs.

Again he mounted the inside window sill and peered over the transom.

In the room beyond, Talcott was seated smoking a cigar and looking over some papers.

The jewels were still in the box behind him on the table.

The detective descended to the floor, and began cautiously to raise the window at the side of the landing.

He wished to avail himself of a means of escape in that direction if it were possible.

But the court yard yawned forty feet beneath him.

As he looked along the side of the building, however, he saw directly under the windows of the next room, a small, portable platform.

It was secured by ropes to the roof, and had been used by painters, recently, and left there.

The windows of the room in which Talcott was, were directly above this movable platform.

Langdon saw that they were open, and, leaning forward, saw, too, the box of jewels on the table in the center of the apartment.

To wrest from this villain and his infamous accomplice, the coin-dealer, Barnet, their booty was a pleasant task to the veteran detective.

Langdon acted on a quick impulse. He climbed cautiously out upon the platform and began to traverse its length.

He reached the second and farthest window in the room where Talcott sat waiting for Barnet to return with his money.

It was only a few steps to the table. The detective could not resist the temptation to recover General Clifton's stolen wealth.

He stepped into the room, cautiously crept to the table and back to the window again.

He had just reached the platform, when the jewels rattled in the box.

Talcott turned like a flash.

One fleeting glimpse of the detective's face aroused him to quick action.

He sprang to the window, drawing a knife as he did so.

With one blow he cut the rope supporting one end of the platform.

Rushing to the other window he severed the second rope with the rapidity of a flash of light.

And down to the stone-paved court, before the detective could reach the window of the stairway hall, the platform went crashing through space in the darkness and gloom of the night.

CHAPTER XII.

THE HOUSE OF SECRETS.

To all semblance, Langdon the detective had been precipitated to the stone-paved court forty feet below the window.

At a single glance, it was evident, Harvey Talcott had recognized him, and had thought less of the jewels at the moment than of the fate of the man who was his sworn enemy.

He heard the platform crash on the pavement, and adjudged his foe done for at last.

His evil face was aglow with malignant triumph as he glanced down into the darkness, and then retreated into the room.

At that moment Barnet, the coin-dealer, reappeared.

He noted the subdued excitement in his companion's face, but said:

"I have brought the money, where are the jewels?"

"They are gone."

"Gone!—where?"

"To the court below, where the enemy we thought dead is now lying, a crushed, mangled heap."

He pointed coolly to the open window, and to the cut ends of rope dangling from above.

Barnet stared at him in mute stupefaction for a moment or two.

"What do you mean?" he asked, in open amazement.

"What I say. You claimed to have disposed of Langdon the Shadow effectually."

"That is true. I did."

"You are mistaken."

"Impossible!"

"A moment since he appeared at that window, habited just as he was when we met at the river."

"It cannot be!" gasped Barnet, incredulously.

"Oh! it was he. I was sitting with my back to the window when he crept into the room. He seized the jewel case, regained the window and the platform hanging there, and—"

"He escaped?" cried Barnet, actually turning pale.

"No," replied Talcott, coolly, "for I prevented him."

"You?"

"Yes."

"In what way?"

"Two cuts of the knife at two ropes, and platform and man went hurtling through space."

"We must search the court at once, and regain the jewels and dispose of his body, then," said Barnet. "It is fortunate the

court is inclosed and private property. But how did he escape?"

"I do not know, but he seems to bear a charmed life. The money——"

"The jewels first."

Talcott pointed to the window.

The shrewd Barnet shook his head slowly and divided the large package of bills he held in his hand.

"When I recover the jewels you shall have the balance," he said.

Talcott was compelled to be satisfied with this.

"All right," he remarked. "I'll go down to the gaming-room, and before morning we'll remove the girl to a place of safety."

"It must be done," replied Barnet, as he walked to the window and peered forth. "That fall will end the detective's career in earnest this time, I'll wager," he muttered, grimly.

"Perhaps not!"

The words were spoken clearly, distinctly.

Not, however, did they seem to float upon the still air of the court until the old coin-dealer had left the window and the room.

They were spoken, too, in a familiar voice, that of the veteran detective, who had been in too many hair-breadth escapes, in the course of his eventful life, to lose his self-possession even under such perilous circumstances as those which had surrounded the episode narrated.

Langdon had not accompanied the platform in that mad plunge to instant death.

He had not time to regain the window whence he had crept upon the platform when Talcott had discovered him.

When, however, the keen-witted detective realized his danger, and divined Talcott's intention to sever the second rope, he knew that he must act promptly to escape certain and terrible death.

Quick as a flash he sprang upward, seized the second rope above the window, clambered from the platform, nimble as a sailor, and was ten feet up the wall clinging to the cable just as Talcott's knife severed it.

The latter never thought of the possibility of this deft maneuver, and did not chance to look above his head.

For a few moments, his feet resting on the top of the projecting coping of the window above which he had clambered, the detective clung to the rope.

Then, hand over hand, he began to ascend its length.

He did not venture to descend, for this action would bring him to the end of the rope, with no foothold beneath him except

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the window, from which his enemies might be glancing forth at any moment.

He could not hope to regain the window of the hall stairway and rejoin the strange friend he had met in the cellar of the place, nor could he remain where he was, for he was satisfied that some one would soon visit the court below, and, discovering that he was not there, would institute a search for his whereabouts.

Clambering up the frail rope, the detective finally gained the ledge of a window about two stories above the floor whence he had just escaped.

It was closed, but he managed to raise the sash, and cautiously climbed into a room that was completely in darkness.

His eyes becoming gradually accustomed to its black gloom, however, finally made out dimly its interior from what light of the night penetrated its windows.

It was a furnished room, that is, there was a carpet on the floor and a table in its center.

Along its side were arranged what appeared to be a series of wardrobes.

Groping his way stealthily about, as his hand touched the table, he became conscious of the fact that it held an object of considerable utility to him in his present dilemma.

"A dark lantern!" he murmured, in a satisfied tone, "and matches. I will venture to explore my surroundings."

In a moment he had the lantern lit and its rays directed about the apartment.

A genuine surprise confronted him as he opened one of the wardrobes and examined its contents.

The room seemed to be a vast repository for the most elaborate and varied disguises.

Each wardrobe contained at least a dozen sets of wearing apparel, besides wigs, false whiskers, spectacles, and minor articles of that class, and on a shelf was a tray of cosmetics and dyes for changing the complexion.

"This house must be the headquarters of some band of criminals hitherto unknown to the police," decided Langdon.

Immediately he resolved on a quick and bold course of action.

He would assume one of these disguises, and penetrate still farther into the mysteries of this strange house.

In an incredibly short period of time, for he was an expert in the art of disguises, the detective had so completely changed his identity that his most intimate friend would have failed to recognize him.

The dark lantern and a mirror facilitated his operations in this regard, and then, satisfied with the result of his labors, Lang-

don shaded the lantern and opened the single door that led from the room.

He found himself in a dark hall, and, traversing this, came to a narrow staircase.

He hesitated about descending this without some preliminary examination.

At its foot was a green baize swinging door, beyond which were lights, and the sounds of numerous voices engaged in various conversations.

The clinking of glasses, and anon the click of ivory checks, such as are employed in gambling-rooms, gave him a hint as to the probable occupancy of the apartments beyond the staircase.

"I think I understand it now," he soliloquized. "This place has but one entrance and exit, the store of the coin-dealer."

"Here, behind it, in this rambling old structure, he has a quiet and unsuspected resort for criminals."

"Here they come to hide, to divide and sell their plunder, and to disguise themselves when necessary."

"No such place could be long unknown to the police, unless the utmost caution was exercised to prevent outsiders coming in."

"And, on the same theory, it is doubtful if any unfortunate brought here ever leaves alive."

"There must be some password of entrance and exit, and I imagine it will be as difficult for me to leave here as it was for the man in the cellar to effect an entrance."

"However, I will trust to circumstances and my disguise to carry me through."

Langdon went down the stairs and boldly pushed open the green baize door.

It opened into an ante-room, and beyond that, smoking, drinking, and playing cards, were as many as a score of men.

They were so engrossed in their occupations that when he glided into the main apartment no one seemed to notice him.

He congratulated himself on so easily entering the charmed precincts of this choice congregation of cut-throats and thieves, and he at once set his wits at work to ascertain a means of leaving the place.

At one end of the room was a small bar, presided over by a stalwart negro.

Langdon, as he passed him, ordered a cigar, and, paying liberally for the same, sat puffing it coolly, as though an old denizen of the place.

A man at his side sat watching a game at cards at the next table.

Langdon ventured to address him.

"Quite a crowd to-night," he said.

"Yes; these hot summer nights the boys don't like to work."

"I must get to work in an hour, all the same," remarked Langdon, carelessly.

"How can you?"

"Why not?"

"The rule is that no one leaves the house after midnight."

"That's true; I forgot that."

Langdon saw that he had very nearly committed a serious error.

The man by his side took him for a burglar or sneak-thief like himself, and had imparted a valuable piece of information to him.

Langdon arose and strolled about the room. He found that several smaller apartments completed the extensive suite of rooms beyond the main one.

In one of these he sat down at a table and began to carelessly shuffle a pack of cards that lay there.

He pretended to be engrossed finally in playing some solitary game at them, when he started and listened intently.

In the very next apartment two men were conversing in earnest, guarded tones, and he at once recognized their voices as belonging to Harvey Talcott and Barnet, the coin-dealer.

The latter was speaking.

"I found neither the jewels nor the detective," he was saying. "There is some mystery about all this, and I'm going to investigate it."

"Have you visited the cellar?" inquired Talcott.

"Yes."

"And found no one there?"

"No, the detective was gone. What does it all mean?"

"I cannot surmise. He never could have left this building."

"Apparently not. He is probably hidden somewhere about it. I shall soon know."

Langdon experienced a satisfied emotion as he realized that his strange friend in the cellar could not have been discovered, else Barnet would have spoken of it.

The two plotters seemed to separate, for Talcott came out into the room where Langdon was.

His face was pale and anxious, and he passed through the room rapidly.

Langdon was about to start on an investigating tour of the adjoining apartment, whence he hoped to find the same means of exit by which the coin-dealer and Talcott had entered it, when the latter re-entered the room.

He seemed to have been drinking freely, for his manner was more reckless and relieved.

He espied Langdon at the table handling the cards, and sat down in an opposite chair.

"I will play you a game," he said.

Langdon was no gamester, and hated cards as he did strong drink or crime itself.

His profession, however, demanded that he be familiar with every phase of metropolitan life, and he had gained a knowledge of its details, with no vicious acquirements.

He drank when a case demanded it, and played cards where it was a point gained in his business, but only as he pretended to engage in a burglary, to trace down the criminals themselves.

He assented to Talcott's proposition with a gracious nod of the head.

Without a suspicion of the truth, Harvey Talcott seated himself at the table, little dreaming that his adversary was his bitterest enemy, Langdon the Shadow.

CHAPTER XIII.

A DOUBLE GAME.

"What shall it be?"

Handling the pasteboards with the skill and nonchalance of an expert gamester, Harvey Talcott propounded the query to his adversary.

"The game? What you will."

"The turn of a card, then. A simple game, but quickly played. And the stakes?"

"A double eagle," and the detective placed a gold coin on the table.

Talcott was evidently feverish for the excitement of chance, but Langdon became rueful as he remembered that his means were limited.

Talcott staked an amount similar to his own, and shuffled the cards.

"The deal to me, the second card to you, and then reverse," he said. "The highest card takes the stakes."

"Agreed."

There was a new interest in the detective's tones.

His eyes sparkled as they fell upon an object crossing the vest of his adversary at play.

It was an article of ornament, the same watch-chain he had worn at the river, on which was the broken guard to which fitted the brilliant found in the library of the murdered millionaire.

The only tangible clue to his connection with that crime, its possession meant a most valuable and coveted treasure to the detective.

If, with fortune on his side, he could lure on this rash gamester to play until his money was gone and he would stake this article of jewelry, the risk was worth the effort.

They began the so-called game. It was a rapid, an exciting and varying play. First the detective would win, and then fortune would smile on Talcott.

At last, however, the tide took one mighty sweep in Talcott's favor.

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XIII
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A man who had sauntered into the room carelessly came to the table, and sat down by Langdon's side, watching the game with apparent interest.

Neither of the players noticed him, engrossed in their game. The detective had placed upon the table his last coin.

With eagerness he watched the turn of the cards.

Talcott won.

Langdon drew back with a gesture of final abandonment of the game.

The stranger by his side, with apparent design, touched his hand under the table.

Langdon looked up, and their eyes met.

A thrill of recognition pervaded the face of the detective, but only momentarily, and then his mask of disguise went up again.

For, in that single glance, a flash of quick intelligence had told him that the man before him in a new guise was no other than his friend of the cellar.

At the same moment he felt pressed into his hand a roll of bills.

"You ain't going to stop, are you?" asked Talcott, the triumphant flush of the gamester's pleasure on his face.

"No. I will double the stakes, and run the cards to the end."

"Good."

The game seemed now to assume new interest for Talcott.

With varying success the men played. Talcott became excited, lost, won, trebled the stakes, and then kept losing steadily.

"That ends it."

He uttered the words disappointedly as he saw his companion draw the pile of gold and bills toward him.

"No more money?" inquired Langdon pleasantly.

"Not a dollar. I'd like to have my revenge."

"I'll grant it. See here; that's a fine chain you wear."

The crisis had come. The detective had determined to secure the coveted clew at any cost. He watched Talcott's face, and saw the fever of rash excitement burning there.

"And a fine watch at the end of it," remarked Talcott, drawing a valuable chronometer from his pocket.

"What do you value it at?"

"Three hundred dollars."

"I'll stake the entire winnings against it."

"Agreed."

Talcott placed the watch and chain upon the table.

The fatal clew was almost in the detective's possession.

There were only four cards left. Each turned one face upward.

"Even—two deuces!" gasped Talcott.

He was fairly trembling with excitement as he turned the last card but one.

"A n i e-spot!" he breathed hoarsely.

"Ten!" cried Langdon. "I have won!"

He placed the watch and chain in his pocket.

Looking up at the door of the next room he saw a man regarding him closely.

His eyes seemed to burn in his very soul, and Langdon thrilled as he saw that it was Barnett, the coin-dealer.

The latter averted his glance quickly, and passed through the apartment.

The stranger by Langdon's side arose also, and followed in Barnett's footsteps.

Langdon felt somewhat uneasy, but continued to converse casually with Talcott.

The latter at length arose, and strolled back into the apartment beyond.

A minute later the detective's strange friend hurriedly entered the apartment he had so recently left.

He came direct to where Langdon sat, and whispered hastily:

"You are suspected—discovered! They are talking about your escape to the room with disguises."

"Look out for yourself," spoke Langdon, rising abruptly to his feet.

He glanced once toward the main room, then he glided into the apartment whither Talcott had gone.

The latter was standing near a window, lost in thought.

The detective gained his side, his hand in his coat pocket, a stern resolution in his deep-set eyes.

"There is a way out of the building there?" he demanded abruptly, pointing to a door.

Talcott started and looked in suspicious surprise at his interlocutor.

"Yes; why do you ask?"

"Then lead the way at once."

"Who are you?"

The detective leaned toward him and said impressively:

"Langdon!"

"The detective!—we have found you!"

"Stop!"

Talcott was about to start toward the main room to call for assistance.

The detective blocked his way.

"Harvey Talcott," he said, in a low, impressive tone of voice, "I hold in my pocket a revolver ready for use, my finger on the trigger, your life at the touch of my hand.

"If you attempt to call for help or disobey me—if you do not at once lead the way from this place—I swear to send a bullet to your craven heart!"

MANACLE AND BRACELET.

"It would not be murder; it would be self-defense, a just vengeance, for you and your evil accomplices have twice sought my life to-night.

"Go, and at once, or I will kill you where you stand!"

Talcott had grown frightfully pale. His eyes flashed a baffled rage, his hands clenched spasmodically.

Then his coward heart failed him, his eyes sank before the detective's magnetic glance, and he slunk toward the door, with the hoarsely muttered word:

"Come."

Langdon watched his every movement as he passed through two rooms into a hall, and then up a long, narrow staircase.

At its top was a corridor, beyond it still another room.

All the apartments they had entered were lighted.

This last one seemed to be near the very top of the building, and bore evidences of having been at some past time a work-room of some kind.

At one end a flight of unrailed stairs ran up to a door near the ceiling.

"Where are you leading me?" demanded Langdon.

"To the roof."

Talcott was slightly in advance of the detective. The latter started as his prisoner made a quick movement.

He seemed to mount the stairs in a flash. He was at the top just as the detective placed his foot on the lower step.

A sharp snap echoed through the room. The detective was flung violently backward by some movement of the stair itself.

The steps seemed to fold up and, by some hidden mechanism, to become bulked in a kind of frame-work at the bottom of the high door through which Talcott had just disappeared.

The detective was intensely startled, and stood staring at the open doorway ten feet above his head.

"Duped—foiled!" he breathed, in deep chagrin; "I should have watched him more closely."

A shot whizzing by his head caused the detective to spring to the door through which he had just entered the room.

It was bolted from the outside at that very moment. He could hear the locks slide as his hand touched the knob.

A second shot from the open doorway overhead warned Langdon that his enemy in the dark, Talcott, was in a position most advantageous for his assassination.

He therefore glided across the room, and crouded close to the wall under the door.

Talcott could not now shoot at him with-

out leaning over the door and exposing himself to the detective's fire.

A minute later a shot from a new quarter followed the shattering of the glass of the transom over the door just locked upon the detective.

The evil face of Barnet, the coin-dealer, appeared.

The detective was now between two fires. The contest was an unequal one, and he made a quick, strategic movement.

He directed his revolver at the single lamp that afforded light to the room.

A bullet shattered it, plunging the apartment into complete darkness.

The firing ceased, and the detective glided noiselessly to another part of the room.

He was surprised and curious as, in feeling his way along the wall, he came to a spot where a large piece of heavy manila paper was tacked upon it.

It gave to his touch, and was loose. He lifted it up—he could feel an aperture behind it.

Whatever it was, wherever it led, it could not complicate his peril worse than at present, for voices at the door in hasty consultation told that his enemies were about to enter the room and overpower him.

The space under the paper in the wall appeared to slant down a smooth, inclined plane.

This house of strange surprises and mysterious secrets seemed to be provided with a myriad of singular retreats.

The detective climbed over the edge of the opening, and let himself downward.

The door was burst open; he relaxed his grasp.

Then, down a smooth inclined plane with the rapidity of light, Langdon the Shadow went whirling like a shot.

CHAPTER XIV!

FOUND.

Langdon had never before experienced the peculiar gliding, sinking sensation which accompanied his wild flight from the room where he had been made the target of the weapons of his enemies.

He seemed to slide as much as fifty feet, and came to a sudden stop amid a heap of sawdust and ashes.

He then made up his mind that the chute through which he had descended was a long, narrow box, employed at some time in the past to convey the refuse of a factory room to the basement of the building.

Down this he had gone, its sides, worn smooth with use, enabling a facile progress.

"They will surely discover that I have come this way," reasoned the detective. "I must be on the ground floor of this strange

house. Which way shall I go to evade my enemies?"

He stumbled over heaps of refuse, and finally came to a door standing half-open and leading to the outer air.

"Freedom at last!" breathed Langdon, fervently.

He stepped over the threshold of the basement, and out into the fresh air of the night.

He had reckoned too hopefully, however, for he discerned that he was still a prisoner, and within the confines of the coin-dealer's house of secrets.

This open space was evidently the court into which the platform had fallen, for he imagined that he could see its wreck a few feet away.

What windows opened on the court as far as the second story were closely and stoutly barred.

There seemed to be no door opening into the court besides the one behind him, and another directly across the opening.

Toward this, bent on investigating every possible avenue to escape, the detective proceeded.

He stood startled and transfixed for a moment or two, as his eyes met a strange sight.

The door before him presented an ominous appearance, for imbedded in its surface, as if hung there by some tremendous force, were three glittering knives.

They seemed to convey an ominous warning to the spectator, as if they were indicative not only of the three lives that lay imperiled between the plotters and the Clifton fortune, but also of the number of the plotters themselves.

"What are they placed in this dramatic manner for, I wonder?" mused Langdon.

He then decided that they constituted a warning, and built up a plausible theory that the inmates of the place knew what their appearance meant.

Beyond the door, doubtless, was some secret apartment whither only Barnet and his familiar associates might penetrate.

Perhaps, and Langdon thrilled at the thought, the innocent victim of all Talcott's plotting, the beautiful Ethel Clifton, might be imprisoned there.

The detective did not delay longer to try the door with its ominous armament of menacing steel.

It opened readily, and revealed a dimly lighted hall beyond.

At the end of this was another of those strange staircases with which the place seemed to abound.

At its top was another corridor, from which a dozen or more apartments led off,

and some of which opened upon a large skylight.

Cautiously traversing the corridor, Langdon came to a sudden halt.

Across the skylight, where an interior window looked into one of the apartments off the hall, his eyes fell upon the outlines of a lighted room.

Within its confines, seated at a table, her face bent upon her hands, was a woman.

Her golden hair clustered thickly over a brow of marble whiteness, and her graceful form seemed bent in a pose of terror and grief.

A wild delight surged in the detective's heart as he stood regarding her closely.

Had he at last found the girl for whom he was seeking? Should he penetrate to her presence at once?

No. He saw her start violently, and then crouch down again in her misery, as a voice fell clearly on the silent air of the corridor.

It was that of Harvey Talcott, and he was coming directly down the hall, and evidently toward the room which Langdon was watching.

The detective had barely time to turn the knob of an adjoining apartment and hide himself in its darkness when Talcott came into view.

He could discern that he was not alone, and both he and his companion came to a halt directly before the door of the apartment in which the detective was ensconced. "You must not remain here any longer, Talcott," spoke the familiar voice of the plotter's companion.

The listening detective recognized the tones as belonging to the ubiquitous Barnet, the coin-dealer.

"Why not?" demanded Talcott.

"Because you are getting the house into trouble."

"In what way?"

"In what way?" repeated Barnet, angrily. "Can you ask, remembering what has taken place here to-night?"

"You mean the detective?"

"Yes; has one ever before crossed the threshold of this house? How long will it be the safe retreat it is, if the police once suspect its existence?"

"How can they? The detective is here alone."

"Well, what of it?"

"You can find him; he cannot escape."

"We have not found him yet. A man who is shrewd enough to climb a frail rope to our disguise-room, and then boldly appear in our midst, is a foe to be feared. Besides, he is not alone."

"Not alone?" repeated Talcott, startled. "No; he had a companion with him."

We suspected him, and have got him in a safe place."

"Who is he?"

"I do not know. Leave it to me, however, to find and dispose of the detective. You must leave this house."

"When?"

"At once. As long as you remain here the police will be lurking around."

"Very well. I must have some money."

"You shall have it."

"And the girl?"

"Must go with you."

"All right. Where had I better go?"

"To some new and more remote place of hiding."

"In the city?"

"Yes."

"Why not the boat?"

"It may not be safe. The detective Langdon must have suspected from what I said that you intended taking the girl away by means of a boat."

"That is true."

"And we had better wait a day or two, and learn if he has set any one watching the wharves."

"And meanwhile?"

"I will direct you to some new place of hiding near here. Tell the girl you are going to leave here, and I will have a carriage and some trusty aids ready to convey you to your destination."

Barnet passed, as if seeking some trace of the detective, and Langdon heard the door of the next room open.

Evidently, Talcott had entered the apartment where he had seen the mysterious woman who had so aroused his curiosity a few moments previous.

He applied his ear closely to the floor between the two rooms, and could hear the rough, quick intonations of Talcott's voice.

There seemed to be a piteous, moaning reply, and then Talcott again left the room.

"I wish you to be ready in ten minutes' time," the detective heard him say, as he proceeded again down the corridor.

"Who is the woman if not the one I seek? I will see her, be the risk what it may," murmured Langdon, determinedly. He glided to the deserted hall, and to the door of the next room.

His hand on its knob, he opened it so silently that the figure before him never changed its pose, or seemed to discover the intrusion.

He approached the chair in which she sat and touched her hand gently.

She startled with a little cry of startled terror, recoiled, and then slowly arose to her feet, staring at the detective in silence.

Langdon was intensely startled, for the woman before him was masked.

Covering eyes and face, and leaving exposed only the beautiful clustering locks and the white, broad brow, a silken mask hid from his vision the features he so longed to see.

What new mystery was here—what fell power did Harvey Talcott exercise over this girl, his unwilling prisoner, that he could induce her to wear a mask at his will?

The detective did not waste time in endeavoring by silent thought to probe the mystery that assailed his mind.

"Do not cry out," he spoke, in a low, rapid tone of voice; "do not shrink from me. I am a friend."

"A friend?" came in broken accents from behind the silken mask. "I have no friends."

"You are in error. Even now those who have sworn to protect and rescue you are here in your service."

"In my service? Of what are you speaking? Do you know me?"

"Yes, Ethel Clifton, I know you."

A low cry broke from the lips of the masked woman.

"Then know me as a persecuted, unfortunate girl, whose heart is crushed with griefs I cannot comprehend, I cannot battle. Whoever you are, I beg of you to fly from me, to leave this place, where only disaster can attend those who seek to befriend me."

"I have come to rescue you. I am a detective, a friend of your affianced husband, Vincent Morton."

A moan of misery broke from the lips of the detective's companion.

"Leave me—leave me, you torture me!" she cried, in tones of the most heart-rending anguish.

"Leave you, to be carried away to a new hiding place, which your friends may never find?"

"Yes, if you are a friend. I beg of you to forget that you have seen me."

"Miss Clifton, are you mad?"

"I am not Miss Clifton—oh! what do I say?"

"It is useless to deny that. In heaven's name speak to me, and explain all this evasion and denial."

"I dare not. I cannot."

"Once you have escaped, all the wrongs your enemies have done shall be fitly avenged."

"No, no! Oh! you do not know my position. Fly, I beseech you. Abandon me to a fate far better than if I were free. Go! I would not have my liberty if I could. Fate demands that I obey the mandates of the man who holds my life and the lives of those I love at his will."

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"In heaven's name, what new mystery
is here?"

"Go, go!" cried the young girl, hyster-
ically. "If you resented me to-morrow I
would deny that I was Ethel Clifton. I
would claim that I never was a prisoner,
except of my own free will and consent."

The detective had met startling surprises
in the course of his long and varied ca-
reer, but none to equal this.

He fairly staggered where he stood, as
he sought to comprehend what subtle in-
fluence held this beautiful girl a slave to
the will of her villainous captor.

He did not know that the secret mystery
General Clifton had exercised was now
bearing terrible results for the innocent
and helpless child to whom he had be-
queathed the legacy.

"I will fathom this mystery. I swear it!"
he cried, in an intense tone of voice.

He advanced to the side of the girl, and
with one quick movement tore the mask
from her face.

She uttered a frightened cry, and sought
to cover her face with her hands.

The same beautiful features that had
beamed on General Clifton two nights pre-
viously now looked upon the detective.

"Ethel Clifton," he said, "for the sake
of those you love, I beg of you to tell me
what infamous falsehood the man who
holds you here has told you, that you fly
from those who would befriend you."

The beautiful creature before him paled,
and moaned, and cowered at his words.

"I cannot. I dare not. Oh! death were
better than that my reappearance should
doom to disgrace and suffering those who
have loved me."

"It is false!" cried Langdon. "I see it
all. The man you fear has frightened
your timid soul with base falsehoods. I
will refute all—only tell me what has he
told you, what influence has he exerted
over you that you even seek to deny that
you are Ethel Clifton?"

"I will answer that question."

A calm, steady voice spoke the words.

Turning, startled and dismayed, Lang-
don the Shadow faced a gleaming re-
volver, leveled directly at his heart by the
man he had sworn to hunt to his doom—
Harvey Talcott.

CHAPTER XV.

STARTLING ADVENTURES.

Talcott had entered the room unper-
ceived, and his appearance, so startling
and unexpected to the detective, seemed
to overwhelm Ethel Clifton with terror.

She fell back with a cry that thrilled
Langdon's heart to dread uncertainty and
pity, so anguished was its utterance.

"Replace your mask," ordered Talcott
sternly. "Remember my power, your
promise. As to you, the tables are turned,
my friend, the detective," sneered the vil-
lain, turning upon Langdon.

As he spoke he uttered a quick, pecu-
liar whistle. The sounds of tramping foot-
steps could be heard approaching the
place.

The detective never imperiled his life
uselessly. He realized that he could not
in any way benefit or rescue Ethel Clifton
for the present, and he knew that in a few
moments' time Talcott's hurrying emissar-
ies would surround and capture him.

"Take care, or I will fire!"

Talcott uttered the words warningly, as
the detective took a step backward.

The threat was but to execute a mo-
ment later.

A terrified shriek rent Ethel Clifton's
lips as a bullet went flying past Langdon's
form.

It lodged in the woodwork of a door, the
knob of which he had just seized.

Langdon, however, uttered a cry of dis-
may as he closed the door after him.

For he was in a small, confined closet, a
veritable death-trap.

Talcott evidently knew of his limited
quarters, for he kept firing through the
door.

He had emptied his revolver as two men
dashed precipitately into the room.

One of them was the coin-dealer, Bar-
net, and he asked excitedly:

"The detective?"

"Yes."

"Where is he?"

Talcott pointed to the splintered door of
the closet.

"In there, dead by this time, I'll guaran-
tee. Come, Barnett, I must get the girl
away."

"Yes, the carriage is ready. I'll attend
to the detective."

Talcott seized the sobbing, agitated
Ethel Clifton by the arm, and almost rough-
ly drew her from the room.

She followed him with the shrieking
yet unresisting dread of a being oppress-
ed with some terrible power of menace
and domination.

Barnet pointed to the closet door as Tal-
cott left the room.

"Open it, Bartley," he ordered.

The man did so. The coin-dealer peer-
ed curiously over his shoulder, expecting
to see the dead body of his troublesome
foe.

"Empty!" he gasped out. "We are trick-
ed again."

He could scarcely credit the evidence
of his senses. This enemy in his house

appeared and disappeared as magically as harlequin in the pantomime.

"That's the way he went," said the coin-dealer's companion, pointing to a little window in the side of the closet.

The sash showed where it had recently been kicked out, but the aperture was so small it seemed incredible that Langdon had escaped that way.

Nor had he. While Barnet and his companion were following a false trail, having left the room and gone in search of him, the detective was congratulating himself on his narrow escape, in the very closet they had just left.

He had kicked out the window, but found it too narrow to admit of the passage of his body.

Above his head, however, was a shelf, and on this he had sprung and remained during Talcott's wild fusillade and Barnet's investigations.

When his enemies had departed, he lowered himself to the floor.

"Fortune will not always favor me," he muttered. "Talcott has gone to carry away the girl to a new place of concealment, which it may be difficult for me to discover."

"I must escape. The only avenue seems to be the roof. I will try to reach it."

The effort to reach the top of the house was an arduous one.

The place seemed to be built with a view to confuse and confine any outside person lost in the labyrinth of its numerous rooms and corridors.

The detective penetrated a score of devious hallways ere he finally came to a light ladder which ran up to the ceiling.

This he mounted, and found a closed trap-door at its top.

It lifted readily. He imagined he saw a dark figure lurking in the hall below as he did so, but he hurriedly crawled through the aperture, closed the door over it, and looked around him.

The survey was not a satisfactory one. The building joined on to another brick structure on one side, but this was three stories higher, and a blank, unbroken wall shut out all hopes of escape that way.

On the front, rear and other exposure the ground yawned sixty feet below.

The center of the building was taken up by a large court. The detective was hopeless of regaining his liberty from the roof, but he peered over the front of the cornice to see if it were not possible to signal some one in the street below.

The thoroughfare was almost deserted. A few pedestrians only were hurrying by at that late hour.

But his glance became fixed upon the

figure of a man who seemed to have some object in haunting the vicinity.

He was pacing up and down in front of the alley-way next to the building on that side, and would ever and anon inspect the house critically.

As he passed in the full glare of the street-lamp, Langdon gave a quick start of recognition.

"Why, it's Howard!" he breathed intensely. "What is he doing here? Can he have struck the same trail as myself?"

Later, Langdon knew that Howard's mission at the place was to endeavor to find his strange friend of the cellar, whom he had traced this far, and lost sight of some hours previously.

Howard, as the reader will remember, was the city detective Langdon had met at the Clifton mansion the night of the murder, and again immediately after his rencontre with Talcott at the river.

Langdon was very keen-sighted, and his clear vision told him that the man below was certainly Howard, the detective.

The latter had now drawn back in the shadow, and stood against the corner of the building.

He seemed to be watching some one in front of the place, and Langdon, following his glance, saw a carriage drive up to the curb.

At almost the same moment, a man came out from the store of the coin-dealer.

Langdon, an interested spectator of all these occurrences, became very much excited.

"They are about to carry away Ethel Clifton," he decided. "I shall lose the trail after all my hard work. If I could only signal Howard!"

That seemed impossible, for if he called from his lofty perch he might be heard about the building, and it was doubtful if Howard could hear his unconfined voice at that great distance.

Suddenly a brilliant idea entered the detective's mind.

Directly before him was a large water-pipe, the opening almost at his mouth.

Looking down, he observed that it terminated almost at the spot where Howard was standing.

"A natural speaking-tube," he murmured. "I wonder if I can utilize it? I'll try the experiment, any way."

He applied his lips to the opening of the pipe, and attempted to confuse his voice by holding his hands speaking-trumpet fashion to his face.

"Howard!"

He saw the man below start and stare wonderingly about him.

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A grim smile of satisfaction illumined
Langdon's face. Howard had heard him.

"Here, in the water pipe. I am talking
from the roof. It is I, Langdon."

He could tell from the movements of the
man below that his every word had been
heard distinctly, for Howard's face was
lifted toward the top of the building be-
wilderedly seeking for some trace of the
mysterious speaker.

"Do not betray, surprise, or make a sus-
picious movement, for you may be watched.
Indicate by three taps on the pipe that you
hear and understand me."

Tap-tap-tap!

The detective's heart beat wildly. He
could not escape, but he was in direct com-
munication with a trusty ally, to whom he
could impart sufficient to soon bring a force
of police to raid Barnett's vile den of crim-
inals.

Just then, his eye sweeping the street
caught sight of a new movement in front
of the place.

A man had come out on the pavement,
and following him was another man lead-
ing by the arm a female figure.

"The girl, Ethel Clifton," murmured the
detective. "I must lose no time in think-
ing of my own safety. The trail of Tal-
cott and his prisoner must not be lost."

And then through the water-pipe he
called excitedly to Howard:

"A carriage has just driven to the front
of the building. A man is carrying away a
girl. At any risk secure or follow her. It
is a case involving a million in money and
half a dozen human lives."

He saw Howard dart from the alley-
way a moment later. The impetuous young
detective had but to receive the word of
command from his veteran associate to act
promptly and effectively.

"He will not lose the trail," murmured
Langdon. "He will return here later and
rescue us if we do not effect our own es-
cape."

He saw the carriage drive off. As it
turned the next corner, a form glided from
the pavement and clung to the rear axle.

It was the intrepid Howard—another
earnest ally of the detective—on the trail
of the great Clifton mystery.

Langdon determined to remain on the
roof for a time, at least. He imagined
that a search for him there would be less
likely to occur than in the interior of the
house.

"Howard will understand that I am in
trouble or in danger, and will be sure to
return to this place as soon as he has lo-
cated the occupants of the carriage," de-
cided the detective.

Langdon was about to ensconce himself

near one of the chimneys when two dark
forms sprang from behind its shelter.

He drew his revolver, but it was knocked
from his hand before he could use it.

A pair of strong arms encircled his own
in a vise-like clasp, while Barnett, the coin-
dealer, confronting him cried, triumph-
antly:

"Ah! Langdon the detective. We've
caught you at last, it seems."

CHAPTER XVII

THE ESCAPE.

Langdon ceased to struggle as he real-
ized the futility of his efforts.

"What shall I do with him?" demanded
the companion of the coin-dealer.

"Get him off the roof first."

This was accomplished by Barnett de-
scending through the trap door, and hold-
ing a pistol leveled at Langdon as a per-
petual menace, while the latter descended.

The other man followed them, and,
guarded by the wily twain, the prisoner
was marched down a series of stairs.

"Where shall we put him?" asked the
man.

"In the low room."

"With the other?"

"Yes; we'll settle both at the same time."

They had come to a halt at a place where
a short stairway led to a door.

The detective observed that his captors
were apparently off their guard, and ac-
cepted the present as a decisive movement
for an attempt at escape.

He suddenly dashed down the staircase.
A mocking laugh greeted his action.

He understood its significance a moment
later, for, as he pushed the door open, he
found no foothold beyond.

He went down like a shot through the
darkness, and landed with a dull thud on
the hard stone floor of some cellar room.

The door shut behind him, and the place
was in utter darkness.

Somewhat bruised and almost stunned
by the heavy fall, Langdon rose to his
feet.

He imagined he heard some one breath-
ing and moving about the same apartment
of which he was an occupant.

Before, however, he could investigate
the matter, a flood of light suddenly il-
luminated the place.

It showed a large, damp apartment, ev-
idently underground. The walls were
brick, the floor cement.

From the floor overhead a movable panel
had been slid back.

Through this a flood of light permeated
the apartment.

Langdon looked up curiously. A man
was leaning over the aperture, and by the

side of a lamp was surveying the dark room beneath him.

The detective started as a hand touched his arm.

Turning, he was amazed to confront the strange friend who had rescued him from drowning in the cellar, and later had furnished him the money to defeat Talcott at cards.

"You!" he ejaculated; "a prisoner here like myself?"

"As you see. I was suspected, discovered, and cast into this vile prison."

"Look! They mean to settle us for good this time, I imagine."

The stranger followed the direction of Langdon's glance, and both watched with breathless interest the movements of the man who appeared at the sliding panel in the ceiling.

It was not Barnet, but they knew a few moments later that he was acting under the coin-dealer's instruction, and that he was a most heartless executioner of Barnet's designs.

He seemed to be about to lower some object into the room, when he paused and looked down.

"Hello, there!" he cried to the two captives.

His repulsive face was almost hideous in its outlines. He wore a shade over one eye, and what portion of his features was not protected by his beard was a mass of scars, doubtlessly received in various criminal ventures in the past.

"Well, what do you want?" demanded Langdon.

"A little talk with you, my friends. You see I have an order to get rid of you."

"Well, why don't you do it?" inquired the detective, with feigned coolness.

"You're in a bad box."

"I suppose we are."

"You see this little glass globe?"

The man extended through the aperture a round ball made of glass, and containing some colorless liquid.

The prisoners regarded it curiously and attentively.

"Yes, we see it. What of it?" queried Langdon.

"It holds a hundred deaths in its power. It is filled with a subtle poison the vapor of which will kill a man in less than five minutes' time. When I drop it into the room where you are, and it breaks, that's the end of both of you."

The man seemed to take a fiendish satisfaction in torturing his captives, and grinned complacently and horribly at them.

Langdon did not disbelieve his words, for he realized that having safely caged them, Barnet would never allow them to

leave the place again alive, if he could help it.

His companion was more alarmed and agitated than himself at the fate which threatened them, and after a minnie's pause he addressed the man at the aperture:

"See here, my man," he said, "I want to say a word to you."

"Go ahead."

"We do not wish to die just yet."

"Ha! ha! Who would if they could help it?"

"Can't we?"

"No."

"Not if we're willing to pay for a little respite?"

The man with the glass globe started, "What's that you say?" he demanded, his lurid eye glittering with the fires of avarice.

"We'll pay you to abandon your murderous intentions, and allow us to live."

"How much?"

"All we've got, and it's quite a sum."

"A hundred dollars?"

"Yes, ten times a hundred dollars."

"Ho! ho! this is a rich game. Well, I'll have the money anyway."

"How will you?"

"When you're dead I'll come down and get it."

Langdon's companion uttered a cry of disappointment. The villain was too shrewd for him, but he remarked:

"Suppose we tear up the money so it won't be any use to you?"

"Then I'll drop the globe before you can do it, that's all. I guess I won't waste any more time with you, as it is. Here goes."

He extended the globe over the aperture.

"Hold on!" again ordered the stranger.

"Well, hurry up. I'm getting tired waiting, and am anxious for the money you were kind enough to tell me about!"

"That's a mere bagatelle. I've a bargain to offer you."

"What is it?"

"If you will allow us to escape from this den I will make you a rich man for life."

"How rich?"

"Fifty thousand dollars."

"You're romancing."

"No, I am not."

"Have you got the money with you?"

"No, it's in the bank."

"You're trying a game on me."

"I swear that I am not," cried the stranger earnestly. "I have double that amount on deposit at the bank."

"That don't do me any good."

"It will if you let us escape. Now, here's my proposition: I will draw out a check

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made payable to bearer for the sum I have
named."

"Fifty thousand dollars?"

"Yes. When you present it, the check
will be paid at once. I left that order ex-
pressly, for reasons, and the money will be
given you without question."

"Fifty thousand dollars!" they could
hear the man mutter, in a gasping, covet-
ous tone. "I wouldn't make that much
here in a century."

Langdon watched all this by-play inter-
estedly. He was becoming very curious
as to the identity of his strange companion.

The detective did not believe that Bar-
net's ally would spare their lives, but the
conversation he had held with them at
least gave them a brief respite.

The stranger had drawn a small check-
book and pencil from his pocket, and look-
ed up anxiously at the grim arbiter of
their fate.

"Come," he said, impatiently, hopefully,
"your answer?"

"I'll do it. Write out your check."

The stranger filled out a blank, and tore
it from the book.

"You wait a minute," said their jailer.

He disappeared from the aperture, but
re turned a minute later and lowered a cord.

"Tie it on the end of that string," he or-
dered.

The stranger did so. It was drawn to
the ceiling, and there, by the light of the
lamp overhead, the man examined the
check critically.

"Is that your name signed here?" he de-
manded suspiciously.

"Yes."

The man spelled it out:

"V-i-n-c-e-n-t M-o-r-t-o-n."

"Great heavens! and I never suspected
it."

Langdon the detective forgot their sur-
roundings, their peril—all—as he recoiled
with a shock.

The identity of his strange friend was
revealed at last, and he now knew his com-
panion as the innocent victim of Talcott's
plots—the man he had wrongfully arrested
for the murder of General Clifton.

"You know me now?" spoke Morton
calmly.

"Yes. Why did you not tell me before
who you were?"

"And run the risk of another arrest?"
queried the young man bitterly.

"Do you imagine I still believe you
guilty?"

"Do you not?"

"Would I be tracing down the infamous
assassin, Harvey Talcott, if I did?"

"What are you doing there?"

Both men started, as Barnet's stern voice

pronounced the words near the aperture
overhead.

He had, it seemed, evidently discovered
his emissary reading the check.

"Come," he ordered roughly, "get
through with these men. I wish to send
you on an errand to Talcott."

The prisoners saw the man's hand again
appear at the slide.

It held suspended for an instant of time
the fatal globe of poison.

The glittering ball dropped toward the
imperiled detective and his friend.

Langdon sprang forward to catch it ere
it reached the floor and diffused its vapor-
ous death.

It eluded his grasp and broke to frag-
ments on the hard stone floor of their
prison.

At the same moment a heavy, pungent
odor permeated the apartment.

The panel in the ceiling was drawn shut
with an echoing slam.

Utter darkness fell upon the devoted
friends in their close, tomb-like quarters.

Neither spoke—awed, silenced, by the
mysterious fate that lurked in the air.

The liquid, released from the globe, be-
gan to diffuse its vaporous influence
through the apartment.

The first sensation experienced by its
victims was a dull, dizzy feeling in the
head.

Then their eyes seemed to swim, and
they reeled where they stood.

"We are doomed!" gasped Morton wildly.

The detective felt that certain death, in-
deed, menaced them.

Blinded, choked, by the deadly fumes
of the vaporous poison from the globe, he
could not retain his footing, and reeled to
the floor with a groan of despair.

"Hope!"

The word burst wildly from his lips, as
his hand came in contact with the floor.

It had touched an iron ring sunk into
what seemed to be a block of the cement-
ed floor itself.

"You have discovered something?" ut-
tered Morton, painfully gasping for breath.

"Yes! Do not despair."

"A means of escape?"

"I hope so."

The detective drew the ring upward.
It was sunk on a level with the floor.

"We are saved!" he cried joyfully, as
he felt the ring give way.

"What is it?"

"A trap-door."

A rush of cold air from beneath them
partially cleared the heavy atmosphere of
the apartment.

Langdon flung back the heavy trap-door
he had discovered in the floor.

"The air of the room will again overcome us if we do not hasten," he said.

"Where does it lead to?"

"The trap-door?"

"Yes."

"I do not know, but it means escape for us. To the sewer, the river—any risk is better than the certain fate that threatens us here."

"Go. Whatever the danger, I will follow it boldly," cried Vincent courageously.

Beneath them, they realized, yawned a dark, unknown abyss.

They imagined they could hear rushing waters some distance below.

"Follow me!" cried Langdon, as he stepped to the edge of the trap-door.

The detective and his companion leaped into the dark void.

CHAPTER XVII. PLOTTERS AT WORK.

Two days after the occurrence of the events detailed in the last chapter, a scene that will be of interest to the reader was transpiring in the suite of rooms located near the business center which Langdon the Shadow called home.

The detective himself had just entered the main apartment of the place.

As he did so, a form that had been seated at one of the windows arose to greet him.

"Ah, Vincent! Out of bed, eh? and your old self again!" cried the detective cheerfully.

"Yes. Your medicine has restored my vitality, and I feel new strength in my veins. My kind friend, how much do I owe you?"

"For what?" demanded Langdon sharply.

"For saving my life."

"You saved mine in the first place, it seems."

"I shall never forget our terrible experience in the sewer after leaping through the trap-door in Barnett's house."

"We both had a severe struggle for life," replied Langdon. "We seemed to have sprung into the main sewer of the city, and were borne toward the river. You struck a projecting piece of masonry, and were stunned."

"And you carried me bodily to liberty and life."

"Well, well, yes. I brought you here and nursed you back to consciousness. Let us be thankful to Providence for our safety."

Langdon spoke the words devoutly. In daily contact with crime of every description, the detective was still uncorrupted by its influences, and could honestly express

gratitude for aid in the hour of peril coming from a higher source than human wisdom knows.

"You have been out," spoke Vincent, after a brief pause. "Have you discovered anything?"

"Enough to arouse us to prompt and immediate action. Mr. Morton," continued the detective, seriously, "you still desire to join issues with me in tracing down the murderer of General Clifton?"

"To the end!" cried Vincent, excitedly. "Who, more than I, has the right to explore the dark crime which has robbed me of a bride, and my darling Ethel of a beloved protector. Interest and justice have incited me to patience, endurance, and determination. My fortune, my time, my life itself, are at your disposal to bring about the punishment of the guilty assassin, and the rescue of the innocent victim of his bad-faith plots."

Langdon gazed admiringly at his enthusiasm in companion. So far, Vincent had certainly exhibited the skill and bravery of a natural-born detective.

"Very well, be it so. I even prefer it," said the veteran officer. "We must set at work at once."

"The case so far is entirely in our hands, for the police seem to have abandoned it as a matter entirely too complicated for them to fathom."

"We start out to-day as if we were engaging on an entirely new trail, only I know all the circumstances surrounding your connection with the taking away of the box of papers from the Clifton mansion the night of the murder."

"We have two objects to attain—the arrest of the murderer of General Clifton, and the rescue of your affianced wife."

"You forget," interrupted Vincent anxiously; "the papers concerning General Clifton's secret—the assassin undoubtedly took away from the Clifton mansion."

"That is a side issue we must settle when we come to it. Meantime, we pursue the assassin. We know who he is—Harvey Talcott. But he has disappeared, and we must locate him."

"The woman Viola Dale, at the Clifton mansion, believes me dead, for she is still there, quietly allowing affairs to take their course, hoping the Clifton fortune will fall into her hands."

"Then you have seen her?" asked Vincent.

"Yes. She left the mansion to-day and met a man at a public park." And Langdon went on to relate how he had followed them while they held a conversation, the subject of which was evidently the plot against the Clifton fortune.

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The detective shadowed their every step. He learned that the man was an emissary of Talcott's named Alstyns, sent to inform Viola how their plans were progressing.

"I lost track of this man in following the woman back to the Clifton mansion," continued Langdon. "We will leave her in fancied security until we corner the assassin. Then we will arrest all parties."

"Why not now?"

"Because it would drive those at liberty away where we would never find them again. If I arrested Viola Dale, Talcott might threaten to kill Ethel Clifton."

"Yes, yes, I see. You are right," cried Vincent anxiously.

"Barnet, the coin-dealer, has learned of our escape from the house, for he has closed his store and is in hiding somewhere until he learns if we really escaped from the sewer," continued the detective. "He fears a descent upon the place. I think I know where to find him when I want him."

"And Talcott—you have no trace of him?"

"No, but I soon expect to have. I wish to learn, before I arrest him, two points of importance."

"What are they?"

"First, the full significance of his terrible influence over Ethel Clifton."

"Ah, the wretch! Believe me, it is in some way connected with the secret General Clifton cherished."

"That is the other point—I must know what that secret is, also. Now, then, we must delay no longer. It is getting on toward night and we must to work. First, to disguise ourselves thoroughly."

"That is important."

"In your case especially," said Langdon.

"Why so?"

"Because it would not suit my plans to have some blundering detective arrest you for the murder of General Clifton."

"I understand, and I must especially avoid the detective Howard, you say."

"Yes, for he believes you guilty."

"Why did you not tell him of the true assassin?"

"Because I like to manage my cases alone, and an outside detective might spoil all my hard work just at the moment of signal success. But you need not fear Howard for the present. He has gone out of the city."

"Then you have heard from him?"

"Yes. I found a note from him at the police headquarters to-day."

"Did he succeed in tracing Talcott to his new place of hiding?"

"No. He was discovered on the back of the carriage, but later he found a very valuable clew for us."

"What was that?"

"He learned that Talcott had sent one of his men to a place in the country, near Chicago, to arrange for the final reception of the girl there."

"And you know the place?"

"Yes. You must go there to-night, and watch that end of the line. I will remain in the city."

The detective then gave Vincent minute instructions as to his work.

He was to go to Lakeside, the place alluded to, and endeavor to locate Talcott's man there.

A dispatch or letter to Langdon at police headquarters would report his daily progress.

Thus, if Langdon failed to find Talcott in the city, he might be discovered when he removed Ethel Clifton to Lakeside, which was his evident intention.

"I have found one clew to our enemies," Langdon remarked to Vincent, as they completed a most elaborate disguise.

Vincent looked inquiringly at his companion.

"At a low resort for thieves, near the den of Barnet, the coin-dealer, I saw to-day the man who took your check."

"Ah! the check. What about that?"

"I stopped its payment, of course."

"Why did you not arrange to have him arrested when he presented the check?" asked Vincent.

"He would not undertake to do so. He is too shrewd for that, and would employ some third party to act for him. The man's name is Bartley, and I have an idea he will communicate with Barnet soon. At all events, I intend watching him."

The two men descended to the street. There they separated, Vincent going to a railroad depot to take a suburban train to Lakeside, and Langdon proceeding to the saloon he had spoken of.

It was located a short distance only from the former den of the coin-dealer, and as he entered the detective found it thronged with a low class of criminals, drinking, smoking and playing cards.

Behind the bar-room proper were quite a number of little curtained compartments, and in one of these Langdon stationed himself as, after watching for half an hour or more, he saw the man Bartley enter the place, and after speaking hurriedly and mysteriously to the bar-tender, go into one of these little rooms.

Bartley still wore the green shade over his eye, and the detective grew stern as he recalled how evilly that scarred, murderous face had gleamed down at him in Barnet's den.

A few minutes later a bent, white-haired

old man came hobbling into the saloon with the aid of a cane.

Langdon could command a perfect view of the bar-room from where he sat, and he saw the bar-keeper make a significant gesture to the new comer, who came to the rear part of the place.

"It's Barnet, and he's well disguised," murmured Langdon.

His suspicion was verified a moment later, for, from the next compartment sounded familiar voices.

"On time, eh, Bartley?" the detective heard the well-known voice of Barnet ask.

"Yes. What's all the row about, anyway?"

"The police. Those infernal detectives escorted, and we've abandoned the old den temporarily. See if anybody is in hearing distance."

Langdon could hear Bartley climb to a chair, as if to look over the partition.

"No one on that side," he reported.

The detective flung himself across the table, and snored profoundly.

Only a drunken man in the other. Now then, Barnet, what is it?"

"A letter."

"Who for?"

"Talcott, and it's a delicate task, for you may be shadowed."

"I'll be careful."

"You are to go to a place I shall direct you to, and give this letter to Talcott, and place yourself under his instructions."

"All right."

"He may wish to send you at once to a little place down in the country named Lakeside."

"I'm ready, if I get paid for it."

"You will, never fear. Now be careful, for a clear million is involved in this case."

"Where is Talcott?"

Barnet mentioned a street and number.

Langdon arose silently to his feet and glided from the place.

A few minutes later Bartley came out, and passed rapidly down the street.

The detective shadowed him closely, meanwhile devising a brilliant scheme for immediate action.

After Bartley had gone nearly a mile, he allowed him to get quite a distance ahead of him.

Then he broke into a run, and as he got near the other, shouted breathlessly:

"Bartley! Bartley! wait!"

The man addressed stopped abruptly, and looked suspicious and alarmed.

"The letter—Talcott—Lakeside," gasped the detective, feigning all the incoherent exhaustion of a long run.

"Who are you?"

"I just saw Barnet. You are not to go to Talcott. Give me the letter."

"What for?"

Langdon drew some bills from his pocket.

"Change in plans. You are to go to Lakeside at once. Here's money for your expenses. I am to take the letter to Talcott."

Nothing except the detective's perfect familiarity with the interview that had just passed between Barnet and Bartley could have deceived the latter.

He handed the letter to Langdon, and took the proffered money.

"You can just get a train to Lakeside, if you hurry to the depot," said Langdon.

Bartley started off with a muttered "all right," in the direction of the depot.

Langdon chuckled serenely.

"A clever ruse," he soliloquized complacently, and at once hastened to his room.

In ten minutes' time he had effected a disguise that in every detail was a complete copy of Bartley's ordinary appearance.

The green patch over his eye, the scarred face, the slouching gait, and the bristling beard were all there, and the detective felt confident that he could carry out his new assumption successfully.

He knew where Harvey Talcott was in hiding, but he did not meditate an immediate assault.

He wished to get into the confidence of the plotter, to learn by shrewd, patient imposture the secret of his influence over Ethel Clifton, and to secure the stolen Clift on papers, if possible.

The address Barnet had given was in a retired portion of the city, and Langdon found it to be a low stone structure standing back from the street.

He determined to affect a slight inebriety, the more easily to deceive Talcott.

The house was gloomy and dark as Langdon proceeded up the steps and rang the door-bell.

There was a long pause of silence. Then footsteps sounded in the hall within.

There was the rattling of boots and chains, and a familiar voice asked:

"Who's there?"

"A letter from Barnet," spoke Langdon, in the close, muffled tones of Bartley's voice.

A man opened the door. It was Harvey Talcott.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A NEW MYSTERY.

The false Bartley stepped over the threshold of the plotter's new retreat with-

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out the latter for a moment suspecting his
true identity.

"You've got a letter from Barnet, you
say?" asked Talcott, as he closed and se-

curely locked the door.
"Exactly, Captain," replied Langdon,
giving to his manner a slight unsteadiness,

and as far as possible imitating the gruff,
guttural voice of Bartley.
"Give it to me."

The detective handed the missive to Tal-

cott, with a hicough, and stood awaiting
his further orders.
Talcott perused the letter hastily, and
then turned to Langdon.

"Barnet says I can rely on you to help
me faithfully."
"Every time, Captain."

"Then you want to keep sober, for the
business I have on hand needs a clear head
and steady nerves."

"All right. Give me your orders; I'll
do them, trusty and true."
"Go to the big room yonder, then, and
wait till I need you. We're making an im-

portant move to-night, and may start away
from here shortly."
Langdon went into the apartment Tal-

cott had designated.
A man he had never seen before, but
whom he adjudged to be some new accom-

plis of Talcott's, was seated at the table
reading, and looked up, curiously.
Talcott followed the detective into the

room. The latter flung himself into an arm
chair and settled himself as if for a doze.
To all appearances he was preparing for

a careless slumber, and seemed to pay no
attention to the other occupants of the
place.

Never, however, were the detective's
keen senses more fully on the alert for de-

velopments.
"Who is that?" he heard the stranger ask.
"A man Barnet sent me."
"Did you hear from the coin-dealer?"

"Yes."
"Anything about the detectives?"
"Not a word. He advises us to get the
girl out of the city."

"Well, we're ready, ain't we?"
"Yes, and with all our plans perfected to
meet every contingency."
"Even if the police unmask Viola, and
the truth comes out, we will still have the
fortune."

"And no trace of the girl can be found,"
supplemented Talcott.
"None, except that she is dead."
Langdon started, violently.

What did this last gloomy allusion sig-
nify? What new scheme of cunning and
deceit was Talcott, the unscrupulous
plotter, devising in this house?

"You see," went on Talcott, "we were
not as safe as we thought."

"In what way?"
"We imagined first that no one suspected
our agency in the Clifton business."

"Well?"
"Langdon the detective knew all about it."
"But he may be dead."

"And may not. I tell you I fear that
man. He bears a charmed life, and will de-

fect us yet, if he is alive and we are not
careful. Even if he is dead he may have
told what he knows to some fellow-officer—
maybe the man whom we discovered cling-

ing to the carriage two nights since."
"When we brought the girl from Bar-
net's house here?"

"Yes. Now, then, if it is going to come
out sooner or later that Viola is not Ethel
Clifton, and that I was mixed up in the
tragedy at the Clifton mansion, two things

are necessary."
"What?"
"The death of Ethel Clifton and my
total disappearance."

"Then Viola would be the heiress to all
General Clifton's wealth, as next of kin."
"Exactly."

"Talcott!" cried that worthy's compan-

ion, "you are the prince of plotters."
"I wish to leave no means untried to
provide against our ever losing the stake

we have played for—the Clifton millions.
After to-night, let the police discover what
they may. Ethel Clifton will be pro-

ven dead, I will be out of their reach in
some hiding place, and Viola will secure
the fortune; if not as the supposed Ethel
Clifton, as the real heiress after her."

"Then you intend to carry out all this
to-night?"
"I intend to make events have this sem-

blance, in case of contingencies, yes, Al-

tyne. For that I have been plotting since
we came here."
"And a clever plot it is. Has the doctor
gone?"

"Two hours since, and well paid for his
share in the affair."
"And the old housekeeper here?"

"Both she and her daughter are de-

ceived. Hist! it is she coming now."
There was the sound of a dress whisk-

ing through the hallway, and a light tap
sounded at the door.
"Come in," said Talcott, in response to
the summons.

A middle-aged lady dressed in deep
mourning ventured as far as the threshold.

Her face was sad and tear-stained, and
from the covert glance he managed to be-

stow on her Langdon decided that the
grief she exhibited was genuine.

He saw a quick, deceitful expression of

subdued gloom come over the face of the consummate hypocrite, Harvey Talcott.

"We have done all we could for the poor young lady, sir," spoke the woman, in broken accents.

"How shall I thank you for your consideration?" murmured Talcott, humbly.

"It is terrible to see such sudden trouble in one so young."

"Yes, madam, but the doctor anticipated it, as he told you."

"Will you give up the house now, sir?"

"I shall be compelled to do so on account of my niece, but I will pay you for the entire month. Let me accompany you to your apartments, madam, and we will settle the matter at once."

Talcott left the place with the woman, and Langdon sat perplexed and mystified concerning the developments made in their brief conversation.

A moment later Talcott's companion also arose and left the room.

"What does it all mean?" soliloquized Langdon, concernedly. "Will these villains never cease their dark plottings?"

"Some new scheme to complicate the case and baffle justice is on foot, and I must know what it is."

He strolled, with affected carelessness, to the hall. The man who had just left the room was promenading its length, immersed in deep thought.

"Are we going to leave here to-night?" ventured Langdon.

"Ask Talcott," was the short response.

"Where's the girl?"

"What girl?"

"Ethel Clifton."

"In there."

The man pointed to a closed door, and resumed his silent promenade, as if desirous of pursuing his meditations undisturbed.

The detective did not wish to commit any blunders, but he resolved to enter the room the man had just designated.

His hand on the knob, he boldly turned it and stepped across the threshold.

A dim light outlined the furniture of the apartment and revealed to the startled detective an object at the sight of which he came to a dead halt.

An ominous suspicion of the truth almost appalled him as he saw, lying upon trestles, a dark, silver-mounted casket.

He held his breath in suspense, and took a single step forward.

An involuntary cry of mingled rage, horror, and pity swept the detective's lips as he gazed within the coffin.

For there, mute and motionless, in apparent death, lay the beautiful Ethel Clifton.

CHAPTER XIX.

UNMASKED.

A great wave of emotion thrilled the veteran detective's heart.

As he gazed at the lovely features set in a seal of awful silence, he seemed to have come to a blank wall in his investigations.

Here the case practically ended; with the second victim of Harvey Talcott's plots before him, Langdon the Shadow stood like one in a dream.

To rescue this innocent girl from the wiles of her unscrupulous enemies, extraordinary patience, shrewdness, and intelligence had been exercised.

Here was the result of his labors, here the evidence of Talcott's triumph, for one more obstacle in the path of Viola Dale toward the attainment of the Clifton millions had been removed.

His pose suddenly changed as a terrible reaction took place in his mind.

Horror, indignation, grief came trooping into his soul with fierce and unrestrained tread.

His face grew stern, his eyes flashed forth the rage and resentment of an outraged spirit.

His was a nature foreign of selfish or morbid emotions. He was incapable of experiencing revenge, but one mighty word expressed the sense of dread responsibility and sentiment he felt:

Justice!

Aye, for this last terrible murder—for murder it must surely be—Harvey Talcott should know the gallows.

Only once the stern face of the detective relaxed. It was when he leaned over solemnly, tearfully, and pressed his trembling lips to the cold marble brow of the silent face before him.

"My poor girl, the innocent child-victim of the plots of murderous schemers, justice shall have life for life; the iron hand of the law shall wring Harvey Talcott's heart even as he has made you and yours suffer. I swear it."

Langdon retired from the room and closed the door after him.

He went at once to the adjoining apartment and sat down to reflect.

"Which is the wiser course?" he debated, mentally; "to arrest Talcott at once or watch the development of his plans still farther?"

His thoughts were rudely disturbed by Talcott entering the apartment and approaching the saunterer of the hallway, Alstyne.

"Did you settle with the landlady?" asked the latter.

"Yes. Any inquiries made of her at any future time will carry out our carefully

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There was a ring at the door bell as Talcott spoke, and he went to answer it, and returned a minute later followed by two rough-looking men.

"Come, Alstyne," he said, "and you, Bartley, keep a watch from the front door for any suspicious lurkers in the street."

Talcott and Alstyne disappeared within the room where the casket was, the latter asking his companion:

"You have the reviving phial the doctor gave you?"

"Yes."

"Will the men drive as far as Lakeside?"

"Yes, it is better so."

"Why?"

"On account of the papers."

All this was enigmatical to the listening detective, but later he understood what important facts these vague allusions concealed.

The two men were in the room where the casket was for about a quarter of an hour.

Talcott appeared at the door finally and beckoned to the pretended Bartley.

The detective could have sworn he heard a low, wailing cry like that of a child or woman in distress, in the room beyond Talcott, but the latter closed the door abruptly.

"Take a careful look around the rear of the house," he ordered, briefly; "we cannot be too watchful at this critical stage of the game."

Langdon walked down the hall and went through the rambling rear garden.

Ten minutes later he returned to the house, his mind fully determined on the course he should pursue.

It was evident that Talcott intended to remove the dead girl to some spot near Lakeside.

He had noticed a horse and carriage standing in waiting in front of the house.

Doubtlessly, too, he theorized, Talcott and Alstyne and himself would leave the city in the carriage.

He would allow them to start, call the first policeman he saw, and arrest the entire party.

Full of this determination he entered the hall and started toward the room where the other men were.

Suddenly he paused.

The door of a room was partially open, and a light that was not there when he last passed it illumined its interior.

By its radiance the detective witnessed a sight that transfixed and bewildered him momentarily.

A woman stood leaning on the back of a chair, as if from weakness or grief.

She was sobbing pitifully, her pale face anguished with emotion, her eyes haunted with a nameless terror and dread.

"Great heavens—the dead restored to life. It is Ethel Clifton!" fell gaspingly from the mystified detective's lips.

There could be no mistake. The same fair face and golden hair, the same shy, shrinking glance was there.

What did it mean? What intangible mystery surrounded this woman's sudden restoration to life.

An impulse of joy and courage inspired Langdon to a rash movement.

He pushed open the door and entered the room. He was about to reveal to the girl in hurried words his true identity, to beg of her to fly from her enemies while the opportunity offered, to demand from her lips an explanation of the horrible mockery of death in which she had taken a part.

If she still refused under the dread fear of Harvey Talcott he would seize her forcibly to carry his plan into execution.

He took a step forward, but recoiled suddenly.

"What are you doing here?"

The harsh voice of Talcott uttered the words, and Talcott himself, whom the detective had not noticed before, stepped from an adjoining apartment.

"I came to report that the coast is clear," stammered Langdon, considerably confused at the unexpected confrontation.

"All right. Go to Alstyne and tell him I'll be ready in a moment."

His mind in a maze, Langdon proceeded to the front room.

He was so completely mystified with the fast occurring episodes of the hour that he sat like one in a dream.

Talcott entered the apartment a few minutes later.

"Is all ready?" the detective heard Alstyne ask.

"Yes."

"And the potion revived her?"

"At once. Now get the casket fastened down and remove it at once."

"And the girl?"

"Will leave secretly by the rear way while the housekeeper and her daughter are at the front of the house."

"All right. Who's that?"

A violent ring at the door bell and a wild clatter on the steps startled all present.

Alstyne proceeded to the door. He seemed to admit a noisy, excited visitor, for the sounds of loud and incoherent conversation accompanied them to the room where the others were.

Alstynne, with a startled look at Langdon, stepped into the room.

At the sight of his companion Talcott uttered a wild cry of amazement.

His startled glance wandered from the newcomer to Langdon in the profoundest bewilderment.

"What does this mean?" cried Talcott. Langdon's heart stood still, for the newcomer, the exact counterpart of himself, was no other than the man he had sought to impersonate—the real Bartley!

CHAPTER XX.

A TERRIBLE EXPERIENCE.

Langdon the detective did not wait for the first emotions of Talcott and his associates to pass away before acting.

He saw at a glance that the discovery of his bold imposture was imminent, and gathered himself together for a wild dash for liberty.

The real Bartley blocked his progress, and stood regarding him fiercely with the crouching deadly pose of an enraged tiger. "I knew I was being fooled," he hissed, "and I found Barnet and then hurried here."

He barely completed the sentence. With a quick leap Langdon cleared the space between himself and the door.

One mighty blow of his powerful fist sent his foe sprawling to the floor.

Then he sprang across the threshold and gained the hall.

His good common sense told him that his enemies would be in hot pursuit and shoot him down, ere he reached the end of that long corridor.

He, therefore, turned into the first room he came to, closed the door in a flash, and crouched beside it, listening intently.

From the hall without came the sounds of excited cries and hurrying footsteps.

Then the stentorian voice of Talcott shouted out:

"He cannot have left the house. He is hiding in some of the rooms."

"Then search them all," cried Alstynne.

"Yes, and shoot down the spy whoever he is. Discovery, his escape now means ruin to our every plan."

Langdon discerned that he was in a dilemma, the rapid action of which would soon force him to accept one of two desperate alternatives.

The hall without was patrolled by four armed men. He must either confront them boldly in an unequal conflict or secrete himself.

He glanced about the room he was in, and started as he recognized it as the same apartment in which he had, as he then

supposed, gazed upon the dead face of Ethel Clifton.

The casket that had contained her silent form still stood upon the trestles, its cover lying over the top of the coffin.

Langdon gazed with n the satin-lined casket. It was empty, as he knew it would be, for he had just seen its late occupant alive in another apartment of the house.

He glanced hurriedly around the room. Except the door at which he had just entered there was not another means of leaving the apartment.

"It is a desperate fight or death if I remain here," he muttered, grimly. "I must conceal myself."

There was no visible nook, however, where he could hope to escape the searches.

"The casket," he breathed, wildly. "If I could hide myself in that I should be carried out of the house in it."

He pushed the cover aside and boldly climbed into the coffin. It was a desperate resource of safety and his peril was fully as desperate.

He pulled the cover into place and lay at full length in the strangest hiding place he had known in his exciting detective career.

The door opened a minute later.

"He is not here," cried Talcott's excited voice. "We can delay no longer. Quick, Alstynne, fasten up the coffin and get it away."

Langdon shuddered as the cover was pressed down, and the sounds of a chisel putting the screws in place fell upon his startled hearing.

It was too late to retreat from his unpleasant predicament now, however.

"It's all ready. Lift it up and carry it to the hearse," Alstynne ordered the men.

"Let us get the girl to the carriage the rear way," spoke Talcott.

The three emissaries of the plotters lifted the coffin without commenting on its weight.

It seemed to be carried from the room, down a flight of steps, slid into a hearse, and then as the doors shut to with a click the vehicle started off rapidly with its living freight.

A choking, suffocating sense of misery oppressed the detective. Involuntarily he sought to force open the top of the casket. It resisted his most powerful efforts. He was a close prisoner in an almost air-tight box.

Langdon did not lose his presence of mind in this unpleasant and even perilous dilemma.

He managed to reach for and open his pocket knife.

Systematically, calmly, he began to cut at

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the under side of the lid. He experienced
a rare sense of relief, as he made a small
aperture and the heavy air of his strange
place of captivity lifted.

He busied himself in making several of
these in the casket, and then, compara-
tively comfortable, except for the rough
jolting of the vehicle, he began to consider
his position.

"What will be the end of this adventure,
I wonder?" he mused, seriously. "They
certainly won't bury an empty casket."

"I shall be taken to some place where
they intend to imprison Ethel Clifton."

"I now comprehend fully the scheme of
having her appear dead."

"Talcott hired some doctor to adminis-
ter a powerful drug, which, robbing her of
sensitivity, added the perfect semblance of
death."

"While she was in this comatose condi-
tion the landlady and her daughter visited
her and are honest witnesses as to the fact
of her death."

"Should Viola Dale's imposture be dis-
covered the death of the real Ethel Clif-
ton will be proven, and Viola will claim
General Clifton's fortune as the next legal
heirress of kin."

"They will take her to Lakeside, little
dreaming that Vincent Morton is there
probably watching already the movements
of their emissary at that place."

Several times the detective endeavored
to force open the cover of the casket, but
from his peculiarly cramped position was
unable to effect his purpose.

He resigned himself to his fate, finally,
and endeavored to estimate mentally the
distance the hearse had traversed.

It at last left the paved streets of the city
and emerged upon the rough country roads.

It must have been two hours later that
the vehicle came to a stop.

Langdon could hear the confused mur-
mur of human voices. Then the doors of
the hearse were thrown back.

The casket was drawn out and lowered
to the ground.

Then for fully ten minutes there seemed
to be utter silence.

"Ready!" shouted a voice, finally.

The casket was lifted bodily and carried
quite a distance.

It seemed to be lowered several feet and
then came to a stop.

Langdon's heart took a quick alarm as a
horrible idea took possession of his mind.

Was it the intention of the men after all
to enter the empty casket?

Was he to endure all the horrors of be-
ing buried alive?

A thrill of horror convulsed the detec-
tive's frame.

A shovel full of earth fell upon the cas-
ket.

For the first time in his life, unable to
endure the terror, his mind depicted in
one fleeting, throbbing moment of space,
the detective fainted dead away.

CHAPTER XXI

ESCAPED.

While Langdon the detective was going
through all these varied and thrilling ex-
ploits the faithful ally he had sent to
Lakeside was not idle.

Vincent Morton, deeply disguised, left
the city within half an hour after parting
with his friend.

Lakeside was a charming suburban town
located near the lake and surrounded with
bluffs and dense forests.

Somewhere near this place, Langdon had
told Vincent, an emissary of Talcott was
now awaiting the arrival of his employer
with the missing heiress, Ethel Clifton.

Vincent found the town to be much scat-
tered and divided into two elements of
society.

One portion contained the residences of
the wealthy, the other the humble homes
and factories of the place.

After a ramble through the village Vin-
cent decided that a person of the character
Talcott would be likely to employ would
naturally find his associates and enjoy-
ments at the nearest tavern.

There was only one saloon in Lakeside,
and thither Vincent made his way.

He found it crowded, and as all present
were strangers to him, could not very well
decide who among them was a recent ar-
rival in the village.

Fortune seemed to favor his quest, how-
ever, for about an hour after Vincent had
entered the place an incident occurred
which interested him and caused him to
believe he was on the right trail.

A messenger had come from the depot
with a telegraph message, which he handed
to the landlord of the place.

The latter made several inquiries among
those around the bar, and finally called out:

"Is there any person here answering to
the name of Arnold?"

"That's my name," spoke up a man who
had been seated at a table.

"Well, here's a telegram for you. The
station-keeper sent it here because, being a
hotel, he thought a stranger would be like-
ly to come here."

The stranger took the telegram, opened
it, perused it coolly, and resumed his
place at the table and his drinking once
more.

"He may not be my man, but it will do

no harm to cultivate his acquaintance," soliloquized Vincent.

He managed to finally get a chair exactly opposite that of the object of his attention.

The table only divided them and naturally their near proximity soon led to an exchange of neighborly compliments.

The man named Arnold was a rather well-dressed, talkative fellow of middle age, with a pleasant face and a keen eye.

Away from the usual scene of his criminal exploits, the city, he seemed to have thrown off his ordinary reserve, and the liquor he had drank loosened his tongue considerably.

At least so reasoned Vincent.

"This is quite a nice town," he remarked.

"Are you a stranger here?" inquired Vincent.

"Yes; just came here yesterday."

"Business here?"

"Looking for a summer residence. I found one to-day."

"Ah, indeed. I am a stranger, myself."

Arnold looked somewhat surprised.

"From the city?" he asked.

"Yes. In fact I left the city under a little cloud."

Vincent had decided to make a bold venture to lead the stranger on, to learn whether or not he was an emissary of Talcott, as he suspected.

The other started at Vincent's last words, and a peculiar expression came into his face.

"Ah!" he said, knowingly; "I understand you. Are you acquainted in the city?"

"Yes, particularly near the river. There is an old coin-dealer there I know very well."

"What is his name?"

"Barnet."

The man named Arnold drew nearer to Vincent.

"See here, my friend, you seem to know some of my acquaintances in the city."

"Indeed!"

"Yes; I know where Barnet's place is."

"I was there two days ago."

"And I was there yesterday. The place seemed to be deserted."

"They feared a visit from the police."

"Why?"

"Because they were afraid the detectives were watching the house."

"What detectives?"

"Langdon for one."

Vincent was now assured that the man he was talking to was indeed an emissary of Talcott.

He felt that his interchange of mutual knowledge would soon win Arnold's confidence, and he boldly did all in his power to lead his companion to believe that he

was a chosen member of the criminal fraternity.

"Do you know any of Barnet's friends?" asked Arnold.

"Oh, yes."

"Who, for instance?"

"Talcott."

Arnold manifested no particular emotion at the name.

"And I know all about the Clifton business, too," ventured Vincent, boldly.

"Then you are my man."

The stranger had risen to his feet.

A new expression had come into his eyes that was almost menacing.

Vincent was thoroughly startled at his manner.

He had assumed that Arnold was one of the Talcott band.

Fatal mistake!

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"That you are my prisoner, Vincent Morton. I know you."

Vincent Morton recoiled in the wildest consternation.

The other had suddenly lifted his hand and torn the false beard from Vincent's face.

"I thought so!" he cried, triumphantly.

"I traced you to the Barnet den a few nights since; I find you here, where I knew the game Langdon was following had come. I have caught you at last, Vincent Morton. You are my prisoner."

"Your prisoner," gasped Vincent, terribly bewildered at the unexpected turn of affairs.

"Yes."

"What has he done—who are you?" demanded a dozen excited voices attracted to the spot by Arnold's words.

"A detective. My name is Howard, and I arrest this man for murder."

"Murder!"

"Yes; the cold-blooded murder of General Clifton, the Chicago millionaire."

Vincent Morton stood petrified. He could scarcely comprehend the strange combination of circumstances which led up to his arrest.

He now saw that it was the natural sequence of Howard's connection with the case, and that in following out the advice of Langdon the detective Howard had come to Lakeside himself.

He realized how fatal to Langdon's plans was his arrest, for he would be prevented from searching for Talcott's emissary at Lakeside.

The detective seized his arm and led him to the village jail, a large throng following him excitedly.

Without exchanging another word with his prisoner he placed him in charge of

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the lock-up keeper, saying he would tel-
graph to Chicago for instructions.

Vincent dared not impart Langdon's se-
crets to Howard, and attempted no ex-
planation.

Once alone in the prison, however, he
began to realize that, should Langdon meet
with any mishap, his position was a serious
one.

He was allowed the freedom of the
prison corridor until Howard's return, and
he paced to and fro restlessly.

His attention was abruptly enchain-
ed as he chanced to walk down an end corridor.

Two men, doubtless prisoners like him-
self, had in some way forced the lock of
their cell door and were sawing at the bars
of the outside window.

He watched them silently, a wild thought
of escape in his mind.

He saw them force the bars and climb
through the window.

"I am doomed if I remain and Langdon
should not appear to tell the true story of
General Clifton's murder," murmured Vin-
cent in an intense tone of voice.

The next hour of his life was ever af-
terward like a dream to his mind.

He remembered gaining the ground
stealthily. Vincent Morton climbed through
the window of his prison and was at lib-
erty.

He reached the road, sped away from the
town, and dashed on bareheaded and
breathless through the silent night.

He drew aside and penetrated the timber
at the roadside, as he saw in the distance a
vehicle of some kind and some men sur-
rounding it.

As he came near it he observed that it
was a hearse and that the men had just
filled it in a newly made grave near by.

"Talcott—the girl—the detective;" these
were the startling words he heard as the
vehicle and its attendants drove away.

They aroused him to excited action. He
went to the spot where the burial had taken
place, and with a board from a fence near
by began removing the newly shoveled
earth.

A mystery was here; he had heard the
name of Talcott—it was enough to incite
him to action.

"A casket!" he ejaculated a minute later,
and then, entirely uncovering it, with the
greatest difficulty he dragged it from its
resting place.

With his knife and a sharp-pointed stone
he pried open the lid.

Vincent Morton had been distracted with
a sort of theories as to the occupant of
the casket.

The white moonlight showed to him now

the features of the man he had saved from
a terrible fate.

"Great heavens," he cried, madly, "it is
Langdon the detective!"

CHAPTER XXII

ON THE BEACH.

At first Vincent Morton deemed his
friend Langdon dead.

The detective was not long, however, in
reviving under the influence of the free
night air.

Morton had dragged him from the casket
and pushed this and its cover back into the
grave.

Langdon arose to a sitting posture,
rubbed his eyes, and looked around.

"I remember, now," he muttered; "but
how did I escape, Vincent?"

"Yes, Langdon."

"How came you here?"

"By accident—fate some people would
call it."

"A fortunate fate for me then," re-
marked Langdon, with a shuddering look
at the grave.

Vincent pushed the dirt into the hole
over the coffin, so that it might not appear
to have been disturbed.

"Tell me, Langdon," he said, "how came
you in this predicament?"

The detective, after satisfying himself
that no one was lurking in the vicinity who
might overhear them, proceeded to detail
his exciting adventures of the night.

Vincent listened, palling with anguish and
becoming enraptured with joy as the detec-
tive related the seeming death and later
resuscitation of Ethel Clifton.

"Langdon, Langdon!" he cried, "this
terrible persecution of my darling Ethel
must cease."

"It shall."

"But when?"

"Now, at once. The plotters are some-
where in this neighborhood, and I shall not
rest until I have tracked them down. Have
patience. The trail is closing in. And
now as to yourself. Did you locate Tal-
cott's emissary at Lakeside?"

"No. I was arrested at a time when I
believed I was nearly succeeding in locat-
ing our men."

"Arrested?"

"Yes."

"By whom?"

"By Howard the detective."

In graphic words Vincent told of the
scene at the Lakeside tavern and the prison.

Langdon was profoundly concerned over
the result, and looked serious when his
companion had concluded.

"This is most unfortunate," he said,
gravely.

"But I have escaped?"

"That makes it still more so."

"And why?"

"Because it not only complicates matters, but robs me of your co-operation."

"In what way?"

"Howard and the people of Lakeside will be on the lookout for you, and it will not be safe for you to remain in this vicinity."

Vincent looked gloomy.

"You might see Howard and explain that I am innocent."

"Yes, but he made the arrest public. There is another bad feature in the case. Talcott will learn of the episode and at once divine that his advent here is known."

"And I will fly from Lakeside?"

"Exactly."

"Then what shall I do?"

"Get back to the city before your escape from the jail is known."

"And then?"

"Repair at once to my room and assume a new disguise."

"And remain idle while you are working the case alone," remarked Vincent, bitterly.

"No. I will telegraph you, if I need you. You shall hear from me soon. Never fear, for this case is approaching a climax."

"And if I wish to communicate with you?"

Langdon gave him a fictitious name.

"But you won't want to do that," he said.

"I may. It would kill me to remain inactive now. I may find some work to do on the case in the city."

"Be careful you are not too venturesome."

"Oh, my investigations will take in no larger scope than the Clifton mansion."

"We had better separate now," said Langdon. "Do not delay in reaching the city, for the officers will be in pursuit when your escape is discovered."

Vincent hurried away in the direction of the city, while the detective passed down the dirty country road in an opposite direction.

He was somewhat concerned and not a little annoyed at Howard's zealous interference in the case.

As he reached the limits of the village he drew aside from the highway and began hastily to remove every trace of resemblance in his appearance to that of the man he had sought to personate—Bartley.

A new and essentially different disguise was necessary, and Langdon had started out the evening previous fully prepared for this very contingency.

He had paused at a place where the moonlight had shown a little wayside

spring, and he washed from his face in its cool waters every trace of false color, and removed the green eye shade and false beard he had worn.

He also doled the apparel that had served to carry out his recent imposture, revealing as he did so an under suit he had worn for the occasion, which resembled that of some workman carelessly habited.

Then drawing a curly, kinky wig from a pocket he placed it on his head.

A package of some dry, black, coloring material was his next object of employment, and five minutes later, completely metamorphosed, Langdon the detective stepped out into the road again.

The moonlight showed a perfect specimen of a negro, and as he went along, a cudgel in his hand, the abandoned clothing done up in a bundle, he was a genuine tramp in dark to all appearance.

The village was silent and dark at the late hour when he reached it, but at its center he found considerable excitement prevalent.

The escape from the jail had been discovered, and he loitered around the place gathering from the excited conversation of the officers that a pursuit of Vincent and the other escaped prisoners had just been instituted.

"He will escape them, for he has a fair start, and they can only surmise the direction in which he has gone," soliloquized Langdon.

For some time the detective hunted the streets and outskirts of the village.

"It is useless to seek for any trace of Talcott at this late hour," he decided at last. "If he has found a refuge here, it is somewhat remote from the village proper. I will stroll down the beach beyond the factories. There seem to be some isolated structures there which would just suit Talcott's purposes of retirement, and I will then wait till morning."

Half a mile from the village, after passing half a dozen residences with extensive grounds, Langdon finally sat down by some bushes near the shore of the lake to rest. Weariness overcame him ere he was conscious of it, and he was soon wrapped in a profound slumber.

The early birds awakened him with their maternal twitterings, and he sat entranced at the lovely scene about him for some time.

But the stern realities of life drove sentiment from his thoughts, and he sprang to his feet and retraced his way to the village, where he secured a hearty meal.

He then returned to the beach and made a close observation of all the houses he passed.

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Nothing was too trifling to serve for a clew to Langdon in the prosecution of an important case, and as he noticed in the sand the tracks of carriage wheels he set about following them.

They had escaped his notice the night previous. They might or might not be those of the vehicle he bell veiled Talcott and Alstyn and their captive had come hither in, but he determined to see where they ended.

No carriage, he theorized, would evade the firm, convenient roadway a few rods further in and follow the sandy, difficult course unless for the purpose of secrecy in its movements.

The carriage wheel tracks finally diverged from the beach and passed through some low bushes, and then over a wide area terminating at a high wooden fence.

They followed this till a gate was reached and ended at this gate.

Langdon surveyed the landscape beyond the fence, and found presented to his vision the grounds of a gloomy edifice of brick and stone.

"I believe I have found the lost trail," murmured Langdon. "At all events, what does that mean?"

He had been scanning the lake exposure of the house beyond him carelessly, but now something unusual about it attracted his attention.

Upon a balcony a window opened, and a man stepped into view.

At the distance he was Langdon did not recognize him as being Talcott or any of that individual's allies that he had hitherto seen.

The man bore a piece of blue cloth in his hand, and this he unfolded and spread over the outside railing of the balcony.

"It is a signal or a warning to some outside party, that is certain; but to whom, and for what purpose?" murmured the detective.

He saw the man shade his eyes and scan the lake so intently. Then he retired from the balcony, closing the window after him, and leaving the blue signal behind him.

"Whoever he expects, is coming by the lake," decided Langdon.

He wandered down to the beach, and scanned the surface of the waters.

Less than a mile from shore one craft only was visible.

It seemed to be a yacht, and was nearing the land momentarily.

As it got beyond the first bar its course was changed, and running slowly, the two men aboard of it began traversing the line of the beach.

Langdon could see one of them watching the shore fixedly.

Finally he made a motion to his companion to stop the craft, and pointed landward.

"He has seen the signal; he is pointing to it," murmured Langdon. "I was not mistaken. There is some mystery about yonder isolated mansion; probably the mystery I seek."

The yacht was again directed shoreward. It came as near the land as the depth of the water would admit, and was anchored there.

A little yawl was lowered from the darts, and one of the men seized the oars and rowed ashore.

Langdon had been seated on the beach, watching all these maneuvers, and as the man stepped ashore he arose to his feet.

Assuming the slouching gait of a big, lazy negro, his face grinning idiotically, he approached the man from the yacht.

It was Alstyn.

"Can I mind yer boat, boss? Anything to be of service to ye, sah, an' arn an honest penny."

Alstyn glanced at the pretended negro.

"Yes; row it back to the yacht yonder, and stay there till I come back."

"All right, sah, all right."

"When I return, come ashore with the yawl."

"Thank ye, sah; I will, sah," replied Langdon effusively, as if delighted at the prospect of earning some money.

He chuckled serenely at his readiness in securing employment at Alstyn's hands.

"Ag in on the trail," he breathed in a tone of the deepest satisfaction. "I will make no mistake this time—I will not leave these plotters again until they are behind the bars, and Ebel Clifton is released."

CHAPTER XXIII.

ON THE YACHT.

Langdon rowed to the yacht, flung the bowl around one of the stanchions, and climbed aboard the craft.

A man was seated smoking at the stern. It was Bartley, the man the detective had impersonated the evening previous.

"De boss sent me hurr, sah," grinned Langdon, by way of explanation.

"Where do you come from—the house yonder?"

"No, sah; I've not 'quainted in dese regions. Lookin' for a job, dat's me, an' I'd like to be a sailor."

Bartley resumed his smoking and paid no further attention to the pretended negro.

Langdon wandered over the yacht, with feigned curiosity and delight over all its appointments, and discovered enough to surmise that it was provisioned for a long

cruise, and was capable of comfortably accommodating half a dozen passengers.

He made it a point always to familiarize himself thoroughly with the details of his surroundings, providing for the contingency of such knowledge being valuable to him at some other time.

It was about half an hour later when Alstyne returned to the beach from the isolated house whence the signal had been waved.

He motioned that he wanted the yawl brought ashore, and Langdon was nimble and active in following his orders.

Alstyne eyed the pretended negro sharply as the yawl was beached.

"See here, my man, what's your name?"

"Sam, sah, will do for my name."

"Acquainted around here?"

"Not at all, sah."

"Do you know how to work?"

"Try me, sah."

"And mind your own business?"

"I'm deaf an' dumb an' blind, except pay days, sah."

"You'll suit me. Would you like to take a cruise on the yacht yonder?"

"I would dat."

"All right; we need an extra man. Now, then, you row back to the yacht."

"Yes, sah."

"And bring a bundle of clothing the man there will give you."

"Where to?"

"That house yonder."

"I'll be there in a jiffy."

Alstyne returned toward the house he had indicated, and Langdon rowed back to the yacht, where he made Bartley aware of his orders.

The latter gave him a box containing some kind of female wearing apparel, and a few minutes later Langdon was ashore and on his way to the house.

The front door was wide open, and he entered the hall and then stood still, listening to a conversation going on in a room near by.

The voices of the speakers he recognized at once as belonging to Talcott and Alstyne.

The latter was speaking.

"I brought the yacht," he said, "because we thought we had better have it ready in case of exigency."

"That exigency has arrived."

"How so?"

"This place has been watched for two days."

"This house?"

"Maybe not, but the village has. Howard, the detective, was here all day yesterday."

"Probably on some other business."

"That may be accident, but there was another party who is interested in us who was here I knew."

"Who is that?"

"Vincent Morton."

"Ha! I guess you are right, Talcott. How did you learn of this?"

"It's common talk in the village. Howard arrested Morton in the village last night, but the latter escaped."

"Then they cannot be in league against us."

"No, but each was following the same line of action. We are under suspicion and must change our quarters."

"To the yacht?"

"Exactly."

"When?"

"At once."

"And the girl?"

"Ethel Clifton?"

"Yes."

"She is in the same crushed, despairing frame of mind."

"Will she come to the boat willingly?"

"She is too thoroughly under the power of my influence to refuse."

"Then she believes your story?"

"In all its details."

"Well, I have sent for some other clothing for her which will act as a sort of disguise so that she may not be recognized."

"By whom?"

"By a negro I picked up as a deck hand."

Langdon decided that it was time to make his appearance to prevent any suspicion of eavesdropping.

He knocked at the door and delivered the box to Alstyne, who answered his knock.

"Shall I stay by?" he asked.

"No; return to the boat and wait for me."

Langdon did as ordered.

For a moment the impulse possessed him to hasten to the town, secure police aid, and arrest Talcott and his associates.

The fear that such action might give the plotters an opportunity to leave while he was gone deterred him from risking the experiment.

He, therefore, contented himself with patiently biding his time.

He was accepted as a genuine negro on board the yacht, and would find some means of overpowering his enemies by strategy ere the crime was ended.

Further, he would thereby learn more of the Clifton mystery, concerning which Vincent Morton had told him all he knew.

Concerning this as yet unfathomed secret of the case the detective was intensely curious and mystified.

Not for a moment, however, did he doubt but that this was the powerful menace he

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employed to wield Ethel Clifton to his
will add force her to remain a terrified and
unresisting captive.

After about half an hour's waiting Al-
styne came down to the beach.

He was not alone. Following him were
Talcott and the figure of a woman whom
the detective knew to be the persecuted
Ethel Clifton.

Langdon at once put off from the yacht.
The two plotters paced the beach engaged
in earnest conversation.

They allowed the girl to walk restlessly
up and down the shore.

From the yawl Langdon saw the her
manner was distracted and heart-broken.

Just as the boat reached the beach she
flung herself on the ground with a cry of
utter despair, as she seemed to realize that
a new captivity awaited her.

Talcott hastened toward the prostrate
form of the unhappy girl and forced her to
rise to her feet.

They stepped aboard the yawl, Langdon
taking up the oars, and the sail to the yacht
was made in complete silence.

Talcott handed his companion aboard and
watched her closely, as if fearing she would
attempt escape or suicide.

She at once went down into the cabin,
and Talcott ordered the anchor lifted and
sail made.

He scanned the beach narrowly as the
yacht resumed its voyage.

"We're safe this time, anyway," he re-
marked to Alstyne.

"Yes; no one saw us come to Lakeside or
leave it.

"And now to find a new place of con-
cealment or sail about until we hear from
Barnet and Viola."

"As to Langdon being out of the way?"

"Yes, and the assurance that Viola will
receive the Clifton fortune without opposi-
tion."

"You take a good deal of trouble in keep-
ing this girl safe."

"It is necessary."

"I should imagine that in her death lay
your principal safety."

"Not yet. I fear a score of complica-
tions and wish to be prepared for them."

"What, for instance?"

"The necessity of abandoning a claim
for the property at all."

"How otherwise?"

"A deed from the girl. There are other
issues you do not know of. Let the mat-
ter rest until we learn how affairs are pro-
gressing in the city."

"All right. You are a genius to keep this
girl so tractable."

"That is because I have palmed off a
plausible story upon her."

"Hark! what is that?"

A wild scream issued from the cabin
where Ethel Clifton was.

Both men rushed toward it, while Lang-
don, awaiting some new and startling de-
velopment, stood expectantly by.

Before the plotters could enter the door,
however, a wild figure rushed upon the
deck of the yacht.

It was Ethel Clifton, her veil torn aside,
her beautiful long hair falling unconfined
over her shoulders, her face the color of
marble, her eyes haunted with a wild, un-
certain light.

"What does this mean?" demanded Tal-
cott, angrily seizing her by the arm. "I
told you to never appear without your dis-
guise—"

The woman shook off his hand and faced
him triumphantly.

"It means that I defy you. Your cruel
power is broken at last. You have deceived
me—your story about my uncle and my
alleged husband is a falsehood."

"It is true," affirmed Talcott.

"She has discovered all, but how?" mut-
tered Alstyne.

"It is false, false, false!" shrieked the
excited girl; "you told me my lover was
false and was wedded to another; that my
uncle had sent the forged letter you gave
me, telling me that my appearance meant
disgrace and sorrow to his name. It is a
cruel, wicked falsehood. My lover is true,
my uncle is dead, murdered. Oh, heav-
ens, my brain reels at all this mystery."

"How do you know that?" demanded
Talcott, a gathering frown on his dark
brow.

"By this!" cried the girl, lifting aloft a
crumpled newspaper she bore in her hand.

"Great heavens!" ejaculated Talcott, "my
folly has spoiled all our plans."

"What is it?" asked Alstyne, excitedly.

"A paper I carelessly brought to the boat;
a morning issue of a Lakeside journal."

"And it contains—?"

"The account of Vincent Morton's arrest
and escape last night. The girl knows all."

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE MYSTERIOUS PAPERS.

Langdon the detective was intensely in-
terested in the episode that had just oc-
curred on the deck of the yacht.

He saw that to betray any curiosity in the
scene and attract Talcott's attention to that
fact would endanger his usefulness to the
persecuted girl, who had just developed a
part, at least, of the secret of the plotter's
power over her.

He, therefore, deemed it prudent to re-
main no longer a spectator of the exciting
scene, and feigned to be very much en-

crossed in watching the course of the yacht from another part of the deck.

He kept his eyes on the trio near the deck, however, and his blood boiled with indignation as he saw Talcott angrily seize Ethel Clifton by the arm and force her into the cabin.

The windows of this portion of the yacht were open, and the detective determined to be a witness to the denouement of the scene on deck.

He approached Bartley, who was directing the course of the yacht.

"Can I be of any use to you, guv'nor?" he asked, with a yawn.

"No."

"Den I'll lay down yander an' bask in de sun awhile. Ho, ho!"

Langdon managed to select his "basking spot" so that he could look into the cabin of the boat without being seen.

He could also hear all that was being spoken there, and he distinguished amid the distracted moanings of Ethel Clifton, the harsh, gruff voice of Harvey Talcott.

"Well, then," he was saying, "I did deceive you in one particular. Your uncle, General Clifton, is dead."

"And murdered!" cried Ethel, wildly. "Oh, I see it all. It is you who have murdered him; it is you who are carrying out some terrible plot for revenge or gain. It is all a falsehood, and my poor uncle was its first victim, Vincent Morton another for he never killed his warmest friend and my own."

"Did he not?" cried Talcott, angrily. "Then know that the proofs are so sure against him that he is a fugitive from justice."

"Unjustly accused, then. You made me believe that he was untrue to me, Vincent, Vincent, how I have misjudged you!"

Talcott paced the cabin with increasing irritation.

"Think what you will of these others, your uncle murdered by Vincent, or who you will, your lover true or untrue, but I told you no falsehood when I averred that upon your disappearance was involved all the good name of the Clifton family."

The young girl uttered a frantic cry at these words, and buried her face in her hands, sobbing bitterly.

"I hold the proofs of that at least. Now defy me if you dare. Refuse to remain a willing prisoner, and I will blast forever more the fair name of your uncle."

"Monster, assassin!" cried Ethel, arising to her feet and facing her persecutor with flashing eyes. "What is your motive in working all this baleful, complicated plot?"

"Never mind the motive. I hold you in my power."

"And I defy you. Do your worst. I will no longer please and droop while other lives may be imperiled by my silence and submission."

"Beware!" hissed Talcott, venomously. "You do not yet know all. You do not realize the issues that are hidden beneath my plots. I say your lover is false. I will prove it. It is true."

"It is false."

"I will prove that he murdered your uncle, and that he was in league with a woman who has taken your place as heiress to the Clifton millions."

Ethel Clifton's cheek blanched to the color of marble.

The detective was appalled at the bold falsehoods of the unscrupulous Talcott.

The plotter seemed determined to break down his captives aroused will at any cost.

In his words, or at least their attempted vindication, Langdon traced a new plot against Vincent Morton and his unfortunate fiancée.

"You cannot prove it," she cried. "I will not believe you. I will no longer lend myself to your schemes by remaining a willing prisoner."

She would have rushed past Talcott to the deck and probably sprang overboard amid her excitement but that he prevented her.

"Listen," he cried, fiercely. "Attempt your liberty, regain it if you can, dare to announce you self as the real heiress to General Clifton's fortune, and I swear that the terrible secret he cherished for years shall blast his name to the community."

Ethel Clifton shrank back in terror before his awful words.

"The proofs are here that General Clifton would have given half his fortune to secure."

The young girl's glance was fixed intently on a package of papers which Talcott held in his hand.

Her eyes dilated, her bosom heaved tumultuously. With a sudden spring that took the startled Talcott completely off his guard, she tore the papers from his hand.

"Then your power is gone forever this moment," she cried, in thrilling tones.

"Now, miscreant, I defy you!"

The spirit of the girl had darted to the window like a flash of light.

She had flung the papers through it beyond and over the side of the yacht.

A cry of terrible concern and baffled rage broke from Talcott's lips.

"Foiled! lost!" he cried. "Without the papers we are ruined."

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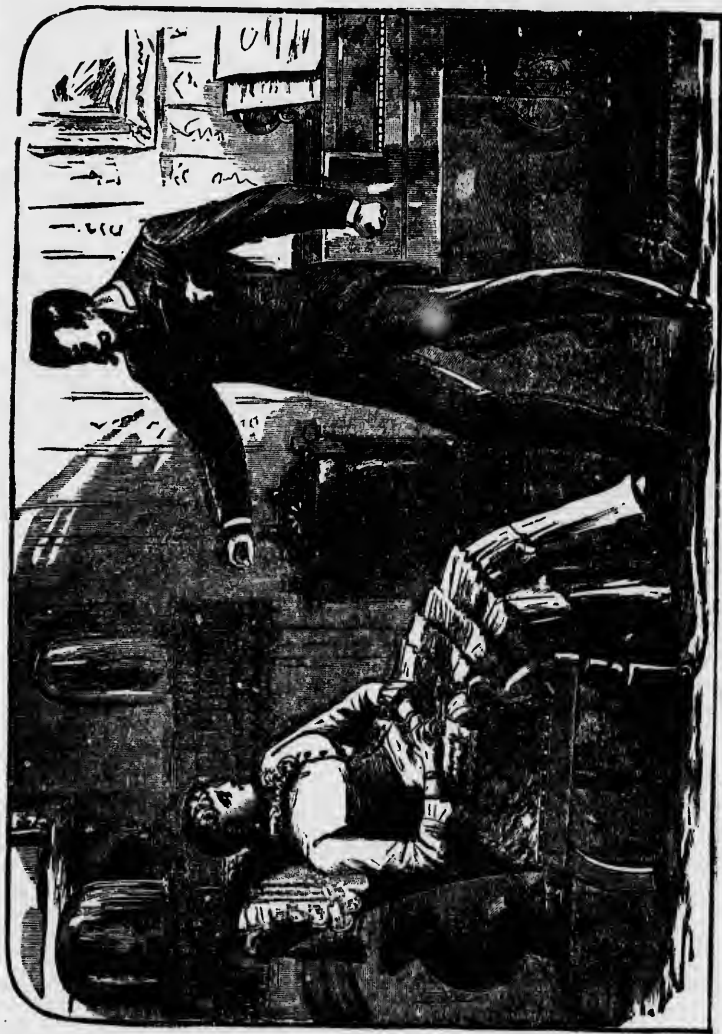
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Langdon had sprang to his feet as he heard the words.

He saw the packet of papers reach the water and drift to the leeward.

He thrilled to keen anxiety as he realized their value.

They probably contained the key to all the mystery of the great Clifton case.

At all hazards he must possess them.

With a quick movement the detective sprang to the rail of the yacht, and, diving headlong into the waters, disappeared beneath the surface of the lake.

CHAPTER XXV.

VIOLA.

Vincent Morton had followed the instructions of his friend, Langdon the detective, closely, after parting with him near Lake-side.

He had recognized the necessity of evading the public highway in case of pursuit, and instead of proceeding along the country road, struck off into the unfrequented paths leading to the woods.

By a devious way he reached a railroad, and finding a train at the small station, started for the city and reached it in safety.

Langdon had given him a key to his rooms, and thither, worried and anxious, Vincent at once made his way.

With the morning he had assumed an entirely different and more elaborate disguise than that which the keen-eyed Detective Howard had penetrated.

He had no particular idea of the line of action he should follow, but he was not content to remain idle while Langdon was imperiling his life in his interests.

"There must be something I can do," he soliloquized.

"It will not consist in shadowing Barnett, even if I could find him, for without doubt he now drops out of the case until the expected end—the attainment of the Clifton fortune—is reached.

"The Clifton fortune! Ah, how cruelly and bitterly do the words remind me of my darling Ethel, of my poor old friend General Clifton, of the vile impostor who now rules the mansion in the place of my persecuted affianced bride.

"Ah, there is a point where I may signalize myself—the woman Langdon calls Viola Dale.

"It is certainly important to know something about her, although Langdon deems her, too, a quiet element in the case for the present.

"Who knows but that, incidentally, through watching the Clifton mansion, I may gain some valuable information.

"Possibly I might secure a clew to the

missing papers they undoubtedly stole from General Clifton.

"At all events, I will follow out a plan I have in my mind concerning this woman, Viola Dale.

"I believe that either boldness or shrewdness, perhaps both combined, may drive her from her present position of assumed confidence and strength, and weaken the power of her evil emissaries."

Vincent was acting entirely opposite to the instructions of the detective.

Like all inexperienced amateurs in detective work, he was likely to forget prudence where emotion prevailed, and might make some serious errors to complicate the case in hand.

Langdon knew this, and little dreamed that Vincent would pursue the active course he followed out that day.

And just as the shrewd detective would have anticipated, it brought Vincent into new trouble.

It was about noon when Vincent entered a business block down town, and sought the presence of a lawyer he well knew, but not in his proper person.

He feigned to be an old-time friend of General Clifton, anxious to learn the details of the recent tragedy.

Vincent knew this lawyer as the attorney of the Clifton estate, and was curious to ascertain if Viola Dale had yet made any move toward the attainment of the fortune.

The lawyer was not loth to impart what intelligence he could to an old-time friend of the murdered millionaire.

He informed Vincent that there was no doubt but that General Clifton's body had been carried to the river and thrown in.

At least his death was assumed as proven satisfactory.

"And, his heiress is his niece, is she not?" asked Vincent, with assumed carelessness.

"Yes, I believe there is a will at the Clifton mansion I draw out to that effect."

"Have you seen Miss Clifton since her uncle's death?"

"No, as I have been out of the city until yesterday. I shall call upon her soon, on a visit of condolence and business combined."

"Then you know her personally?"

"No; only from what General Clifton told me, and from the portrait of her which he showed me."

Vincent started.

"Then he showed you her portrait?"

"Yes."

"And you remember how she looks?"

"Perfectly, for it was a splendid picture, and she has a lovely face; it is difficult to

forget, once having viewed it or its counterfeit presentment."

When Vincent left the lawyer's office a few minutes later he was absorbed in the profoundest thought.

Rapidly in his own mind he formed a plan for immediate action.

"It cannot be possible that Viola Dale can defy the law once it is proven that she is not Ethel Clifton whose identity she has stolen," he murmured.

"If I take the lawyer there to-morrow and show that a picture has been substituted for that of Ethel, and that this woman Viola is an impostor, certainly justice will arrest her.

"Certainly it must demand what she knows of the missing Ethel Clifton, and her guilt in her disappearance and evident connection with the Clifton murder will make a serious case against her.

"This seems the wisest course to pursue, and I believe by doing so I can break down this woman's boldness—perhaps by frightening her gain a confession from her lips of all the truth.

"Could I but terrorize or induce her into abandoning the case, Harvey Talcott would be forced to do likewise, for Viola is the main actor in the affair so far as the fortune is concerned.

"I will go to the mansion, but in what guise?

"I have it," and Vincent drew a card from his pocket which he had carelessly picked up on the lawyer's table.

"Here is a card of the family lawyer, a name she has undoubtedly familiarized herself with by this time.

"This will serve as a means of introduction to the mansion.

"I will secure an interview with her, and allow circumstances to shape my course of action after that."

Vincent hurried away to the portion of the city where the Clifton mansion was located.

Torturing memories of the past assailed his mind as he at last viewed the lonely house that had been the scene of so much mystery and sorrow during the past few days.

He repressed his emotions, however, and rang the door-bell with a determination to be calm and prudent in all his actions.

His blood boiled at the thought of the vile impostor who had assumed the place of his darling Ethel, and had robbed her of a home, friends, and happiness at one fell stroke.

But he tried to steel his anguished heart to joy composure in the coming battle of a shrewd woman's wit against his deception and disguise.

Marie, the housemaid, appeared at the door.

"Is Miss Clifton at home?" inquired Vincent, in a false tone of voice.

The maid had seen him several times, and he feared she might remember his natural tones.

But evidently she did not trace in the quiet, professional-looking caller, any resemblance to the light-spirited, impetuous Vincent Morton she had known.

She answered affirmatively, and showed him into the drawing-room.

Vincent tendered the business card of the lawyer. Whatever plan Viola Dale may have formed to remove the effect of the lawyer having seen Ethel Clifton's portrait, that is, if she knew of the fact, it would not be placed in operation now.

Marie undoubtedly knew the lawyer, as he had frequently visited the mansion, and would inform her mistress that Vincent was not he.

"Miss Clifton is in the conservatory, sir," said Marie.

"I will see her there," said Vincent, quickly, and he followed the girl to that portion of the house.

A figure—that of Viola Dale—stood among the flowers.

Vincent bowed courteously, but his heart beat tumultuously as he cast one quick, devouring glance at that bewilderingly beautiful face.

At last he confronted the heartless schemer who held human life so lightly and his own selfish designs so tenaciously.

He shuddered as he seemed to read behind the mask of that calm, subdued face, the cunning and cruelty of a demon.

"You are from the office of my uncle's family lawyer, the card told me," spoke Viola, in a silvery tone of voice.

Vincent's emotions at the meeting were as yet too poignant for him to trust his voice, and he allowed his hostess to take his silence for assent.

She led the way to a room near by, and said, simply:

"Be seated."

Vincent observed a deep, penetrating flash of the woman's eyes from behind the drooping lashes as she sank to a chair.

She occupied a sofa at the other side of a little ornamental table, and looked up at him inquiringly.

"I presume you are aware, Miss Clifton," said Vincent, as calmly as he could at bestowing the beloved name of his fiancée upon the impostor before him, "that, by the will of the late General Clifton, you are made the sole heiress to all his wealth?"

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handkerchief to her eyes in affected grief,
and murmured, brokenly:

"My uncle told me so the night of his
death."

"That will, I presume, is here in the
house. Mr. Harvey, who drew up the
document, will be here in a day or two to
go over the papers with you. General Clif-
ton's affairs are, he says, in a very satisfac-
tory condition, and the closing up of the
estate will be attended with comparatively
little trouble or delay, as he owed no debts."

There was a glow of satisfied delight in
the face half-hidden behind the handker-
chief.

"Mr. Harvey, the lawyer, is very anxious
to see you, as he expressed himself when I
left the office. He was a warm friend of
General Clifton, and therefore feels a deep
interest in you. He has cherished your
face since he last saw it deeply."

The woman started violently.

Evidently Vincent's words conveyed a
new phase in the case she did not know
of—a new peril to the success of her plots,
which alarmed her.

"My face?" she repeated, vaguely. "Then
he remembers me—"

"Perfectly well, from the picture Gen-
eral Clifton showed him in the library—
the portrait that was sent of you to your
uncle from Europe."

A concerned frown darker in Viola Dale's
fair brow, but it seemed to pass away as
she thought out rapidly a plan for over-
coming the new danger of which she had
been warned.

"How long will it be before all this
wearisome business of settling up the es-
tate will be concluded?" asked Viola, softly.

"Several months."

She started with a little cry of dismay.

"So long as that?" she murmured.

"Yes, but practically much sooner. There
is a certain routine to be gone through."

"What, for instance?"

"The expiration of a reasonable length
of time for other claimants to appear."

"Oh! there can be no other claimants."

"Then the proving of the will—but that
need not trouble you. The main point
will be in establishing your identity."

"My identity! Why, am I not Ethel Clif-
ton? Does any one dispute that?"

"Yes, Miss Clifton, it is already dis-
puted."

The woman had arisen to her feet, a
glowing, dangerous light in her eyes.

"Who dares that?" she cried.

"Enemies, you will say, madam," spoke
Vincent, calmly: "but one point will be
strongly insisted on."

"And that is—"

"The certain and complete establishment
of your identity."

"It will not be difficult."

"It may cause delay."

"Why?"

"Because the proofs are not at hand."

"But my letters and papers I brought
from abroad, my arrival here, and reception
by my uncle."

"True; your handwriting corresponding
with that in your letters to your uncle,
General Clifton, would practically settle
the point."

The woman again started.

She saw that she was sailing in deep
waters—that, clever as her plans had been,
there were many weak points in their con-
struction.

It was Vincent's purpose to confuse and
alarm her, and he felt that he was succeed-
ing admirably.

"Again," he resumed, "Mr. Harvey's rec-
ognition of yourself from the portrait
would be something."

The woman had resumed her seat, and
there was a slight tinge of pallor in her
face.

"Then, again, we can write to Europe
and verify the matter before the estate is
settled."

Viola Dale's hands worked nervously.

"Must all this trouble be gone to?" she
demanded, in a husky tone of voice.

"Yes, madam, if your claim is disputed."

"But Marie, the housemaid here, can
prove my identity."

"She never knew you previous to your
arrival here. The law assumes nothing
but direct proof."

"Is not that direct proof?"

"No; but your recognition by your un-
cle, General Clifton, would be evidence."

"But he is dead."

"Yes, or that of another person who has
also disappeared."

"You mean—"

"Mr. Morton."

Viola Dale recoiled with a low utterance
of dismay.

"You mean the murderer of my uncle?"
she asked.

"Vincent Morton, yes."

"The original of this photograph," mur-
mured Viola, indicating a portrait in a little
go'd frame on the table between them.

"Now, he could identify you," said Vin-
cent.

"But he has disappeared."

"He may be found."

"Then his recognition would settle the
matter."

"I think not, madam."

Vincent spoke sharply.

He believed the moment had come to

crush this woman, and unmask her in all her wickedness.

She noted the change in her visitor's manner instantly.

He had arisen to his feet, and his hand rested on the photograph on the table.

"What do you mean, sir?" she demanded, vaguely.

"What I say. I do not think Vincent Morton would recognize you as Ethel Clifton."

"Would not recognize me?" repeated Viola, maintaining an air of offended surprise.

"No, madam."

"And why not, may I ask?"

"Because he does not know you."

"What does this all mean?"

"He would say that you are not Ethel Clifton at all."

"But you assume too much."

"He would say you are, instead, a clever schemer named Viola Dale."

"Great heavens! all is discovered," breathed the woman.

"He would accuse you, with Harvey Talcott, Barton, Pearson, and Barnet of murdering General Clifton and abducting the real heiress, Ethel Clifton."

When he had first spoken the woman had arisen to her feet.

As he concluded, an awful pall of dread, amazement, and defeat shadowed her face, and she sank back overcome.

She sat regarding him in petrified silence, while Vincent triumphed in the conviction that he had completely crushed her. She clenched her hands fiercely; at last her eyes blazed dangerously.

She arose slowly to her feet and confronted him boldly.

"Who are you?" she hissed into his face. Vincent pointed calmly to his own portrait on the table.

"The original of that picture," he said, simply.

The woman uttered a startled cry.

"Impossible!" she gasped forth.

"I am Vincent Morton."

"You would not dare to come here."

"Behold!"

He tore his disguise from his face.

In appalled wonder the woman stood regarding first his flushed, excited features, and then the photograph on the table.

"The same," she murmured, in a low, whispering tone.

A strange emotion seemed to stir her heart to its very depths.

Neither fear nor abashment were revealed in her face, as she continued to regard his handsome features fixedly.

Instead, a deep, rapt sigh escaped her lips, more like the first longing aspiration of

love, newly awakened, than the breathings of remorse or terror.

"Vincent Morton," she repeated, in a musing, tender tone of voice, as though she loved to dwell upon the name.

"Madam," spoke Vincent, abruptly, "you see that I know all."

"Alas, yes."

He was amazed, yet vaguely suspicious at her changed, subdued manner.

She drew her chair near to his own, and a crafty expression came over her dark face as she addressed him.

"What do you wish me to do?" she sighed, murmuringly.

He was startled at her attitude of entire submission to his will.

He did not notice that, as if in agitation, she mechanically kept turning a large ring on her finger.

"You acknowledge all I have said?" he demanded.

"Yes, all."

"And you confess that I have related the truth?"

"As you will, Vincent Morton; do what you will, I cannot resist your slightest command."

A relenting woman's subterfuge or the newly awakened promptings of actual love, her words seemed incomprehensible.

About to speak again, Vincent Morton stared confusedly at Viola Dale.

A deadly sickening vapor seemed to assail his senses suddenly.

He reeled to the chair, essayed to arouse himself, and then sank insensible to the softly carpeted floor of the apartment.

Viola Dale's eyes flashed delightedly, as she sprang to her feet.

"The drug in the ring has stupefied him," she cried. "He is my prisoner. Vincent, Vincent," she murmured, fervently, "the ideal of all my longings; the one man I have ever seen whom I could love devotedly, passionately; the fortune, Talcott, all I would abandon for one word of affection from this man. He is my destiny, he is my fate, he shall, he must love me; it shall be my only task, now, to make him do so."

She touched a bell as she spoke.

Marie appeared.

The housemaid started, as she saw the insensible form on the floor.

"The lawyer's clerk!" she cried, in surprise.

"Is not the lawyer's clerk, Marie. Look you."

"Vincent Morton?" she cried.

"Yes."

"And insensible?"

"Our prisoner. We must remove him to another room. He must be kept drugged and a close watch kept until——"

"Until he learns to love me," she murmured passionately to herself.

And bearing the insensible form of Vincent Morton between them, the housemaid, Marie, and Viola Dale left the apartment.

CHAPTER XXV

AT BAY.

When Langdon the detective leaped over the edge of the yacht, he had a definite purpose in view.

He had overheard all that had been said in the cabin by Talcott and Ethel Clifton, and had witnessed the denouncement to an interview in which the spirited girl had completely baffled her captors.

When she tore the package of papers from Talcott's hands and flung them into the waters of the lake, the detective knew that they must be importance.

They undoubtedly held all the mystery of the secret that had blighted General Clifton's lonely life.

Their possession to Talcott meant a continuance of his reign of terror over the girl whom he held a captive.

To the detective they signified the final unraveling of a tangled skein of intrigue and mystery, which was the clew to the motive of all Talcott's manifold crimes.

Therefore, Langdon had not hesitated to boldly spring into the water in an endeavor to secure the papers.

He saw them floating on the waves, the rapid, onward progress of the yacht leaving them fast behind. He did not doubt his ability to secure them, but he wished to do so without Talcott being aware of the fact.

He was an expert swimmer, and he gained the place where the papers were floating in a moment's time.

Talcott and Alstynne had reached the deck by this time.

They were shouting wildly to Bartley to stop the boat.

Alstynne had rushed to the stern and was letting down the yawl.

Langdon knew they were observing him, and he executed a strategic movement to deceive them.

He pretended not to see the papers, and, striking out with his hand, seemed to drive them unwittingly under the surface of the lake.

At the same moment he feigned to flounder in the water, and disappeared from view.

"The darkey is drowning," shouted Talcott. "Quick, get out the boat."

The pretended negro, however, never possessed clearer wits.

He had seized the packet of papers securely in his hand, and he went down.

He remained long enough under the water to thrust them in a safe pocket.

Then he arose to the surface, puffing and floundering.

The yawl had been put off, and Talcott and Alstynne were rowing it rapidly to the spot where he was.

They really believed he would have drowned but for their timely assistance, for Langdon feigned the utmost distress and terror.

They dragged him into the boat, and Talcott asked:

"What did you jump overboard for?"

"I saw something thrown overboard, sah."

"From the cabin?"

"Yes, sah."

"A package of papers—where is it now?" Langdon scanned the water with apparent careful scrutiny.

"Don't see it now, sah."

He wiped the water from his face with his hands, while Talcott anxiously glanced about them.

"The papers are nowhere in sight," he said to Alstynne.

"Sunk, probably."

"Confusion! That girl has ruined all."

"How so?"

"The papers through which I held a dread influence over General Clifton are lost."

"But he is dead."

"Still they would be a menace against this girl."

"They are gone now."

"There is no use seeking further for them?"

"Not the least that I can see."

"Then let us return to the boat."

Langdon imagined that he saw Alstynne start suspiciously as his eyes fell upon him. He stared blankly at the detective, and seemed to be perplexed and startled.

When they reached the yacht he bestowed a second peculiar look at the detective.

Then Langdon saw him whisper quickly to Talcott, and point to the pretended negro.

Talcott stared at Langdon, and uttered an ejaculation of surprise.

"I wonder what's up?" murmured Langdon, vaguely concerned.

He started to leave that part of the yacht.

"Hold on there."

Alstynne spoke peremptorily, and advanced toward Langdon.

The latter paused abruptly.

"What is it, sah?" he asked.

Alstynne took out a handkerchief.

"Your face is covered with water," he said.

"Oh, yes, sah, de swim in de lake."

"Here, wipe it off,"

Langdon took the proffered handkerchief and wiped his face.

A startled cry broke from Alstyn's lips. At the same moment Talcott drew a revolver and sprang forward.

"Another spy," he ejaculated forcibly. Langdon also discovered what had occurred.

He gazed blankly at the handkerchief in his grasp.

It was soiled and discolored with the black stain from his face.

Langdon now comprehended that his carelessness had precipitated a catastrophe most disastrous for all his cherished plans.

The water had loosened the lamp-black on his face.

His hands in brushing off the water had streaked it alternate white and black.

This had aroused Alstyn's surprise in the boat.

The involuntary use of the handkerchief had completed the strange transformation. Undoubtedly he now stood revealed in his true identity.

"Langdon the detective!" cried Alstyn, wildly.

A second gleaming revolver was leveled at the impostor's head.

In the power of his most cruel enemies, Langdon the detective stood at bay.

CHAPTER XXVII

LANGDON'S PERIL

Langdon saw the futility of resistance, as he stood on board of the yacht at the complete mercy of his two resolute and heartless enemies, Talcott and Alstyn.

"Move and you are a dead man," spoke the latter, grimly.

Bartley had crept forward at the first revelation of the detective's identity.

He suddenly flung a rope around Langdon's arms, securing them tightly to his side by a deft, rapid movement.

"It's Langdon, sure enough," muttered Talcott, staring searchingly into his prisoner's face.

"How did you come here?"

Alstyn propounded the query sternly.

Langdon laughed carelessly.

"You lured me here, it seems," he replied coolly.

"I did not hire a spy."

"I am not a spy," replied Langdon, stanchly.

"What then?"

"A detective."

"It's the same thing."

"No, for my business is a legitimate one."

"Tracing us down?"

"Exactly."

"And you intended to arrest us in the end?"

"Certainly."

"Well, now having you in our power you mustn't blame us if we retaliate with the same line of tactics."

"Not at all."

Langdon's sang-froid aroused Alstyn's admiration for his coolness, but Talcott's brow darkened with rage and hate.

"Search him," he ordered, briefly.

Alstyn moved to execute the order. Langdon looked concerned, but he could not resist.

He saw Alstyn remove from his pockets his private papers and a package he blamed himself for not leaving in a place of safety.

It was the oil portrait of Ethel Clifton, and he had carried it so as to have it handy to produce just such an effect, if the opportunity offered, as he had produced by its exhibition to the startled Viola Dale in the library of the Clifton mansion.

Talcott's eyes gleamed with satisfaction as he opened and recognized the picture.

"A valuable clew recovered," he muttered. "Now see if he has the brilliant and my watch and chain."

"They are in a safe place, never fear," remarked Langdon.

Alstyn's search failed to reveal the articles Talcott had mentioned.

The latter looked uneasy and addressed himself to Langdon.

"See here," he said.

"Well?"

"You are in our power at last."

"I acknowledge that."

"And we propose to end your career of interfering with our plans."

"That's natural."

"Now, I have a proposition to make you."

"Indeed!"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"I will give you a chance for your life."

"That's liberal."

"You can escape death on one condition."

"What is that?"

"Tell us where to find the brilliant I lost in the library of the Clifton mansion."

"What else?"

"Inform us how much is known to the police of our plans."

"Proceed."

"Agree to remain inactive in this case hereafter, and you shall live."

"Is that all?"

"And the day we receive the Clifton fortune you shall have fifty thousand dollars."

Langdon laughed mockingly.

"Do you agree?" demanded Talcott, eagerly.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because you would never pay the money you promise."

"I guarantee it."

"You will never get the Clifton fortune to divide."

So cool and confident was Langdon's demeanor that Talcott uttered an enraged ejaculation.

"We will get it, and very soon," he said.

"Furthermore, if you kill me my death will be avenged."

"By whom?"

"That is my secret. Harvey Talcott, you are already entangled in the meshes of a fatal net of your own weaving. The fates are against you. My death is a trifling element in this case, for your doom is certain."

His sanguine tones caused Talcott to turn pale.

"We will trifle with him no longer," cried Talcott, hoarsely.

"What do intend to do with him," asked Alstyne.

"Send him overboard."

"Now?"

"Yes, at once."

Talcott proceeded to the stern of the boat and returned with several ropes.

These he tied around Langdon's wrists and ankles, while Alstyne and Bartley held him.

They then laid their captive on the deck.

"Is there a tarpaulin in the hold?" Talcott asked of Bartley, when he had completed his task.

"Yes."

"Go and get it."

"What do you propose to do with it?" inquired Alstyne, curiously.

"Prevent Langdon from troubling us again."

Alstyne and Bartley went to a hatchway and disappeared in the hold. They were gone so long that Talcott grew impatient.

He went after them and stood with his back to their captive looking down into the hold.

The outlook for Langdon was portentous.

There seemed to be no possible escape from the fate with which his enemies now menaced him.

Suddenly he started.

From where he lay he could not only see Langdon but also command a view of the cabin.

A form appearing at its open doorway suddenly attracted his attention.

It was Ethel Clifton.

Her face was pale, her eyes startled, but a latent intelligence and terror in her beautiful face told that she had witnessed the scene that had just taken place on the deck of the yacht.

Her finger to her lips to enjoin silence, she moved so stealthily toward the prostrate detective that he knew she comprehended the importance of strategic and decisive action.

In her hand she bore a gleaming knife, half concealed in the folds of her dress, and evidently found in the cabin.

Her face fixed on Langdon, whose attention was diverted to the occupants of the hold of the yacht, she glided to the side of the detective.

Her trembling hands placed the keen-edged blade across the ropes which secured Langdon's wrists, and severed the tight strands deftly.

Then, thrusting the knife into his bosom, she stole back to the cabin.

So effective and cautious had been the maneuver that the grateful look on the detective's face was mingled with an expression of admiration for her courage and shrewdness.

Talcott had not even suspected the occurrence of the episode.

Langdon uttered a long, fervent sigh of relief.

He was partially free and armed, but he did not move.

To sever the bonds which still held his feet would have been only the work of a moment, but the plotters would discover his freedom at once.

If he attempted to attack Talcott the others would be alarmed and an unequal contest ensue.

If he leaped overboard they would shoot him before he could reach land. He, therefore, only grasped the ropes securing his hands so that they presented the same appearance as before.

A moment later the three men came from the hold.

They bore a large tarpaulin.

They laid it on the deck and lifted their captive into it.

Then they tied the ends together, completely enveloping him in its folds.

An iron weight was tied to one end.

"Lift it up," ordered Talcott.

Alstyne and Bartley obeyed the command.

"Heave him overboard," came the second ominous mandate.

Langdon swept the severed ropes from his wrists.

He clutched the knife ready for prompt action the moment he reached the water.

Alstynne and Bartley flung the tarpaulin and its inmate over the rail of the boat. With a heavy splash it disappeared beneath the surface of the lake.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

LOVE'S SACRIFICE.

Viola Dale was a bold, defiant woman, where self-interest or emotion was concerned, and when she determined to hold Vincent Morton as a prisoner she did not fear the results of that venture.

Marie and herself had conveyed Morton to an alcove back of the library.

Here she left the housemaid on guard, while she repaired to her own apartment to prepare her plans for the future and to reflect.

There was an insane brilliancy in her dark eyes, a hectic flush on her cheeks.

"I love him," she kept repeating to herself. "I who scorned the humble passion have met my fate.

"Is it destiny, is it retribution, that the passion I never knew before should make me this man's slave, perhaps to the ruin of my every hope of fortune?

"I care not; under the magnetic thrill of his glorious eyes I could endure poverty, suffering, death, disgrace.

"I love him, I love him. He shall be mine. Let Talcott's scheme fail or succeed, for Vincent Morton's love I will abandon all."

She was terribly in earnest. With the same determination that she pursued intrigue and crime she could devote her life to the devotion of absorbing love.

Amid this new emotion, however, her crafty mind warned her to prepare for every contingency.

She thought profoundly over all the case of the Clifton mystery, and, too, of the intelligence Vincent had imparted to her.

Then she descended to the library and called Marie.

"Under the influence of the drug the ring contained he will not revive for many hours," she said to the housemaid. "I wish you to execute some orders for me at once."

In detail she informed Marie of her wishes, and the intelligent maid left the house bent on her errand shortly afterward.

It was late in the afternoon when she returned.

She found her mistress standing near the alcove, the parted curtains in her hand, her eyes fixed lovingly, raptly on the sleeping Vincent.

"You saw the lawyer, Marie?" the woman asked.

"Yes."

"And approached the subject cautiously?"

"Yes. I intimated that you wished to see him in a day or two, and led him to talk."

"Did he send a messenger here this morning?"

"No."

"And he has not seen Vincent Morton?"

"No, and he furthermore believes that he is the assassin of General Clifton."

"Good. Vincent Morton came here on his own responsibility, then, and I have nothing to fear from outsiders. Did you arrange what other matters I intrusted to you?"

"As you ordered."

"Very well. Be within calling distance during the evening."

"When he wakes?"

"Yes; we may have trouble to carry out our plans."

It was late in the evening when Vincent Morton returned to consciousness.

He experienced a dizzy, confused sensation. For some moments he could not imagine where he was.

Then, as the curtains parted and the light in the library beyond framed the form of a woman peering into the apartment, he recognized Viola Dale. The episode of the morning recurred to his mind instantly, and an angry, indignant flush mounted his brow as the bold schemer retreated into the library and he followed her.

"Madam, the means you employed to rob me of sensibility were worthy of your past record for intrigue and crime," he said, sternly.

The woman never resented his harsh words. Her accents were almost pleading, as she said in her softest tones:

"I did it for your own good, Mr. Morton."

Vincent frowned incredulously.

"In what way?" he demanded.

"You were excited, unreasonably angry. I wished to save you from arrest, from rashly involving me in trouble which would only imperil our mutual interests."

"Our mutual interests!" repeated Vincent, indignantly. "Madam, your interests and my own can never be aught but antagonistic."

"They must."

"Never. Do you see that, madam? It is one of the links to the crime which robbed me of Ethel Clifton. One of the diamonds wrested from your accomplice, Harvey Talcott. It is red with the blood of the murdered General Clifton, and by it I have sworn to hunt down his assassin. Our interests! Madam, they are widely separated—under the ban of my vengeance you, too, must come, if you shield and aid Talcott to escape."

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pocket one of the diamonds of the group
stolen from the Clifton mansion the night
of the murder, which had come into his
possession from Langdon, when they es-
caped from Barnet's den.

Vincent Morton extended the jewel be-
tween his fingers as he spoke, rage and in-
dignation in his face.

"I have nothing to do with General
Clifton's murder, or with Harvey Talcott's
diamond," said Viola, calmly, as she re-
garded him without paling at his words;
"but again I say our interests must be
mutual."

The woman's impressive manner startled
Vincent, and he stared strangely at her
ominous face.

"Listen to me," she said earnestly.

"Had I never seen your face, and your fate
as my enemy was in my hands, I would
have carelessly seen you sacrificed to
Harvey Talcott's plots. I have seen you, and
my motives are changed. In one sentence
I can explain why I seek to benefit you,
why our interests are mutual. I love you."

She spoke calmly, slowly, but the latent
emotion in her face showed her earnest-
ness and fervency.

In utter amazement and incredulity Vin-
cent Morton stood regarding her.

Was this same new plot? No. Utter sin-
cerity was in the woman's tone and man-

he thought of Ethel Clifton, whom
this woman's hatred and that of her evil
associates had doomed to persecution and
sorrow, he was about to repel with scorn
and contempt her humble avowal.

A quick thought drove him to silence.
Through this new phase in her motives,
might he not hope to yet gain his desires,
and punish her and her accomplices?

Repugnance, abhorrence in his heart, he
wore a mask of feigned surprise only at
her bold declaration.

She mistook his manner for interest.
Her pulses quickened as she held a chair
for him.

"Be seated, I beg of you, and listen to
what I have to say."

He obeyed her with a glance at the open
windows looking out into the garden.

Viola Dale's confidence in her powers of
persuasion and in her security was such
that she thus left open an avenue of escape
to his advantage.

"Call me unwomanly, spurn me, scorn
me, if you will, but believe me," pursued
Viola, rapidly, and with rising excitement.

"I love you, and you are the first man I
ever loved. Knowing that, you know all.
You will say you cannot return my love,
that your heart is bound to another. Ah!

let me show you what I will sacrifice for

your dear sake, and you will forget Ethel
Clifton; you will cherish me."

An involuntary shudder passed over Vin-
cent's frame at her words containing a
suspicion of disloyalty to the beautiful in-
nocent creature he loved so devotedly.

"You are mad," he cried. "I am the
affiliated husband of Ethel Clifton."

"And yet, if you refuse me, you will
never wed her. Do not shrink from me
because I say this. I did not abduct her,
I did not murder her uncle, but those who
did direct me, and I have been a willing
instrument in their hands. At your will, I
can defeat their plots. Love me, wed me,
and I do so."

"And, if not?"

"You will never see Ethel Clifton again,
and you will die upon the scaffold for the
murder of General Clifton."

"I am innocent."

"Circumstances are against you."

"I can overcome them. I can leave here
now."

"No, you cannot."

"Who will prevent me?"

"The police. I have arranged all that;
you shall not leave here. I have given
orders to have the house watched, and any
person answering your description appre-
hended."

Vincent started at the woman's cool pre-
vision.

"And yet you pretend to love me."

"Enough to wish you to refrain from
placing yourself in danger. It is useless
to conceal the real facts of the case.
Without my aid, the tangled skeins of the
Clifton mystery can never be straightened
out. Abandon all thoughts of Ethel Clif-
ton, wed me, and I swear to betray those I
have plotted for, and secure her liberty."

"You will do this? you swear it?"

"I do. Refuse, and I remain quiescent
and defy you, and yet will I triumph.
The confederation of crime you battle is
too formidable for your weak defense or
that of the police."

Vincent had turned very pale. He re-
alized that the woman spoke the truth.

"Your love, or Ethel Clifton's life, which
is it?" breathed Viola, intently.

"You can save her?"

"Yes. Agree to make me your wife, and
she shall be restored to liberty."

"And you will abandon the Clifton
fortune?"

"Yes."

"And aid me in the arrest of the murder-
ers of General Clifton?"

"I swear it."

An awful sense of horror settled over
Vincent's mind.

Here was the sacrifice, but it would re-

sult in saving the life of the woman he loved.

It would end in the conviction of the murderers of General Clifton.

Otherwise, justice might be eventually baffled and crime be successful.

Viola Dale was watching his face eagerly, ravenously.

"Speak," she cried, tumultuously. "Your answer."

It came slowly, gaspingly, from Vincent Morton's lips.

"Viola Dale," he said, "I agree. I will wed you—you shall become my wife."

CHAPTER XXIX.

NEW MYSTERIES.

When Langdon, the detective, disappeared beneath the waters of the lake his would-be murderers, Talcott and Alstynne, were satisfied that he was, at last, most effectually disposed of.

The latter ordered Bartley to start the yacht anew upon its course, and with a last satisfied glance at the circling ripples where Langdon had gone down, turned to join Talcott and Ethel Clifton in the cabin.

Meanwhile, the object of their vengeful hatred was undergoing a strange and startling experience.

The moment the tarpaulin struck the water he reached down with the knife in his free hands, and with one quick stroke severed the ropes securing his ankles.

Then, as the weighted tarpaulin reached the sandy bottom of the lake, a single movement of the keen-edged blade ripped it open.

He dropped the knife to be unimpeded in his struggles for liberty, and arose at once to the surface of the water.

He was breathless and almost exhausted from his desperate experience, but prepared for a long swim to the shore.

He did not find it necessary. He came up directly at the stern of the yacht.

The yawl was still floating in its wake, and, grasping the rope which held it in tow, Langdon climbed boldly upward.

There were two little windows directly under the stern of the boat. Langdon reached toward one of them, still clinging to the rope.

He pushed back a movable sash, and climbed through the window.

Closing the window after him, he found himself in the hold of the after part of the yacht.

It was evidently the same portion of the boat from which the tarpaulin had been brought in which he was wrapped and flung into the water.

The hatchway had been battened down, and the hold was quite dark.

At its remote end, where the cabin began, was a small aperture, and as the yacht again started on its trip Langdon began to investigate his surroundings.

The aperture which he found seemed to look into a closet directly back of the cabin.

By leaning over this he could hear the confused murmur of voices, but could not distinguish the identity of the speakers.

He then went to the hatchway, and found that it was closed but not fastened down from the outside.

The detective was irresolute and undecided as to the best course for him to pursue, and deciding finally that it would be best to remain in his present place of concealment until nightfall, crept to a dark corner of the hold and remained securely ensconced there.

From the rear windows he could see that they were approaching the city.

As the shades of night came down he again approached the hatchway.

By lifting it a little he could see that the men on the yacht were all at the forward part of the boat.

Langdon lifted the hatchway cautiously, crept forth, and closed it again.

Near the stern of the yacht were several barrels and a pile of ropes, and he hastened to conceal himself among them.

None too soon, however, for Talcott and Alstynne just then came to that part of the boat.

"It's settled then?" he heard Alstynne say.

"Yes."

"We go first to the old building on the docks?"

"Exactly."

"That is where General Clifton's body was taken?"

"Yes," replied Talcott. "We will not remain there, however. Land the yacht there and take the girl through the old building."

"And then?"

"You go and get a carriage."

"Where will you take the girl?"

"To another and safer place of refuge."

"All right."

A few minutes later the yacht was moored at an old wharf.

A frowning structure of dilapidated appearance looked down upon them.

Alstynne left the boat at once, evidently to get the carriage to remove Ethel Clifton.

Talcott himself came on deck a moment later.

The girl, deeply veiled, leaned timidly upon his arm.

He had apparently menaced her into submission again.

He spoke a few words to Bartley, directing him to remain on the yacht.

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Then he stopped ashore and disappeared
 in an arched roadway which seemed to lead
 to the public thoroughfare beyond.

The detective was not slow in following
 them.

While Bartley was busy at the cabin he
 stole ashore.

He entered the arched roadway into
 which, here and there, windows looked
 from the structure built around it.

He could see Talcott and the girl a few
 feet ahead.

Suddenly, when near the street end of
 the roadway, a wild shriek rang out on the
 still air of the place.

Ethel Clifton had uttered it, at the same
 time recoiling from Talcott with every in-
 dication of terror and alarm.

"What is it?" demanded the latter,
 amazedly.

"That face."

"What face?"

Ethel Clifton pointed to a window in the
 wall.

"I saw it there at that window, distinctly."

"A face?"

"Yes, yes. I cannot be mistaken. It
 was—"

She paused impressively.

"Who?"

"My murdered uncle, General Clifton!"

With a cry of superstitious terror Talcott

seized her arm and hurried her from the
 archway.

Langdon, lurking in the shadow, was in-
 tensely startled as he remembered that Tal-
 cott had said that this was the place where

General Clifton's body had been removed.

A carriage was in waiting at the curb.

Alstynne sat on the box with the driver.

Talcott opened the door and helped Ethel
 Clifton in.

Langdon had ventured near enough to
 witness and hear all that was said.

He was also pre- to pursue the car-
 riage when it start- ny.

"What was that cry?" he heard Alstynne
 ask.

"The girl."

"Was she frightened?"

"Yes; she imagined she saw her uncle's
 face at one of the windows."

"Impossible!"

"Wait a minute; the place cannot be oc-
 cupied. I'm going to look again."

Talcott went again into the arched road-
 way, and glanced at several of the windows.

"Anything there?" inquired Alstynne, as
 he returned.

"Of course not. It was all the girl's
 fancy."

He went to step into the carriage, when
 he started back with a dismayed cry.

The opposite door of the vehicle had

been silently opened while his attention
 was diverted.

The former occupant of the carriage,
 Ethel Clifton, was nowhere visible.

"What is it?" inquired Alstynne.

"The girl is gone!" was the startling re-
 ply which Harvey Talcott gasped forth
 wildly.

CHAPTER XXX.

ETHEL'S FLIGHT.

Langdon, the detective, was intensely
 startled at the mysterious phase the case
 had assumed.

The escape of Ethel Clifton meant dis-
 aster to all of Harvey Talcott's plans; but
 it also brought about unforeseen complica-
 tions in his own calculations.

The girl had certainly evaded her cap-
 tivity; while their attention was dis-
 tracted to the old house by the river, she
 had silently and cleverly slipped from their
 coils.

"Gone!" cried Talcott, glancing wildly
 around in intense excitement and anxiety.
 "It means disaster and ruin to our every
 plan."

"Jump in," cried the driver. "I think I
 saw a form flit around the corner yonder."

"She cannot escape us," remarked Al-
 stynne confidently.

"Why not?"

"Because, by driving rapidly to where
 this street crosses the main thoroughfare
 you can command a view of every avenue
 of exit from this district."

"Then let us hasten—What is it?"

Talcott asked the question as Alstynne
 uttered a startled cry and sprang to the
 ground.

"The building yonder!" he cried ex-
 citedly.

"What of it?"

"Ethel Clifton did see a face at the
 window."

"Nonsense!"

"I just saw it myself."

"Whose face?"

"The murdered millionaire, General Clif-
 ton. Don't wait for me. I am determined
 to explore this mystery."

Alstynne disappeared down the broken
 steps of a stairway leading into the base-
 ment of the place.

Langdon saw Talcott spring into the car-
 riage and give a quick order to the driver.

The vehicle turned and started at a rapid
 rate down the street.

In a flash the detective had darted from
 his place of covert and caught at the rear
 axle of the cab.

There he clung tenaciously, lifting him-
 self so that he could look through the little
 window at the rear of the vehicle.

Talcott had both windows down and was glancing searchingly along every side street they passed.

Suddenly he uttered a cry of satisfaction and delight.

"Stop, stop," he called to the driver. "What are you doing? The horses are running away. We will miss the girl. I just saw her dart down the court yonder."

The driver had abandoned his seat, and, the loaded end of the whip reversed in his hand, was creeping back over the top of the cab.

Ere Langdon suspected the maneuver it fell across his head, and he dropped to the ground stunned and motionless.

The driver regained the lines and stopped the horses.

"A spy!" he explained to Talcott, pointing back to where Langdon lay insensible in the roadway.

"Who is he?"

"I don't know. He followed us from the river. I saw him and settled him."

"Never mind him, now," cried Talcott excitedly. "Drive back to the last court we passed. I am almost certain I saw the girl there."

The driver, who was a friend of Alstyns and in full concurrence with the plots of his associate, whatever they might be, did as ordered.

As they reached the court Talcott opened the carriage door and sprang out.

"Follow me with the cab," he added, and dashed precipitately down the lane.

He saw the form of a woman dimly outlined in the distance.

She was fleeing rapidly through the court, and evidently saw him in pursuit, for she uttered a cry of frantic terror and seemed to crouch against the wall to evade his glance.

He hastened eagerly toward the spot, sanguine of her recapture.

A cry of baffled rage escaped his lips as he came to a blank wall and discerned the means by which his intended prey had escaped him.

A little door in the wall had evidently stood open as she reached it. She had passed through the gateway, secured it after her, and was now beyond doubt safely concealed out of his reach in the next street.

The wall was high and inaccessible. He made no delay in reaching the front of the building it surrounded.

He saw that Ethel Clifton could readily traverse the yard of the place and gain the street, and theorizing correctly that she had done so and had disappeared, was discomfited and discouraged.

He reflected moodily for some time, and

then gave a direction to the driver of the cab of a location near the vicinity of the Clifton mansion.

What more probable than that Ethel Clifton would hasten thither? An entire stranger in the city—she had no other place of refuge.

At least he would see Viola Dale and tell her of what had transpired; and, forgetful of the spy the driver had left insensible in the street, and adjudging Langdon dead, Talcott carried out his vaguely formed plans.

Poor Ethel Clifton! She had, indeed, summoned sufficient courage to take advantage of the momentary negligence of her custodians at the old building by the river.

Stealing from the opposite side of the carriage she crossed the street and darted around the corner unperceived.

When in the court she had seen Talcott in pursuit, all her old terror returned and her heart failed her.

Like a hunted, panting bird in the fowler's snare, she gave up all for lost, when the gate in the wall yielded to the pressure of her hand.

She pushed it open eagerly and stepped into the yard of some large factory, locked the gate after her, and sped forward till she reached the street.

On and on she flew, confused, bewildered, breathless, and finally emerged upon a lighted thoroughfare.

Free! She did not fear her enemies. Surrounded by throngs of people, her terror gave way to anxiety, her hopefulness to despair.

She was at liberty again, but unknown in the great city. There was not one friend or acquaintance to whom she could appeal for aid. There was not even a familiar name she could recall of those who had known her uncle, General Clifton.

"I will go boldly to the mansion," she decided at last. "The servants will know me. If an impostor has taken my place I will unmask her. I will summon the police to my aid."

Poor, inexperienced child, she little realized the power and wickedness of her foes, who could deftly blind justice itself to carry out their dark and deadly plots.

By constant inquiry, and after a long, wearisome tramp, she at last reached the street in which the Clifton mansion was located.

She recognized the house as she reached it. She entered the gate and half-way to the steps paused abruptly.

A light shone in the hall, and the library too, was illuminated.

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gained the side of the mansion. The
library windows were open.

A low cry of pain rent her lips as its in-
terior was revealed to her startled vision.

Two persons were seated there. The
one was a beautiful woman, whose dark,
magnetic glance rested lovingly on a com-
panion.

The other, pale and agitated, yet betray-
ing no manifest aversion to the siren by
his side, was the man to whom she had
plighted her troth in the far past, under the
smiling skies of Italy.

At that moment a strange scene was
reaching a denouement in the library.

Vincent Morton had agreed to wed Viola
Dale to save the life of the persecuted girl
he adored.

The woman had insisted on his making
the pledge before a witness, and she had
summoned the housemaid, Marie.

Thus the amazed and anguished Ethel
Clifton had arrived fatally in time to wit-
ness the denouement of a scene which, mis-
comprehending, struck a sudden deathblow
to all her young heart's love.

She saw Viola Dale lay a caressing hand
on Vincent Morton's arm.

She saw the latter turn to Marie as she
entered the library.

Then, distinctly, clearly, he said:

"Miss Dale has sent for you to tell you
that she will leave the mansion as my wife
to-morrow."

"Oh! merciful heavens, he is false! In
all the wide world I have not one friend in
my hour of dark despair."

A moan of agony, a heart-breaking cry
of black anguish, the words came brokenly
from Ethel Clifton's marble lips.

Then, her pure, innocent heart blighted
and crushed, she sank to the dewy grass,
like a stricken dove, under the calm stars,
so placidly, so cruelly gleaming amid the
silence of the soft summer's night.

CHAPTER XXXI.

UNMASKED.

At that moment the crisis in all the mys-
tery of the great Clifton tragedy had ar-
rived.

The hour of the unmasking of the fair
plotter, Viola Dale, had apparently come.

The true heiress was, all unsuspected by
the schemer, on the very threshold of the
discovery of all the dark plot to defraud
her of a fortune.

New elements and new motives were in
play, however, of which neither the silent
watcher at the window nor the scheming
siren suspected the existence.

At that very moment Harvey Talcott was
nearing the grounds of the mansion.
Langdon, recovered from the blow dealt

him by the driver, was on his way to the
same place, and Howard the detective was
already within its precincts.

Fate seemed to have to have led all these
persons irresistibly to the scene of General
Clifton's murder.

With all the interested parties centered
here, was the long tragedy to end? Not yet.

For only a moment had Ethel Clifton
lain like a bruised, broken flower on the
dewy grass.

Love seemed to have been dealt a cruel
death blow, but pride and justice suddenly
aroused her to action.

What could that scene in the library sig-
nify but that Harvey Talcott's claim of her
lover's faithlessness was true.

Vincent Morton was false, in collusion
with the pretended heiress to the Clifton
millions, possibly an accomplice in the
murder of her uncle.

Thus reasoned the anguished girl, tor-
tured with contending emotions, as, her
brain in a dizzy whirl, her eyes blurred,
her steps unsteady, she staggered to her
feet and reeled from the spot.

Justice! Duty!

The words echoing in her heart seemed
to nerve her to action.

Behind the false smile of Viola Dale
lurked the assassin's frown; beneath the
surface of a base imposture were dark plots,
perhaps, involving more lives than that
of her first victim—General Clifton.

"My uncle's murderers shall be found
and punished; let that be my task, now that
I am deserted by all; now that Vincent
Morton is false!" cried Ethel, wildly.

"Let the guilty tremble, be they whom
they may. I will not falter. Though the
old love and jealousy drive me mad I will
consecrate my life to ferreting out your
enemies, oh! my uncle."

Thus spoke the beautiful girl, in a mo-
ment transformed from a gentle, shrinking
creature to a cold, determined woman
nerved to mighty action by justice and
duty.

What reeked she that her heart was lac-
erated and torn by the memories of a past
dead love.

What cared she that the mocking face of
a rival drove her nearly mad.

She was unloved, her life's purposes
broken, and a victim to a plot she deter-
mined now fully to oppose, or die the Nem-
esis in a mission in which scheming souls
must suffer for their vile iniquities.

"Stop, woman. Who are you?"

On her way to the entrance to the man-
sion, past a group of lilacs, the form of a
man suddenly sprang into view and blocked
her path.

She drew back slightly alarmed, and then,

seeing that it was neither Talcott nor Alstyne, regained her composure and answered:

"I am—Ethel Clifton, the mistress of this mansion."

She spoke boldly, clearly.

The man seemed to regard her with extreme incredulity and amazement.

"Impossible!" he ejaculated.

"Allow me to pass, sir. I have spoken the truth."

Something in her decided tones, in the cold, queenly dignity of her manner, caused the man to partially stand aside.

But instantly he shook off his mystification and laid a detaining hand on her arm.

"Not yet," he said, gently, but firmly. "I must question you farther."

"By what right?"

"As an officer of the law."

A glad cry rose to Ethel Clifton's lips.

"You are a detective, then?" she cried, eagerly.

"Yes, madam, my name is Howard. In seeking the murderer of General Clifton I wandered here to-night. I saw you surreptitiously approach the window yonder. I have the right to question you, not to gratify a private curiosity, but to expedite justice in its workings in this mysterious case."

Ethel Clifton had become very pale.

"The murderer of General Clifton," she repeated. "Who is he?"

"Vincent Morton."

The fair young girl uttered a sob of anguish and swayed unsteadily where she stood.

It was true then. She had believed herself strong, decided, yet even now she believed in Vincent's innocence, even now she would shield him from arrest.

"Oh, it cannot be!" she moaned.

"It is true, madam; the proofs are incontestable. He is now in the library yonder, and this time when I arrest him he shall not escape me. But you—you say you are Ethel Clifton?"

"Yes," murmured Ethel, brokenly.

"Then who is the woman who claims to be the heiress to the Clifton millions?"

"An impostor."

Ethel Clifton's eyes flashed wildly once more, as she thought of the dark schemer who had stolen her identity.

"I do not understand—there is some plot underlying all this case."

"There is, and my uncle was its first victim, and I, just escaped from the hands of his assassin, the second."

"Explain yourself."

"Not here, not now. Follow me into yonder house. Watch and listen while I

tear the mask from the face of the impostor, and you will know all."

Intensely mystified, Howard followed her up the steps of the mansion.

The door beyond the vestibule was locked. She tried it and was about to ring the bell, but Howard stopped her.

He inserted a picklock deftly in the key-hole of the door and opened it gently.

"It is better to give no alarm," he whispered, cautiously.

He looked keenly at the face of his companion, now fully revealed in the gaslight.

It was like marble, but in the clear depths of her sorrowful yet determined eyes he could read no falsehood or deception.

About to steal toward the library, both drew back.

Marie had suddenly come into view.

The housemaid, hurrying toward the staircase, drew back with a shock.

A scream of dismay and amazement rising involuntarily to her lips, was checked suddenly.

Howard had anticipated its utterance and its warning effects upon the inmates of the library.

He caught her arm with one hand and drew her toward him. The other crossed her lips and prevented her outcry.

"Not a word, girl," he breathed sternly to the affrighted housemaid. "Leave this hall, and do not reappear until I summon you."

He drew back his coat and exhibited his badge of official authority.

Not upon its glittering surface, however, were the terrified eyes of Marie fixed.

They had wandered to the face of Ethel Clifton. Riveted there they never wandered, even when the housemaid retreated down the hall, as the detective had ordered her.

"The end has come! All is lost; it is the real Ethel Clifton!" gasped the stupefied Marie, as she retreated from the spot.

Ethel Clifton seemed about to faint as she approached the unopened doorway of the library.

Then clenching her hands, she summoned all her courage for the ordeal she had determined to face, and, drawing the drapery aside, stepped across the threshold of the room.

There was a terrible cry of mingled emotion, followed by a sharp, wild ejaculation of alarm.

With a face suddenly lighted up with joy, hope, uncertainty, Vincent Morton had discovered the intruder.

At the same moment Viola Dale's eyes rested on the lovely form the dark doorway framed.

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sible all."

Howard followed her
mansion.

In the vestibule was
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stopped her.

He took her key in the key-
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Stealthily Vincent Morton climbed through the window of his prison and was at liberty.

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In a flash she recognized the stolen portrait.

In a moment, too, tracing disaster to all her plans in this sudden and unexpected appearance, she knew that speedy and immediate action alone would avert it.

Vincent Morton in a moment forgot all his terrible sacrifice to the jealous love of Viola Dale.

Here was his lost love alive, restored to her home, and apparently by some other means than the agency of Viola Dale.

Surely he was absolved from his pledge to the dark schemer at his side.

With outstretched arms, rapturous, eager, he forgot all save the crowning, tumultuous joy of the moment, and would have sprang toward Ethel to fold her in a loving embrace.

He stood rooted to the spot, and then reeled back slightly as two rapid occurrences took place.

With a queenly gesture of command and repellant dignity, with flashing eyes and censuring tone, Ethel Clifton had uttered the single ominous word:

"Back!"

At the same moment Viola Dale's jeweled hand caught his own and drew him toward the window.

"Remember your promise," she hissed. "Your love is safe, but you are pledged sacredly to wed me."

Ethel Clifton advanced slowly, steadily into the apartment.

Viola Dale, with the prevision of the crafty plotter who thinks only of ultimate escape amid possible defeat, had forced Vincent almost to the open library window. Secluded by the folds of the curtain of the doorway, Howard the detective was an interested spectator of all that was occurring in the room.

The glance of Ethel Clifton rested with burning intensity on the face of the man she loved, as if to trace there fidelity or falseness.

Then it became riveted on the bold, defiant features of his companion.

For a short second of time the rivals confronted each other.

Then, aroused by jealousy, injustice, and grief, Ethel Clifton burst forth:

"Impostor—accomplice of my jailers—murderess—I know you. The mask is down at last. Your hour of punishment has come. I am Ethel Clifton."

Not a word from Viola Dale. The dusky face did not even pale.

Only with a keen speculative light she seemed calculating how much power lay behind her appearance here; how fatal to her own plots did her inexplicable liberty signify.

"I know all," continued Ethel; "the perfidy of the man who was my affianced husband, for I have witnessed it, his probable guilt in the murder of the only friend I had in the world."

Her voice, began in stern, condemnatory accents, faltered in a sob despite herself.

"No, no, Ethel; I swear you have misunderstood all—"

Vincent Morton, starting forward with these words on his lips, paused abruptly.

"Silence!" rang in thrilling tones from Ethel's lips. "I have seen—I have heard all. You cannot deceive me. Though it break my heart, I will not falter at the bidding of justice. Murderess, to the law you must account for your share in the killing of my uncle, General Clifton."

Viola Dale was about to speak in bold, defiant tones to refute the accusation, in deft craftiness attempt to drive the intruder to reveal what assistance she had at hand, that she might know how deep was her peril.

Just then, however, her eyes were lifted to the drapery of the door.

She caught a momentary glimpse of the peering face of Howard the detective.

She did not hesitate to act, and quickly.

By her side, near to the window, stood Vincent Morton, stupefied, transfixed at the crushing words of Ethel Clifton.

What cared she for the failure of all Talcott's schemes for gain and her own, so that she prevented Vincent explaining his seeming disloyalty to Ethel?

What recked she of the restoration to her rights of the persecuted heiress of the Clifton fortune, so that she gained the prize she so craved—the love of Vincent Morton?

Would he, in the face of Ethel's unexpected return, disavow his pledged fealty?

She could not risk it. She must escape with him at once.

Rapidly as flashed these thoughts through her mind did she act finally.

She stepped to the low frame of the window and sprang through to the ground, almost dragging the confused and bewildered Vincent with her.

She almost fell over a form crouched in the grass beneath the window as she did so.

"I will not go with you. Friend! siren! you shall not drag me away from the innocent girl who unjustly believes me false," cried Vincent, suddenly.

"You must!"

As she spoke Viola Dale, a fierce, jealous rage in her face, lifted her hand.

Again from the jeweled ring the poison spray dashed into the face of Vincent, taken completely off his guard.

Again that fatal, deadly lethargy of the senses seemed to invade will and motion,

and the woman led him toward the garden a helpless captive.

She uttered a cry of concern as she glanced back at the library.

Howard the detective had sprung into the room as he saw the woman's movement to escape.

Just as he reached the window to spring forth in pursuit of the fugitives, a figure blocked his progress.

At the same moment the familiar voice of Talcott called out to Viola:

"There is a carriage in waiting in the rear court. Fly!"

Howard drew back dismayed as Harvey Talcott leveled a revolver at his breast.

"Back!" he cried, "or I will kill you."

Ethel Clifton shrank away with a cry of terror as she recognized the sinister face of her old-time enemy.

Howard, the detective, baffled in his design of pursuing Viola and Vincent, stood at bay.

Talcott gave the fugitives time to reach the court, then he began to retreat slowly from the window.

Not knowing how many other officers might be lurking about the house at the call of Howard, he did not attempt to again secure possession of Ethel Clifton.

"The game is lost!" he choked out as he sped from the window to the court.

The driver whipped up the horses as Talcott sprang into the cab.

The latter turned fiercely on Viola, who sat anxiously regarding Vincent Morton, who lay back in the carriage in a dead stupor under the effects of the narcotic.

"What does this mean?" demanded Talcott angrily.

"What?" demanded the woman calmly.

"The reappearance of Ethel Clifton at the mansion?"

"You had better answer that question. You allowed her to escape."

"Confusion, yes!" raved Talcott. "The game is lost, justice knows all. The fortune we plotted for will never be ours."

Viola Dale did not reply.

All her attention seemed centered on Vincent, and the fact incensed Talcott wildly.

"Do you hear me?" he shouted savagely. "We have lost all."

"Well, I can't help it."

"You don't seem to care much, either!"

"I do not. I did my part—you failed in yours. Don't blame me."

"Then you drop out of the game?"

"You say it is lost," insinuated Viola coldly.

Her quiet tones nettled Talcott irritably.

"Not if we devise a new plot."

"What new plot?"

"To destroy General Clifton's will, which makes Ethel Clifton his heirress."

"You have that will?"

"Yes!"

"She would inherit the fortune as next of kin."

"Not if she died and you then claimed it."

"Very well. Plot as you like and count on me, but I predict failure."

"Why?"

"The facts are against us, and I am tired of all this scheming."

"Well, well, we will consult with Alstyne. Something must be done to regain our lost ground. We must not lose this royal fortune nearly in our grasp."

Viola had started and looked concerned at the mention of Alstyne's name.

"You have Alstyne with you?" she asked uneasily.

"Yes. His love for you has made him a faithful ally; you intend to marry him, Viola?"

A dark frown gathered on the woman's brow.

"No," she said forcibly.

"But you promised?"

"I care not."

"Why have you changed your mind?"

"Because I love this man—because I have determined to wed Vincent Morton, come what may."

"Are you mad?" ejaculated Talcott amazedly.

"No" was the calm response. "I am in earnest, and I will not be balked in my design. I love him—I will protect him from your plots to the last. Attempt to battle me in this and I will betray your every plan to the police."

Talcott's brow darkened, but he was silent. He knew better than to oppose this woman at such a time.

The carriage had been driven rapidly all the time they were conversing.

After threading a tortuous course of streets and lanes, as if to leave a trail difficult to follow, it at last entered the same street where the detective had been knocked insensible by the driver of the vehicle.

The river district was soon traversed and the carriage finally halted.

The same frowning structure whence the cab had originally started looked down upon its occupants.

"We stop here?" asked Viola, as she surveyed the gloomy edifice.

"Yes, temporarily."

"What place is it?"

"The house where General Clifton's body was brought."

They dismounted, Viola beckoning the

driver to aid her in conveying the insensible Vincent into the place.

Talcott went down some low steps and knocked loudly at a basement door.

There was the clanking of bolts and chains.

A man with a light opened the door.

It was Alstyne, but so pale and agitated that Talcott regarded his disturbed features with a look of concern and startled surprise.

At that moment, while the plotters were again safely housed, Langdon, the detective, recovered from his fall in the street, had just reached the Clifton mansion.

At that moment, too, Howard stood in the library, regarding anxiously the pale and anguished face of Ethel Clifton.

She had just recovered from a deadly swoon, into which she had fallen immediately after the flight of Viola with Vincent.

And peering through the open window, for the present an unseen actor in the scene, Langdon silently awaited the developments of the hour, which he realized were destined to be of an important and startling nature.

CHAPTER XXXII

FIRE!

Alstyne led the way to a room at the end of a long corridor of the deserted building, aiding Viola to carry Vincent.

Talcott dismissed the coachman, and, locking the door, entered the room where they were a moment later.

Vincent had been placed on the floor, and Viola drew a stool near to him and sat watching him anxiously.

Alstyne's brow clouded as he noticed her devotion, and looked inquiringly at Talcott.

The latter, however, in graphic, rapid language, proceeded to detail the occurrences of the evening.

Alstyne listened with growing concern.

"You see," concluded Talcott moodily, as he completed his recital, "that all is lost, for the present at least."

"No, not yet," was Alstyne's confident reply.

"What do you mean?" demanded Talcott wonderingly.

"Come with me."

Alstyne's manner was impressive as he led the way from the room.

He entered an apartment farther down the corridor, in which a lamp burned on a rude deal table.

He pointed to a stool and said simply:

"Sit down, Talcott; I want to talk to you."

"What about?"

"Viola."

Talcott regarded his companion uneasily.

"What about her?" he demanded.

"A change has come over her."

"Ah! you noticed that?"

"Yes. She no longer loves me."

Talcott was silent.

"She has become infatuated with the man she brought here just now."

"Vincent Morton, yes. Alstyne, you are right."

"Very well; now, then, Talcott, for love of this woman I helped you in your schemes. A rival has appeared. I hold the key to all the Clifton fortune in my possession. This man must be removed and Viola Dale must marry me, or I refuse to aid you further."

"I cannot influence Viola."

"You can and must."

"How?"

"By placing this man Vincent in my power."

"I can do that."

"By craft or threats forcing Viola to wed me."

"I will do what I can."

"You promise this?" demanded Alstyne, earnestly.

"I do."

"Then listen. General Clifton's face at the window of this old structure was no fallacy."

"Ha! I begin to understand."

"You know," resumed Alstyne, "that this old deserted building was at one time a hiding place for Barnett's band. We brought General Clifton's body here. We believed him dead. Listen."

In low, confident tones Alstyne imparted some startling secret to Talcott.

The latter became wildly excited.

"Then we can yet wield Ethel Clifton to our will," he cried.

"Yes. A letter telling the truth would make her hasten to this place, even if she knew that captivity awaited her."

Talcott's face was radiant with triumph.

"All is not lost yet," he cried, exultantly.

"Where is *he*?"

"I conveyed him to the yacht."

"Good."

"We dare not remain here any longer."

"No, it might be known. Ethel Clifton may have told about it."

"Then we all leave here?"

"As soon as we send the letter to the girl."

"Will *he* write it?"

"He must. Now, Talcott, the man?"

"Vincent Morton?"

"Yes."

"What of him?"

"He must be given into my power."

"I will arrange it. Come."

They returned to the room where Viola was.

Talcott took her aside.

"You must go to the yacht at once," he said.

"And this man with me?" indicating Vincent.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because we have an important move to make, and you must assist us."

"You will take care of him until I return?" she demanded, earnestly.

"Yes."

"Be careful, Harvey Talcott. If you deceive me I will betray all."

"And if you do I will kill this new lover of yours."

The woman paled.

"Come, come," said Talcott, hastily, "we will not quarrel. In a day or two our plans will be perfected, and you shall have your lover again."

Viola, half-satisfied, cast a tender look at the insensible Vincent and left the place.

Talcott accompanied her, and returned to the room where Alstyne was a few minutes later.

"Well?" asked Alstyne, "you saw the man?"

"Yes."

"He is our prisoner, and for love of Ethel will obey us."

"I think so."

"Then let us sail the yacht to some other place."

"And send the letter to Ethel Clifton?"

"Yes."

"But that man?"

Talcott pointed to Vincent as he spoke. Alstyne's eyes glowed with a jealous, murderous fire.

"Leave him to me," he muttered, hoarsely.

"I will go to the yacht and get ready to sail."

"Very well."

"You will rejoin us?"

"In a few moments."

Talcott again left the place.

Alstyne walked over to where Vincent lay, and lifted him bodily to his broad, powerful shoulders.

He bore him from the room and carried him to the apartment where he had held the mysterious consultation with Talcott.

He unlocked a heavy oaken door, revealing a kind of cell beyond.

A chain and a manacle attached lay on the floor, attached to an iron ring in the floor.

It was rusted and old, and had evidently

been used to secure prisoners when Barnett's band infested the place.

He laid Vincent on the floor and fitted the manacle to his wrist.

It closed with a rasping snap, encircling Vincent's hand in a vise-like grip.

"He will be a safe prisoner here," muttered Alstyne, with fiendish satisfaction.

He hurried from the cell, as Vincent moved uneasily.

Alstyne closed and locked the door, and took up the lamp as if about to leave the apartment.

There was a murderous glitter in his eyes as he paused irresolutely.

Then as if prompted to crime by some demon with full savage sway over his evil soul, he flung the lamp to the farther end of the room.

Then he hurried from the place.

Ten minutes later, as the yacht set sail, Alstyne glanced back at the old deserted building.

In the window of the room in which Vincent Morton was a prisoner there showed the deadly, lurid glow of fire.

Had he waited a few moments later he would have seen the building burst into flames.

And outlined against the dark building, surrounded by fire and clinging to a water pipe, suspended between heaven and earth, was the victim of his evil plots—Vincent Morton.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE MYSTERIOUS LETTERS.

Langdon, the detective, did not enter the library of the Clifton mansion, even when he saw that Ethel Clifton was one of its inmates.

He had arrived too late to be a witness to the appearance of Harvey Talcott and the escape of Viola and Vincent.

His quick mind, however, intuitively discerned that some dramatic episode had just occurred, and that Ethel Clifton's reappearance at the mansion had been the occasion of a scene, the details of which might be important enough for him to learn at once.

Curious to witness, unobserved, the interview about to take place in the library between Ethel and Howard, the detective remained silently at the window, watching the movements of those in whom he was so much interested.

Ethel Clifton came back to life with a shuddering sense of emotion, gazing blankly at Howard and then reflecting confusedly.

"You are better, Miss Clifton?" he asked, solicitously.

"Yes, yes! but the woman who was here, and Vincent Morton?"

"They have escaped."

"Together?" she asked, gaspingly.

"Yes."

A thrill of anguish convulsed the girl's pale face.

"Then they are leagued together—he is false to me," she moaned.

"Yes, Miss Clifton; beyond doubt they are in collusion in some great scheme of fraud. At all events, Vincent Morton murdered your uncle."

"Oh, it cannot be possible!"

"The evidence already in my hands convicts him. His capture means certain death at the scaffold."

Ethel Clifton lowered her face in her hands and sobbed bitterly.

The revulsion of feeling was too powerful for her to endure placidly.

She could scarcely bring her mind to adjudge her affianced husband an assassin.

He might be false to his vows of constancy, still her woman's heart sought to shield him from danger, hoping the murder at least might not be placed to his charge.

Howard proceeded to state the evidence against Vincent Morton.

He told of his surreptitious visit to the Clifton mansion, of the murder, of the box found in his possession, of his flight, and finally of his certain connection with the Talcott band and with Viola Clifton.

As the reader will remember, Vincent's zeal to gain Howard's confidence at Lakeside resulted in an avowed connection on his part with Barnett, the rascally coin-dealer.

Howard, therefore, ignorant of many of the real details of the case, imagined he was right in his surmise as to Vincent's guilt, and his complicity with Talcott and Viola in their schemes for securing the Clifton fortune.

Ethel became calmer as he spoke. Amid all he said there entered her mind the same suspicion that had come to the detective London.

She discerned quickly that there was a very weak point in the case against Vincent.

Why, she asked herself, had Viola Dale denied Vincent's guilt at the first, if he was an accomplice?

There were many other details equally as obscure, and a dim hope came into her mind that Vincent Morton might not have murdered her uncle.

Still the dark cloud of his evident faithlessness hovered over her mind like a fall.

"Will you tell me your experience in this case, now that I have related my own?" inquired Howard.

Ethel hesitated.

"Yes," she said finally, "I will tell you all."

She had proceeded with her story for only a few moments when there was an interruption.

The housemaid, Marie, had entered the room with an anxious look on her face.

"I must speak with you alone, Miss Clifton," she said.

Howard, from Ethel's story of the maid's evident complicity with Viola Dale, mistrusted her, but Ethel had arisen with an air of surprise, and had accompanied Marie to a retired portion of the room.

"I have a letter for you, Miss Ethel," she said.

"From whom?" asked the young girl, bestowing a suspicious look on the girl.

"I do not know. A man brought it to the door. It must be important, for he comes from Harvey Talcott."

Ethel started at the mention of that dreaded name.

She took a sealed envelope from the girl's hand, and the latter withdrew to the hall without.

"I have received a letter," said Ethel to Howard; "excuse me while I read it, please."

Howard bowed courteously, but looked annoyed and mystified at the episode of the letter.

Ethel tore off the envelope. There were two inclosures.

Howard, watching her face closely, saw her start and pale quickly as she perused the outside missive.

She seemed to be fairly overcome with terror as she read the second.

Her eyes closed with a spasm of pain, and she crushed the letters in her hand convulsively.

Howard sprang forward, as he feared she was about to faint for the second time.

She recovered herself, however, and waved him away hysterically.

"I must leave you," she said in a choked, unnatural tone.

Howard looked concerned, distressed.

"Miss Clifton," he said, gravely, "I mistrust that you have received a letter that has agitated you. As a detective, as a friend, I ask you to confide in me its contents."

"No, no, I cannot; I dare not. I beg of you to believe that I am acting for the best."

"You intend to leave the house in answer to that missive?"

"Yes."

"And it is from a friend?"

Ethel hesitated.

"No, but I must obey it."

"The trap of an enemy to once more get

you in his power, perhaps. Miss Clifton—"

"For heaven's sake do not detain me. If it were to my death I were going, I must answer that letter in person and at once."

Howard fell back in blank amazement and dismay as Ethel Clifton left the room.

Langdon, the detective, watching interestedly at the library window, was fully as much bewildered at this new mysterious complication in the case.

Howard hesitated for a moment or two, then acting on a sudden impulse, opened the door and stepped into the corridor.

Ethel Clifton had disappeared, but he could hear her conversing excitedly with the housemaid in the hall upstairs.

"He will follow you certain," Marie was saying. "If you wish to evade him adopt my plan."

Five minutes later a veiled form came down the stairs and passed stealthily down the steps.

Howard waited a moment and then started in silent pursuit of the figure.

"It is Ethel Clifton," he muttered. "I must not lose sight of her."

He started as he reached the gate.

A man suddenly appeared at his side—a familiar voice spoke his name.

"Howard!"

"You, Langdon?"

"Yes. I have witnessed all that has passed in the library window from the garden. We must follow yonder woman, for I am almost positive her enemies have devised some new scheme to lure her away from her friends."

The detectives had done too much "shadowing" in the past not to instantly comprehend the proper execution of their present task.

They separated and the solitary veiled figure before them was trailed closely.

Her actions puzzled them not a little, for after walking nearly a mile she retraced her steps and returned directly to the Clifton mansion.

She was about to enter the front door when Howard, close upon her footsteps, caught her arm.

"Miss Clifton," he began.

"I am not Miss Clifton," replied a pert voice.

"Marie, the housemaid!" ejaculated Howard in dismay, as she threw her veil aside and disappeared within the house with a mocking laugh.

"We have been duped—baffled," remarked Langdon, concisely.

"Then the other one has escaped?"

"Doubtlessly."

"And exchanged her apparel with the maid purposely to evade us?"

"Exactly."

For a few minutes the detectives held a hurried consultation.

Langdon did not take Howard into his confidence, for there was no time to lose.

He informed the other that he would follow up the case personally, and send for him when his services were necessary.

Then, bidding him remain entirely secretive about the Clifton mystery till he saw him again, Langdon started for the old house at the river side, to take up anew the lost trail of the unfortunate Ethel Clifton.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

STARTLING ADVENTURES.

The yacht which had conveyed Viola Dale, Talcott, Alstyne, and Bartley away from the old river side house proceeded for nearly a mile before it was again moored.

Then Talcott emerged on deck and handed Alstyne the letters which later, through Marie's hands, reached Ethel Clifton, with the result already known to the reader.

If Viola made any demonstration as to the disposition of Vincent Morton, she was coolly informed by Talcott that he was in safe hands, and that she should see him again when the scheme had prospered.

Meantime the helpless victim of Alstyne's jealous treachery was in a most unpleasant and perilous position.

He had aroused from the lethargy into which the narcotic administered by Viola had cast him.

He could see that he was in a small cell-like apartment, for the stout oaken door had a little transom over it through this the reflection of a lamp or a fire showed plainly.

One hand was tightly held by an iron manacle and this was attached to a chain.

He attempted to rise, but the chain was secured to a ring in the floor, and he was prevented from doing so.

Startled—alarmed—as he heard an ominous crackling sound in the adjoining room, he made a violent tug at the chain.

The rusted links gave way with such force that he fell against the opposite wall.

He was free, however, only the iron handcuff remaining on his wrist.

He climbed to the transom and peered over.

A sight that chilled him with vague alarm greeted his vision.

The entire corner of the apartment was in flames, and the fire was spreading rapidly through the room.

He dashed through the transom. A moment later he had leaped into the midst of the flames, dashed through them, and was free to make his escape.

He wandered vainly over the old structure,

ure, seeking some avenue of escape, but finding none.

More than once he was forced to pause, and, dizzy-headed and confused, realized that the full effects of the drug had not yet departed.

An agonized sense of emotion drove him to keen distress, as he dimly recalled the scene in the library and the strange appearance of Ethel Clifton.

"She thinks me false—the world judges me an assassin," he murmured concernedly. "I must escape and find Langdon or I am lost."

The fire had spread through the building as at last he found a window in the basement broken and without bars.

He was on the edge of the wharf, and the fresh night air, instead of reviving him, seemed to drive him to still deeper stupor and lethargy.

Excited cries in front of the building told him that the fire had been discovered.

Doubtless a throng was gathering. He would be conspicuous if he went through the arched court, and the police might find, recognize, and arrest him where he was.

A coal scow, unladen, was moored near the wharf. It would afford temporary refuge at least, and he clambered upon it and climbed down the notched center-pole into its hold.

He was in a dreamy stupor ere he realized it. He slumbered soundly for hours, unaware of all that was transpiring about him.

When he awoke at last all was silent about him, and the darkness and loneliness was intense.

He arose to his feet with unsteady steps and climbed to the deck of the flat-boat.

At a glance he discerned that it had been moved during the night.

It now lay moored on the banks of the river, apparently some miles from the city, and was one of a large number lying near the shore waiting to be loaded from a dock piled high with coal.

His exact location he could not determine. How far he had been removed in the old flat-boat he was unaware. He was confused and baffled as he attempted to think out the events of the night.

Across a dreary waste, near the river, was a light apparently emanating from some building.

He made his way toward it, and found it to be a lonely tavern frequented by rivermen.

The sleepy landlord in the bar nodded acquiescently as Vincent asked for lodging for the night.

Do what he could, he could not shake off completely the deadening sensation of the

drug that had robbed him of consciousness.

He learned that the place was some miles from the city, so, vaguely forming a plan to return in the morning, and once more essay to follow the lost trail, he sought rest.

The reaction of days of weariness and excitement came with sleep.

He awoke profoundly. While the plots of Harvey Talcott were going on uninterrupted, he was all unconscious of their operations.

With a cry of dismay and chagrin he awoke at last. The sun was setting; he had slumbered through the night and the following day.

"Hours of valuable time lost," he murmured concernedly. "Time enough for my enemies to leave the city and cover every trace of their whereabouts."

He hastened to the lower floor of the tavern as he aroused himself, hurriedly partook of a meal, paid his bill, and left the place.

He reflected deeply as he proceeded along the shore of the river and made his way in the direction of the distant city.

Darkness had come down, and he was about to strike off to some more frequented highway, when he became interested in watching a yacht moored near the shore.

It was a strange craft for those waters, and Vincent, without knowing why, began to speculate upon its mission in this out-of-the-way place.

There appeared to be only one person aboard, and he, with the aid of a lantern, was visiting the cabin, the hold, and the deck in turn, in making all snug and trim for the night.

As the light of the lantern flashed across the man's face, Vincent Morton started with a keen look of recognition.

"I have seen that man's face before," he mused, "but where?"

He had to reflect but a moment to determine this point.

The man on the deck of the yacht was the same man who had attempted to kill Langdon the detective and himself in the underground room in Barnes's house by means of the glass globe of poison.

It was indeed Bartley, and, as Vincent regarded his evil features, he decided that he would watch him for a time at least.

Perhaps this man's appearance here bore some relation to the schemes of Harvey Talcott.

Possibly by keeping track of him he might be enabled to regain the trail of his enemies.

If he could do this, he would feel absolved from his rash promise to wed Viola Dale.



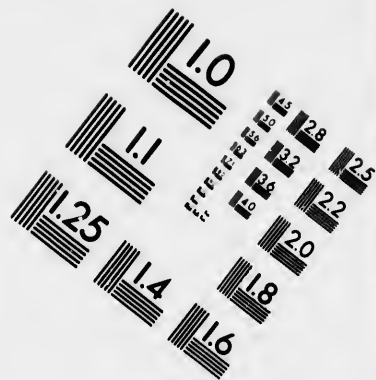
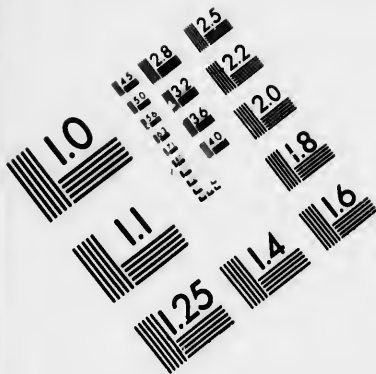
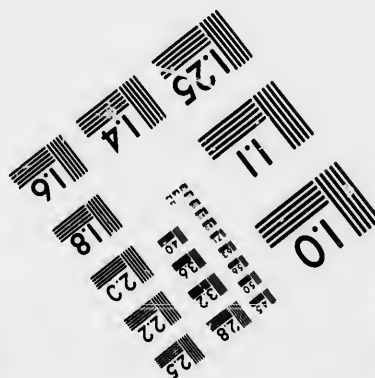
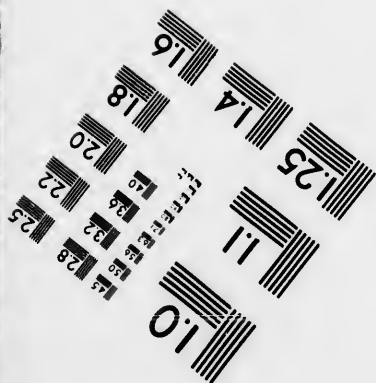
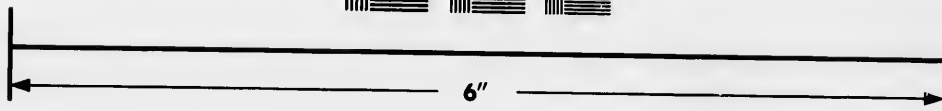
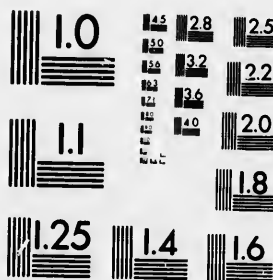


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MANACLE AND BRACELET.

He had made a definite pledge to her, contingent on the restoration of Ethel Clifton to her home and the destruction of the plots of Harvey Talcott.

But the Clifton heiress had returned without Viola's agency being apparent in the matter, and if Vincent secured Talcott's arrest without her aid then he could honorably nullify the contract he had made.

He would watch Bartley, he decided, and then return to the city and see what had transpired at the Clifton mansion.

Bartley soon extinguished the lantern and left the boat.

He walked briskly along the bank of the river, and Vincent at a distance shadowed him unobserved.

Bartley finally diverged through a little grove of trees and came to a place beyond which, located on a little branch of the stream, was a singular-looking building.

Half farm-house, half mill, it was gloomy in the extreme.

It was surrounded by old lumber and rubbish of various kinds, and behind a pile of this Vincent glided as Bartley approached the lower door of the place.

It opened at his knock, he entered, and the door closed.

By the light shining from within Vincent caught sight of the face of the man who had admitted Bartley.

It was Harvey Talcott.

"They are there," murmured Vincent, intensely excited. "What had I better do? Return to the city and secure police aid and arrest them?"

"I dare not. The moment I make an appeal to the police I lay myself open to arrest as a fugitive from justice.

"My position is a most unfortunate one. I am handicapped at every advantageous movement I would make.

"And yet by watching these people I may gain some new point of information of benefit to me."

He stole across the space between his place of concealment and the building, to gain its shadow and endeavor to effect an entrance.

As he did so he paused abruptly and glanced down.

Then stooping over, he picked up a glittering object that had attracted his attention.

He uttered a cry at once exultant and painful as he recognized the object in his hand.

For it was a bracelet peculiarly framed, and having a diamond center in its rich gold setting, of rare brilliancy and value.

At a glance Vincent Morton recognized it, and his manner was intensely agitated as he remembered where he had last seen it.

It was his own betrothal gift sent to Ethel Clifton in Italy over a year previous.

It was the same bracelet that showed in the stolen portrait; he could not be in error.

How had it come here? Had it been lost while these plotters were dragging Ethel Clifton to this new place of confinement.

Could it be possible that she was again in their power?

He pressed the jewel to his lips fervently, longingly, as he thought of the woman he loved.

It clanked accidentally against the iron manacle still on his wrist, as he proceeded to place it in his pocket.

Amid the excitement of the past few hours he had almost forgotten this cold, cruel reminder of the hatred and villainy of his enemies.

"Manacle and bracelet!" he murmured bitterly; "the one a reminder of the heartless cruelty of the foes who seek to destroy my reputation and my life.

"The other symbolical of the flashing gold and jewels that have lured these plotters to intrigue and crime.

"I will keep them both, and cherish the memories they invoke until the day comes when I can boldly produce them to confront the vile schemers who have persecuted my darling Ethel and driven me to become a fugitive from justice.

"How comes the bracelet here? Is Ethel Clifton a prisoner in that building?"

"I will soon know. Disaster and peril have attended every step I have taken in tracking down Harvey Talcott and his accomplices.

"Death may be my reward this time, yet will I go on for the sake of the woman I love, Ethel Clifton."

He stole around the building, and inspected it closely.

At one place, where a light gleamed through the broken blinds of a window in the second story, he essayed to reach the place and peer in.

A half-ruined trellis ran up the side of the building near the window, and this Vincent endeavored to ascend.

He managed to nearly gain the window, and by leaning over and clinging to the trellis he could peer into the apartment beyond.

As he did this a wild ejaculation escaped his lips.

With staring, amazed eyes he glanced into the room through the broken blinds.

A sight that made him doubt the evidence of his senses overpowered him with the wildest amazement and uncertainty.

"Great heavens!" he cried. "It cannot be!"

For the room held three occupants.

Two of them were Harvey Talcott and the man Alstrove.

The other! At him, half reclining in a chair, weak, pale, and apparently helpless, Vincent Morton stared in the profoundest bewilderment and momentary superstitious doubt.

"General Clifton, or his spirit!" broke in a gasping murmur from Vincent's lips. "What mystery is this—"

Crash!

Amid his excitement, he had been careless of his movements.

The next moment the frail trellis work gave way.

He was precipitated to the ground with a violent shock, although not seriously injured.

He lay perfectly quiet for a moment or two, fearing the crash might have been heard in the room above and its cause be investigated.

No movement at the window, however, indicated this to be true.

He crept from the spot a moment later, and sat down on a pile of logs to reflect.

He was dazed, stunned, bewildered at this new complication in the mysterious case in hand.

"I cannot comprehend it all," he murmured in an intense tone of voice.

"I am utterly at a loss how to proceed.

"If Langdon, the detective, were only here. If I only had his friendly counsel and aid."

A form he had not noticed, lurking in the shadows of the place, stole silently to his side as he spoke.

A hand rested warningly on his arm, and a familiar voice spoke:

"Langdon is here."

A glad cry of delight escaped Vincent Morton's lips as he turned quickly and recognized the speaker.

It was Langdon, the detective,

CHAPTER XXXV.

TRAPPED.

"Come."

Langdon drew his friend and companion, Vincent Morton, away from the near proximity of the building they had been watching, with a single peremptory word.

Once in a spot where their voices might not accidentally be overheard by any lurking spy, the detective confronted Vincent cautiously.

"How came you here?" he asked.

"By sheer accident."

"When?"

"An hour since."

"Tell me briefly all that has occurred since I saw you last."

In rapid, graphic outline Vincent de-

tailed his adventures since they had last met.

In doing so he supplied the missing links in the chain of the narrative.

The detective listened interestedly to his recital.

"And you?" inquired Vincent.

As concisely, the detective told of the varied and exciting episodes in which he had taken part during the past few days.

After leaving Howard and the Clifton mansion he had gone at once to the burning structure at the river side.

Hence he had traced the yacht, and, an hour previous, had located Talcott in the place to which Vincent had so strangely been led by Bartley.

"Then Ethel is again a captive of Talcott and his accomplices?" inquired Vincent anxiously.

"Yes."

"And believes me false?"

"He will soon know the truth."

"Then you propose—"

"To arrest all hands."

"When?"

"At once. We must make no mistakes this time."

"I hope not."

"Talcott believes that I am dead, and that they are secure in their new hiding place here."

"Undoubtedly."

"I will allow them to dwell in fancied security while I hasten to the nearest telegraph station."

"For what purpose?"

"To send to the city for sufficient police aid to surround the house and arrest its occupants."

"And I am to remain here?" inquired Vincent.

"Until I return, yes. You forgot to tell me you climbed the trellis yonder a moment since."

"Yes."

"What did you see?"

Vincent manifested a quick excitement and agitation.

"Ah, I forgot!" he cried.

"Forgot what?"

"To tell you what I saw. Langdon, the dead has come to life."

"What do you mean?" demanded the mystified detective.

"That these plotters cannot now hope to secure the Clifton fortune."

"How is that?"

"Nor can I be arrested for murder."

"I do not understand you."

"General Clifton is alive."

At this startling announcement Langdon recoiled as if dealt a sudden blow.

"What is that?" he cried incredulously. "General Clifton alive?"

"Yes."

"Impossible!"

"I just saw him in that room yonder."

The detective's expressive face was the picture of amazement and doubt.

"You are positive?" he asked slowly.

"Yes, I saw him distinctly."

"Then these villains did not murder him after all?"

"Apparently not."

"Vincent," said the detective seriously, "this discovery places the case on an entirely new basis."

"I see that."

"I now understand how Harvey Talcott again induced Ethel Clifton to leave home."

"You mean the letters you spoke of?"

"Yes. Alas, he found General Clifton alive in the old building by the river side."

"Where they supposed they had left him dead?"

"Exactly. They took him to the yacht, and threatened him into writing to Ethel Clifton, and she hastened to obey him."

"That is how she comes to be their prisoner again."

"It must be so. We must return to the building and investigate all this new mystery," said Langdon, reflectively.

"Then you will not telegraph to the city for police aid, as you intended?" inquired Vincent.

"Not yet."

"Why not?"

"Because it may precipitate General Clifton in trouble."

"You mean about the secret Talcott holds regarding his son—the papers that compromised the family honor?"

"Yes."

"Then you hope to secure these?"

"I hope to learn all about this hidden mystery before I act definitely."

Langdon started toward the building.

"You remain within call," he ordered Vincent.

"Until you return?"

"Or signal. Yes. If I whistle thus," and Langdon gave a low, peculiar signal, "it means danger."

"And I shall come to your rescue?"

"Not at all."

"What then?"

"Hasten after the police."

"I understand."

Vincent ensconced himself near a pile of lumber, and saw his companion disappear in the direction of the building.

Langdon, the detective, was intensely engrossed in the case in hand.

The new element of mystery that had

appeared made him curious and interested.

He saw within the possible scope of a speedy accomplishment the utter defeat of all Harvey Talcott's evil plots.

In the structure he was now approaching were quartered all the principal parties to the great Clifton mystery.

He was safe to proceed with prompt, effective measures of arrest except for one reason.

Vincent had told him that for years Talcott had held a secret against General Clifton that menaced his welfare and good name.

Langdon was anxious to make a brilliant capture, but he did not wish to involve General Clifton in trouble.

"I must learn the truth concerning this family secret," he decided.

"Perhaps it is of a nature which it would kill the General to have made public."

"It must certainly be a forcible one to give Talcott so terrible a power over the millionaire."

"And yet may not this very secret be a vile plot of Talcott's, in which General Clifton is himself deceived?"

"A man of his sterling integrity could not willfully be concerned in a crime, and Talcott may be preying on his credulity with a false story regarding some alleged past misconduct of his son."

"I will learn the truth. I will rescue the General from his heartless blackmailers. Then I will jail the entire band for attempted murder and conspiracy."

Langdon proceeded silently around the building.

At last he espied a point of advantage, and hastened to avail himself of its benefits.

He had seen a light at a window on the side of the building near the branch of the river.

The curtain was down, the window open. The night breeze swayed it to and fro, and anon disclosed a woman's form pacing the apartment restlessly.

"It must be Ethel Clifton," he decided.

A shed projected from the building at this point, and its slanting roof came directly under the window.

The detective scaled the shed and began to creep up the roof.

He reached the window and arose to his feet.

His hands rested on the sill, and he peered into the room past the corner of the curtain.

"Ethel Clifton!" he murmured, excitedly.

"It is she."

The young girl was pacing the floor with a pale face and dejected air.

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The detective wished to attract her attention without exciting her alarm.

He drew aside the curtain and murmured her name softly.

"Miss Clifton!"

Ethel paused, started, and glanced at the window framing the face of the detective. "Do not cry out," warned Langdon. "Do you remember me?"

Ethel had drawn near the window, and regarded the detective with startled glance.

"Yes: you are the man on the yacht."

"Whose life you saved, and your friend."

"I know that. You are the detective."

"Yes, yes. You will trust and obey me to leave here."

"I dare not. My uncle is alive, a prisoner."

"I will rescue him."

"But the secret against his name. Be careful: some one is coming."

Langdon dodged down as the door of the room opened suddenly.

Talcott and Viola Dale entered the apartment.

The former uttered a cry of rage, and turned out the light.

"Do you wish to attract attention to the house?" he demanded angrily of Ethel.

"Beware! Your uncle's life is in the balance."

"Infamous plotter, what scheme do you now propose?"

"A signature to a certain document from your uncle. Come, he awaits you."

The trio left the room. Langdon stood at the window, undecided what to do.

The door opened again, and some one seemed to be searching for some object in the dark.

"The girl has returned," decided the detective. "I will venture to appeal to her to fly at once, and leave her uncle's rescue in my hands. Miss Clifton!"

There was a fluttering, rustling sound within the apartment.

A woman's form came to the window.

"You must escape, and at once," spoke Langdon, in a low, rapid tone.

A whispered response was made, less agitated than excited, although he noted it not at that moment.

"How can I?"

"By climbing through the window."

"No, no; there is a safer way."

"From the room itself?"

"Yes, yes."

"You know the way?"

"I do."

Langdon climbed over the window sill and dropped into the room.

"Quick," he said; "lead the way."

A soft hand clasped his own; a low voice murmured:

"Come."

"Can we evade Talcott and the others?"

"Yes, yes."

In the darkness he allowed his guide to lead the way.

They left the room and traversed an unlighted hallway.

Then his companion led the way down a flight of stairs.

There was a door at its end.

She tightened her clasp on the detective's hand.

"This way," she whispered, tumultuously.

She flung the door open suddenly, and fairly dragged the detective into a large lighted apartment.

Three men, its occupants, instantly sprang to their feet at his abrupt appearance.

They were Talcott, Alstyne, and Bartley.

With bent brows and fierce looks they regarded the intruder.

"Who is this?" demanded Talcott, excitedly.

Too late to retreat, Langdon regarded his guide with profound dismay as a low, mocking laugh escaped her lips.

Turning, his amazed eyes met, not the face of Ethel Clifton, as he had expected, but that of Viola Dale.

"Duped! trapped!" he uttered, in a tone of the deepest chagrin.

Three glittering revolvers confronted him as he took a retreating step, while Viola in triumphant tones announced his identity.

"An important capture, my friends," she cried, exultantly. "It is the detective."

CHAPTER XXXVI

IN CAPTIVITY.

Langdon did not attempt resistance in the face of the formidable armament which opposed his retreat.

"You are a very clever woman, Viola Dale," he remarked coolly, with an affected careless laugh, "but some day you will overreach yourself."

Talcott, of all the three plotters who had arisen to their feet, stood amazed and alarmed at this unexpected appearance of the detective.

"Are you the evil one himself?" he gasped out.

"No, but I seem hard to kill," smiled Langdon.

"How did he escape?" muttered Talcott. "I saw him bound, weighted, and sunk in the lake."

"You are mistaken," replied Langdon. "I accompanied the yacht to the city."

Talcott seemed terribly concerned over the mysterious escape from death of the detective.

"Will nothing kill this man?" he asked, hopelessly, of Alstyne.

"Take care!" cried the latter suddenly.

The warning was a general one. Closely watching Langdon, he had seen the latter make a suspicious movement.

The detective had remembered the signal agreed on by himself and Vincent, awaiting him outside the building.

He raised his hand to his lips to give utterance to the shrill, peculiar whistle he knew how to deliver with sufficient power and clearness to reach his ally's hearing.

As Alstynne uttered the warning words, however, the woman Viola quickly interpreted its significance, and anticipated and foiled the detective's purpose.

Her white but sinewy hand went across his mouth like a band, interrupting the signal.

The others sprang upon him. His struggles were vain, for they had soon overpowered him and bound him securely with his arms behind him.

"What shall we do with him?" asked Talcott anxiously.

"Put him in one of the rooms overhead, till we get ready to dispose of him," replied Alstynne.

At a motion from Talcott, his accomplice Bartley led the vanquished detective from the apartment.

"I don't like this," muttered Talcott, apprehensively.

"You mean the detective's appearance?" inquired Alstynne.

"Yes."

"He's caged, aint he?"

"So we have thought several times."

"Well, we will soon have no occasion to evade him, as you expect to bring General Clifton to terms."

"I am sure of it."

"Is the girl with him now?" asked Alstynne.

"Yes."

"And he has agreed to sign the documents?"

"He will do so, I am sure."

"That insures us the fortune."

"Without further trouble. Where are you going?" asked Talcott, as Alstynne arose, as if to leave the room.

"To see Bartley."

"What for?"

"I have my suspicions of this detective."

"That he may have allies?"

"Exactly."

"Why do you think so?"

"The attempted signal."

"True. That meant something."

"You may rest assured he has some one watching outside of the house."

Talcott looked annoyed.

"And I am going to find out," concluded Alstynne.

"How"

"Leave that to me. I think I will borrow the detective's disguise for a few moments."

"Ah; I understand."

"And take a little jaunt around the vicinity here."

Alstynne left the room as he spoke.

It was about half an hour later that the watching Vincent, on the outside, made out a stealthy figure lurking near the walls of the building.

He had grown impatient waiting, and bailed the appearance of Langdon, as he supposed the new comer to be, with relief and suspense.

Certainly the detective's peculiar attire and false beard and hat were present in the ensemble of the lurking figure.

Vincent whistled low and distinctly.

The figure paused, and raised a beckoning form.

The motion indicated caution and obedience, and Vincent followed the other at a distance.

He was led into the building through an open doorway on the lower floor.

"Langdon," he whispered, as the other began to ascend a staircase, "Have you found the girl?"

"Hist!" was the warning response.

Vincent kept following his guide. As they reached the landing he was suddenly seized from behind.

Bound securely, before he could realize it, he was flung into a lighted room.

Langdon, found like himself, regarded him with a look of dismay.

Alstynne removed the detective's disguise he had borrowed to delude Vincent into captivity.

"Two of them captured," he remarked to Bartley. "Watch them closely."

"I will," replied Bartley grimly.

He sat smoking his pipe on a stool, eyeing the prisoners from beneath his shaggy eyebrows with a satisfied, malignant expression on his evil face.

"Look the door after you," he called to the departing Alstynne.

"All right."

Langdon was consumed with impatience and chagrin, and paced the floor moodily.

Vincent, pale and distressed at the failure of their plans, stood silent, leaning against the wall and regarding Bartley glumly.

Evidently not satisfied with having their captives bound and imprisoned, the plotters had determined to prevent an escape this time by appointing a constant guard over their movements.

Langdon found his hands and arms se-

curely bound, and all efforts to burst the strong ropes proved unavailing.

Meantime, he was certain Talcott and Alstyne were perfecting their plans to secure the Clifton fortune.

An invalid old man, menaced with a terrible secret which threatened his fair family name, and a terrified, persecuted girl were being forced to some nefarious compact which doubtless would give the Clifton millions to successful plotters.

The schemes once successful, Langdon's work was all undone, and he might not be unable to prevent the Cliftons being victimized.

"I must regain my liberty," he muttered grimly, desperately. "I must know this new plan of Harvey Talcott to extort money of General Clifton, and the mysterious secret which gives the plotters their power."

His eye brightened as it fell upon Bartley. Apparently the ally of the plotters felt secure as regarded his captives, for he paid no further attention to them but dozed placidly as he smoked.

Langdon extended his restless pacing of the floor, so that he passed behind Alstyne several times.

He had devised a rash and daring plan to get rid of their gaoler.

He finally paused stealthily, gathered himself for a spring, and leaped upwards.

Tied as his hands were, he gave to his feet a bounding jump.

They alighted on the back of the unsuspecting Bartley.

The latter went forward as if propelled from a cannon.

His head struck the opposite wall with a crash.

Then with a single moan he sank insensible to the floor.

Langdon hurried at once to where Vincent stood amazedly witnessing this brilliant movement on the part of his companion.

"Quick!" he said, "let me release your bonds."

"How?" inquired the mystified Vincent.

"With my teeth."

In two minutes time Langdon had bitten apart the strands of rope securing his friend a prisoner.

Once free, Vincent set the detective at liberty.

The latter at once tried the door. It resisted all efforts to force it open.

Langdon glanced out of the window.

"The ground is only forty feet below," he explained to Vincent.

"But how shall we reach it?"

There was a large heap of rope lying in

one corner of the room, and of these the detective soon made a long, stout cable.

Securing it to the side of the window, he cast a last glance at Bartley.

"He will not awake from that blow for a time," he remarked. "I will descend first, you follow me."

"And then?"

"We will make our way into the lower portion of the building again."

Langdon dropped over the edge of the window and disappeared in the darkness below.

As the rope slackened finally as if relieved of its weight, Vincent followed his example.

He reached the ground and looked all round for some trace of the detective.

The latter was nowhere visible, and Vincent, somewhat mystified, began to search for him.

At that moment, however, the detective was a witness to a most startling scene, the importance and interest of which prevented him temporarily from rejoicing his anxious companion, Vincent.

CHAPTER XXXVII THE PRISONERS.

Langdon had no descender the rope its entire length, as Vincent imagined.

He had gone down to the floor beneath the room in which they had been imprisoned, when his attention was attracted by a light.

It shone from a window about five feet to the side of the rope, outside of which was a balcony.

One glance through the open window revealed the occupants of the apartment, and that momentary vision was sufficient to cause Langdon to pause.

He swung toward the balcony and released the rope.

Thus, a moment later, Vincent Morton passed down the rope without discovering the whereabouts of the detective.

Within the room, into which Langdon looked, a lamp burned dimly.

Lying upon a curtained bed, pale and apparently suffering, was the millionaire, General Clifton.

By his side, seated near the couch, and holding his thin white hand in her own, was Ethel Clifton.

There was a hunted, despairing look in the old man's face, while his devoted companion regarded his suffering through a veil of bitter tears of anguish.

The two other occupants of the apartment were Harvey Talcott, and his faithful ally and accomplice, Alstyne.

The latter was seated near the door, and

seemed only a passive actor in the present scene.

Talcott, however, was terribly excited, and paced the floor rapidly, a folded document in his hand.

"You have heard what I have had to say," he cried to General Clifton. "Your answer?"

"I have answered you already, infamous miscreant, blackmailer, and would be murderer!" cried Clifton, in agitated tones.

"Then you refuse to sign this paper?"

"I do. I will not blindly affix my name to a paper that may compromise myself and ruin those who are my friends."

"Suppose I make known to you its contents, then?"

"That is different. I am in your power. I am willing to purchase my liberty, and that of the poor girl you have persecuted so unjustly; but I must know the cost of the sacrifice."

"Your fortune," replied Talcott.

Clifton was silent.

"This paper," resumed Talcott, "converts to a friend of mine in the city, the means of securing a large portion of your fortune."

"And you will be satisfied with that?" inquired General Clifton, eagerly.

"No. You will remain our prisoner until I have carried out my plans."

"And then?"

"You will agree to convert sufficient of your ready into ready cash to pay me an additional one hundred dollars."

"Monstrous!"

"It is the price of your liberty, of life itself."

"I value neither."

"Your niece then."

A spasm of pain crossed the old man's face and he was silent.

"You will do well to agree to these terms," continued Talcott. "Then we will abandon the case."

"And I shall return to my home?"

"Yes."

"And my niece with me?"

"Certainly."

"What guarantee have I that after bargaining myself for your enrichment, you will not also rob me of my good name?"

"In what way?"

"By revealing the secret you have held over me for so many years."

"What would be my object?"

"Malice and revenge."

"I hear you none. It is the money I am after, and that I am determined to obtain. I demanded one-half your fortune as the price of the secret I held regarding your dead son."

General Clifton turned a shad- paper.

"An infamous falsehood, perhaps," he cried.

"And maybe not. I have the proofs of his crime."

"Well, well," interrupted Clifton, with an agitated glance at Ethel, "do not speak of it now."

"You refused my offer through Vincent Morton, and I began another plot. This is the end of it. Now then, you must agree to follow my bidding, and you shall escape."

"And the secret?"

"Every paper referring to it shall be given to you."

"And the box you stole from my library?"

"The one you intended Vincent Morton to carry away."

"Yes."

"That, too, shall be returned to you."

"You promise it?"

"Faithfully. I will even tell you where it is. The moment you sign this paper I will give you a memorandum describing the place where the proofs we spoke of are hidden."

General Clifton hesitated.

Ethel had glided to a dark corner of the room and sank into a chair.

Enveloped in a shawl there, she sobbed bitterly at a realization of how fully her name was in the power of these desperate captors.

"Your answer?" spoke Talcott, harshly and impatiently.

"I want time to reflect over your proposition."

"How much time?"

"Ten minutes."

"Agreed."

"Alone with my niece to discuss it."

"Very well. Come, Alstyne. In ten minutes time I return for you to sign the paper."

The two plotters left the room.

The watching, interested detective heard the door locked on the outside.

Ethel Clifton flung aside the shawl, and rushed to her niece's side.

"Oh, my dear, my dear!" she cried, "is there no way out of this terrible sacrifice?"

"None," replied Clifton, gloomily.

"And you will sign the paper?"

"Yes."

"And later again divide your fortune with these villains?"

"They demand it. I am powerless. It is that or death."

"You believe his story about Ernest, your dead son?"

"Alas, the proofs seem indisputable."

"And this crime—it involves his reputation?"

"As an honest man, yes."

"Tell me all?"

"No, no. If I can only trust Talcott to deliver up the papers, I will be content to lose half the fortune."

"You will not do that, General Clifton?"

Ethel recoiled with a started cry.

General Clifton half rose on his couch, and stared wonderingly at the open window looking on on the balcony.

It framed a face and figure unfamiliar to him, but Ethel cried joyously.

"We are saved!"

"Who is he?" asked Clifton anxiously.

"A friend to us; the dead enemy of our foes."

"I am a detective, General Clifton," interrupted Langdon, advancing into the room, "and I indeed come to save you."

"It is impossible."

"No. Arouse yourself, exert yourself, for you must leave here."

He advanced to a little stand near the couch.

It contained, besides various phials of medicine, a bottle of some powerful liquor. Pointing out a glass, he placed it to the lips of the invalid.

"Drink," he urged gently but firmly.

General Clifton obeyed him.

"You must gain sufficient strength to leave this place," continued the detective.

"Man, I dare not."

"Because you fear Talcott's vaunted secret. Leave it all to me. I swear he shall never make it known if you but trust me with the conduct of this case."

"Oh, uncle, uncle, obey him; we can trust him; he is our friend."

General Clifton seemed agitated by contending emotions of a powerful nature.

"Remain here and you are lost," said Langdon. "Can you not trust me when I tell you that night and day since your supposed murder I have risked my life a score of times to defeat your enemies and aid your friends."

His earnest tones, and the stimulant he had taken seemed to finally arouse Clifton from his cowardly dread of Talcott.

He managed to overcome his weakness sufficiently to arise from the couch.

The brilliant, unnatural light of excitement gleamed in his eyes as he asked:

"How shall we escape?"

"By yonder window."

"There is a ladder there, then?"

"No, a rope; but do not fear. It is stout and the distance to the ground is slight."

"Come, uncle, let us not delay," urged the agitated Ethel.

"And whither shall I go?" inquired Clifton.

"There is a settlement near here. Hasten

thither. But you will find a friend below to aid you."

"A friend?"

"Yes, Vincent Morton."

General Clifton seemed pleased at the mention of his old-time friend.

Ethel turned a shade paler and shuddered slightly.

She had heard her uncle and Talcott speak of the attempted murder without in any way implicating Vincent.

She had not yet, however, learned all the details of the crime, and a memory of Vincent's apparent faithlessness made her shrink from meeting him.

The detective led both of them to the balcony.

Despite his weakness, General Clifton seized the rope steadily as Langdon drew it toward him.

"Brave man, how will you, single-handed, meet our enemies?" asked Ethel, anxiously.

"I will meet and battle them, never fear," was the confident reply.

Langdon saw them disappear down the rope.

Then he re-entered the apartment and glanced at his watch.

"Fifteen minutes to prepare for my meeting with my enemies," murmured Langdon, grimly.

And then the detective began the initial steps in a crafty game against his boss, in which all his skill and shrewdness would be required.

CHAPTER XXXV. II.

A TERRIBLE PREDICAMENT.

Langdon had conceived an idea at once brilliant and perilous.

Partly to cover the escape of General Clifton and his niece, Ethel, and afford them time to reach a place of safety, and because he wished to endeavor to learn more of the Clifton secret, he had determined to attempt a bold imposture.

The moment he was alone he began a rapid transformation of his personal appearance.

He always carried the means of effecting a rapid disguise, and although his coat and hat had been taken by Aistyne to inveigle Vincent into the place, he carried other disguises under his vest.

In a moment he had produced wig and false whiskers, and proceeded to arrange the gray locks artificially.

From a little case of powders and other cosmetics he selected several articles, and penciled his face with deep lines and furrows.

Then he arranged the shawl over the

chair where Ethel had been when Talcott and Alstyne last left the apartment.

In the deep shadow of the room it looked as if her form was still concealed there.

Langdon then turned down the lamp still lower, drew the curtains of the couch more closely, and taking a pair of colored eyeglasses in his hand, drew the clothes of the couch over all his form except his face.

His imposition was certainly a remarkable one, and entirely life-like and natural.

In a word, he resembled General Clifton in general appearance most strangely.

The gray hair and beard and penciled face were aided in their effect by the dim light in the apartment.

He had just got comfortably ensconced in the bed when there was the sound of the door being unlocked.

Talcott entered the room, followed by Alstyne.

The former cast a careless glance at the deftly arranged shawl over the chair, and, as Langdon had anticipated, never suspected that Ethel Clifton was not an inmate of the apartment.

Alstyne sank to a chair by the door, as if totally uninterested in the interview about to occur.

"You've got it terrible gloomy here," remarked Talcott approaching the couch.

Langdon was a natural mimic and ventriloquist, and did not fear to venture a reply.

In a well-feigned imitation of General Clifton's tones, he said:

"The light is bad for the eyes."

Then he placed the colored spectacles on his nose, thereby still further disguising his face.

"About this paper?" said Talcott. "Have you decided?"

"Yes."

"You will sign it?" demanded Talcott eagerly.

"Willingly."

Talcott unfolded the document he carried in his hand, with an exultant look on his face.

"Provisionally," supplemented the false General Clifton.

Talcott frowned darkly.

"How provisionally?"

"You promised to tell about the hiding-place of the papers."

"Referring to the secret of your son, Ernest?"

"Yes."

"Well, I will, but sign first."

"No, the information first."

"And you agree to then sign this document?"

"I do."

"Very well, they are hidden away near Lakeside."

"Where?"

"In a coffin."

Langdon started.

He now recalled the conversation he had overheard transpire in the house in the city, where Ethel Clifton was supposed to have died.

In that interview an allusion had been made to certain papers in connection with the mock burial.

The casket in which he had so nearly been buried alive contained, then, the great Clifton secret.

He thrilled at quick excitement as he realized the importance of this discovery.

If Talcott told the truth, and he probably did, the papers once secured, the villain was completely disarmed from further persecution of the Cliftons, once these papers were found by Langdon, or destroyed.

Talcott seemed to grow impatient at the long silence of the pretended Clifton.

"Now will you sign the paper?" he asked.

Langdon had determined on a decisive movement.

"Yes," he said.

Talcott motioned to Alstyne.

The latter brought a pen and ink to the side of the couch.

Langdon feigned extreme weakness as he seized the pen.

With suspenseful delight Talcott watched him scrawl a signature at the bottom of the closely written document.

In his satisfaction and impatience he fairly tore the paper from Langdon's hand. He carried it to the lamp, his eyes gleaming with triumph.

Alstyne followed him, interestedly.

"The fortune is ours at last," cried Talcott exultantly.

"A part of it you mean," corrected Alstyne.

"The rest will be ours quite as easily in time."

Langdon crept silently from the couch.

Cautiously he drew a revolver.

It was one that had been taken from him by Barkley when Viola Dale led the detective into the power of his enemies an hour previous.

He had recovered it from Alstyne when the latter was overpowered in the room on the upper floor, whence himself and Vincent had escaped by the rope.

He stood ready now to capture his two foes, who were engrossed in perusing the document.

Suddenly a wild cry rang from Talcott's lips.

"Confusion!" he ejaculated, "we have been duped."

"Daped!" echoed Alstynne excitedly.

"Yes,

"What do you mean?"

"Look at that signature."

"Is it not General Clifton's signature?"

"No, read."

"Langdon, the detective," read Alstynne. Both men turned.

"Yes, gentlemen, I signed that document, and General Clifton and his niece have escaped to a place of safety."

As if petrified for a moment, the two baffled plotters stood regarding the detective in the wildest amazement.

They could scarcely credit the evidence of their senses.

But the voice of Langdon rang familiarly upon their hearing, and as they gazed at him they discerned his natural features even through his assumed disguise.

Langdon had leveled the revolver directly at them.

"Move and I fire," he said menacingly. "Gentlemen your game is ended, and you are my prisoners."

In the face of his determined bearing and the poised weapon in his hand, the baffled plotters were motionless and silent.

"You will obey me implicitly," resumed the detective calmly, "and march from this place ahead of me to the nearest settlement, where I shall hand you over to the police."

"No, we will not."

Alstynne, flaming with rage and chagrin, sprang toward Langdon boldly.

He had drawn a revolver, reckless of the detective's threat.

The latter pulled the trigger of the weapon in his hand.

Its sharp click was followed by no explosion.

Evidently Bartley had removed the cartridges.

With a cry of dismay, Langdon flung the revolver to the floor.

Alstynne fired at him point blank.

Narrowly escaping the shot, the detective dashed toward the window.

He sprang to the balcony and made a jump for the rope hanging near at hand.

As he grasped it, a derisive laugh caused him to glance up.

At the window above was Bartley, evidently recovered from his insensibility in time to prevent the detective's meditated escape.

He held a knife in his hand, and its gleaming blade swept the surface of the rope.

Its strands parted and the detective was precipitated through space.

At the same moment Talcott and Alstynne

reaching the balcony, fired down into the darkness.

Langdon could not repress a cry of pain as he reached the ground.

His foot seemed sprained by the fall, for it was with difficulty that he limped out of range of the shots of his enemies.

His plan had in part, failed most disastrously.

However, he hopefully theorized, General Clifton and his niece were safe by this time.

He heard Talcott urge Alstynne excitedly, to hurry from the balcony and intercept the detective's escape.

Langdon could scarcely limp along, so great was the pain in his sprained limb.

"I must not be captured now," he muttered, grimly. "I must secrete myself until the search is past."

He looked quickly around, and then made his way as rapidly as possible toward the branch of the river near at hand.

A flat-boat, partially loaded with wood, was moored to the banks.

Just as he clambered upon it, he could see three hurrying forms dash from the building from which he had just escaped.

He hoped they had not perceived him, but he lost heart as he heard them utter an excited shout.

He climbed over the wood and into the open hold of the boat.

There he crept to a dark corner and awaited developments.

They were not slow in revealing themselves.

A few moments later three forms clambered over the piles of wood.

"I saw him come here," cried Alstynne.

"Then he must be in the hold," suggested Talcott.

"Yes. Bring a lantern, Bartley."

The man addressed ran back to the old building.

He reappeared a moment later with a lantern.

Its rays showed to the detective his murderous enemies grouped around the entrance to the hold.

The illumination, too, revealed his crouching form to his enemies.

Talcott and Alstynne raised their revolvers to fire at him.

"Take care!" cried Bartley, warningly.

The men sprang aside at his warning cry.

With a crash a huge mass of wood became dislodged.

It rushed down towards the hold with crushing force, and filled it completely.

The action, sending the overweight to the bow of the boat, caused it to dip.

The recoil of the craft sent its side against a projecting timber on the dock.

There was an ominous gurgling sound. "The boat is sinking," cried Talcott in alarm.

"Then our friend, the detective, is done for this time sure," muttered Alstyne complacently.

His words seemed true.

Imprisoned in the hold of the boat, which was fast sinking from sight, what chance for life had the imperiled detective?

CHAPTER XXXIX.

TANGLED SEELING.

One month after the occurrence of the events detailed in the last chapter the Clifton case had assumed a strange aspect.

To the police it was a mystery abandoned as too impenetrable for lucid investigation.

To the public it became the excitement of a day, and then passed into the archives of the past as an almost forgotten tragedy.

In the vicinity of the Clifton mansion gossip was still busy with its details, though only incidentally and remotely.

There the certain murder of General Clifton and the stealing of his body was accepted as a fact.

The supposed assassin, Vincent Morton, was said to have gone to some foreign country to escape justice.

Marie, the housemaid, still had charge at the gloomy mansion, and, with the exception of another servant, was its sole occupant.

To the lawyer and others who had come to inquire concerning the disappearance of Ethel Clifton she made a plausible reply.

The young lady, she stated, overcome with grief at her bereavement, had left the mansion to visit some friends of the family in a distant city.

Whether the lawyer himself accepted this as the truth she did not know.

Marie seemed to consider the disappearance of the detectives as evidence that the plans of Talcott were succeeding, and she remained at her post of duty, awaiting his orders and further developments in the case.

Certainly that case had assumed a most singular aspect.

The occurrences at the old house by the river seemed to have placed a decided check on the movements of detectives and plotters alike.

To all semblance, Langdon, the detective, had gone to his death in the sinking flat-boat, crushed by the weight of the coal that filled its hold.

So, at least, Talcott, Alstyne, and Bartley believed.

What Langdon's fate was—whether he was

really killed, or mysteriously escaped, but so injured that he was forced to seek seclusion for a time—the course of this narrative will develop later in the natural sequence of events.

For the present, the veteran detective disappears from the case and all its varied workings.

A strange case of collateral disappearance was made manifest a week later.

Howard, the detective, received a note at police headquarters one evening, apparently from Langdon.

He went at once to the place it pointed for a meeting.

Whether it was a trap of Talcott or not, at least Howard from that day had not been seen by any of his police colleagues.

These two detectives had disappeared as suddenly and mysteriously as though the earth had swallowed them from the sight of man.

So far there was a clearfield for the unmolested operations of Harvey Talcott's plots, for two of his most dangerous enemies were apparently effectually removed from his path.

In order to fully comprehend the condition of affairs one month after the episode of the sinking of the flat-boat the reader must be told briefly of the occurrences transpiring that same night subsequent to the event alluded to.

When Ethel Clifton and her uncle had descended by the rope to the ground, with Langdon, the detective, covering their escape, they had not been discovered by any of the occupants of the building they had just left.

Pursuant to the suggestion of Langdon, the fugitives hastened to leave the place of their recent imprisonment.

General Clifton was too weak and sick to make rapid progress, however, and Ethel was in despair as he sank to the ground with a moan of helplessness and pain.

Vincent Morton was nowhere in sight, as the detective had stated he would be.

At the end of half an hour the fugitives had not got more than a few hundred yards from the building.

It was at the moment when Langdon escaped from his enemies and reached the flat-boat that General Clifton, striving to walk from the scene, fell over the edge of a deep pit in their path.

Ethel shrieked loudly as she saw her uncle disappear from view.

That cry was the means of precipitating a catastrophe.

Talcott and his accomplices had seen the flat-boat in which the detective, Langdon, was imprisoned gradually sink beneath the

CHAPTER XL

TRACED DOWN.

Let the reader pause for a moment and observe the peculiar condition of affairs the detectives in the Clifton case had brought about.

Their death or silence meant ultimate success for Harvey Talcott's plots, for they alone had locked in their breasts the details of the conspiracy against General Clifton and his beautiful niece.

Too often is this the case in actual detective experience.

An officer, in the zest of professional emulation to succeed alone, will go into danger with the secret of some great case possessed by himself only, and if he dies the result of all his work is lost.

Justice is blinded, the victim helpless, and villainy and crime triumphant, because no report or record of the detective's discoveries is made manifest.

This is a defect in the secret-service system which only the private detective agencies insist on obviating by a system of daily written reports of their operatives.

Even there a certain scope of secrecy is retained by the detective.

How many murderers, almost traced to their doom, have escaped because the detective who had been trailing them dies, and the secret of their guilt with him.

Of all this Vincent Morton was thinking one morning about a week after his recovery.

As has been stated, almost despairing but not yet daunted he had, after leaving the hospital, determined to once more seek trace of his lost love.

He was alone in the quest now, but he was not hopeless of accomplishing his purpose by patient, earnest toil.

His first visit had been to the Clifton mansion.

He had assumed a disguise which constituted almost a permanent change in his face, manner, and tone of voice.

His recent illness had made his features unnaturally thin, and this aided his assumption, so that a careful and successful makeup completely concealed his true identity.

He found no one at the Clifton mansion but Marie, the housemaid, and another servant.

Inquiry among the neighbors evolved the fact that but few persons had visited the Clifton mansion of late, and none of these answered the description of Talcott or his emissaries.

"I cannot understand it," murmured Vincent in a mystified tone, as he walked slowly away from the Clifton mansion, "No one has apparently returned to claim the fortune left by General Clifton. What

surface of the water, when Ethel's cry reached their ears.

Instantly they were on the alert. Three shadowy forms traversed the landscape in the direction whence the shriek had emanated.

A loud cry of delight escaped Talcott's lips as he saw and recognized their escaped captive, Ethel Clifton.

Amid her excitement and horror the poor girl fainted dead away.

Unaware of and unaring for the fate of General Clifton, the plotters bore the insensible Ethel from the spot.

It was at that moment that Vincent Morton, who had been haunting the vicinities in a vain search for the detective, Langdon, came to the place.

The shots at the boat and Ethel Clifton's cry had aroused his attention.

He came suddenly upon the villains only to engage in a desperate hand-to-hand conflict with Alstyne and Bartley.

A heavy blow from a revolver sent him to the ground, his head striking a rock and rendering him insensible.

Leaving him for dead, the plotters hastened to the old house where Viola Clifton was.

An hour later they left it for the yacht.

Ethel Clifton had been restored to consciousness, and at her pleading request the pit was visited into which General Clifton had fallen.

But all search proved unavailing. To all appearances, the old man had escaped from the pit and wandered to the river and had been drowned.

At midnight his mysterious disappearance was added to that of the schemers who had left the place.

Vincent Morton had received serious injuries in his combat with Ethel Clifton's captors.

He awoke, for the time being, a raving madman.

Three weeks later he aroused to life and reason, the inmate of a hospital in the city.

The attendants told him that he had been found, insane from a wound in the temple and fever, wandering the streets.

This was the state of the great Clifton mystery one month after the apparent death of Langdon, the detective.

Every important actor in the tragedy had disappeared from public view except Vincent Morton.

And this man, disheartened at the disastrous experience of the past, and bewildered at the strange complications surrounding him one bright morning in August started forth to renew the broken quest for the woman he loved.

can be the object of Talcott's indifference to this vital object of all his former plotting?

"Surely he deems the coast clear now. Ah! the lawyer—General Clifton's family counselor. I will visit his office and see if he cannot afford me some information that may put me on the trail of the schemers."

Vincent had consumed the morning in his investigations, and it was late in the afternoon when he reached the office of the lawyer.

The attorney's clerk showed Vincent into the private office.

"I will learn for you when he will return," he said, and left the visitor alone while he went to make inquiries as to his employer from the other clerks in the office.

Vincent naturally glanced at the cases and cabinets around him, some of which probably contained papers referring to the fortune of the unfortunate General Clifton.

Naturally, too, his gaze wandered over the table before him, and he started as among several open letters lying on the desk before the arm-chair usually occupied by the lawyer his eye fell upon a missive which contained the name Clifton several times.

He could not resist the temptation to peruse the letter as it lay before him, so keenly anxious was he to gain some clew to the captors of Ethel Clifton.

He thrilled to quick excitement and delight as he read the missive.

Evidently it had been received that very day by the lawyer.

Seemingly, too, he was now absent on a visit to its writer.

And that writer in a flash of thought Vincent Morton decided to be Harvey Talcott.

The letter was brief, and requested the lawyer to call that afternoon to see the representative of Miss Ethel Clifton, heiress to the dead General Clifton.

The lawyer was assured that there was reason for the secret course so far pursued in Miss Clifton's communications to himself.

All this, it was stated, would be fully explained if the lawyer would call at a number written on the margin of the note.

This location the suspenseful Vincent noted carefully, and determined to act upon his newly acquired information at once.

When the clerk returned he informed Vincent that the lawyer might not return for an hour yet.

"Will you wait his return or leave your name?" asked the clerk.

He had his mind fully made up that he

would go at once to the place where the sender of the note to the lawyer resided.

It was getting on toward dusk as he reached the place, which was located on a retired residence street in the southern portion of the city.

At a glance Vincent recognized in the selection of this new place of hiding of the conspirators, for such he decided it to certainly be, all the prevision and craftiness of Harvey Talcott.

A small stone house, set well back from the street. It was surrounded with shrubbery in front and at one side.

Beyond, it joined a high brick building which ran back apparently to the next street.

At a glance Vincent discerned that this place had doubtlessly been chosen with a view to enable secret exit and entrance other than by the single one apparent from the street.

Several times Vincent passed the house trying to devise some plan by which he might be enabled to effect a safe entrance.

At last he decided on a plan of action, and proceeded to set the same in action at once.

In its primary execution he did not consume much time.

For the space of about five minutes he was gone from the vicinity of the house.

When he returned he bore under his arm a green bag such as lawyers sometimes carry, and also a package of papers in his hand.

He now proceeded boldly up the graveled walk leading to the front entrance to the house.

The door was supplied with a heavy old-fashioned knocker, and he was about to lift this when he decided to try the door.

To his surprise and delight he found it was neither locked nor bolted, and he opened it, closed it after him, and found himself standing alone in a broad, uncarpeted hallway.

Doors led off into rooms from both sides of this, and the sounds of voices, engaged in animated conversation, reached Vincent's ears vaguely.

He located the apartment whence the sound emanated, and decided to act boldly.

A door slightly ajar showed two rooms, in the further one of which were seated several persons.

The ante-room was unoccupied and was gloomy and quite dark. Once in its shadows, Vincent could hope to overhear the conversation going on in the adjoining apartment.

If he could glide to a chair in some remote corner, he would for the present, at least, be undiscovered by any one.

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Later, if confronted, he would pretend to have come to see the lawyer, and he had framed a plausible excuse to make that person for following him hither.

Vincent pushed open the door slightly, and stealthily glided into the ante-room.

He shrank to the shadow of the folding doors, and sank to a chair standing there without apparently attracting the attention of the occupants of the next apartment.

He could both see and hear what was transpiring in that room, and he became intently absorbed in this task.

The place held three occupants besides himself.

One he could not see, but his soul thrilled to wild suspense as he divined that it could be no other than Ethel Clifton.

She was lying upon a couch, a shawl thrown over her, and beside her sat the lawyer of the Clifton estate.

Harvey Talcott and Aistyne, both elegantly dressed, and presenting the appearance of reputable, well-to-do citizens, sat at a table conversing with the lawyer.

Near the couch, wearing the garb of an attendant, was Vola Clifton.

Vincent read in all this the successful development of Talcott's plots.

He doubted not but that some specious story of fraud and duplicity was now imposed upon the lawyer.

To this Ethel Clifton, crushed and helpless under the old terror of her enemies, was an unwilling party.

Vincent strained his hearing to catch the full import of the first words spoken.

Harvey Talcott was the speaker, and he was saying:

"You will see, sir, that we have had a reason for remaining away from the Clifton mansion."

"Yes," replied the lawyer. "You have acted quite right. I am grieved to see Miss Clifton so depressed and ill."

There was a faint moan from the couch, and its occupant moved restlessly.

"General Clifton had his enemies," pursued Talcott. "His niece fled to our protection when she learned of it. There is a family secret we cannot impart even to you. We wish to settle up the matter of the estate as soon as possible, and remove Miss Clifton to her old home in Italy."

"I will endeavor to carry out your wishes," remarked the lawyer.

"You received the will I sent you nearly a month since?" inquired Talcott.

"Yes."

"It makes Miss Clifton the sole heiress, I believe."

"It does, and I have seen the subscribing witnesses, who attest to their signatures.

"Then the estate can be settled up at once?" inquired Talcott, eagerly.

"No, not entirely; but as you say that Miss Clifton must leave the country—"

"She will pine and die in this climate."

"Then I will be ready to transfer the greater portion of the ready money of the estate to her whenever she desires."

Talcott's eyes gleamed avariciously.

"You mean at once?"

"Certainly. There is no doubt of General Clifton's death."

"None, of course."

"The will is proven, and I, myself, recognize Miss Clifton from the picture in the library in the Clifton mansion."

"And the letters—"

"You have scoured from abroad. They verify the other proofs as to her identity. Yes, I have been given liberal powers as administrator of the estate of my dead friend General Clifton; but I shall not be exceeding my duty if I somewhat anticipate the slow award of the Probate Court."

"Then to-morrow or the next day."

"When you like, I will meet yourself and Miss Clifton at my office or at the Clifton mansion."

Talcott glanced with affected concern at the figure on the couch.

"So many sad memories cluster about the mansion that I fear to remove her there," he said.

"Then I will come here," replied the lawyer, "and will pay over whatever of the fortune she desires."

"I will send you word then to-morrow," remarked Talcott.

"If you will. There is one formality which will have to be gone through, however."

"What is that?"

"A written order from Miss Clifton."

Talcott glanced in some alarm at the mute figure on the couch, but replied promptly and with forced calmness:

"Certainly, although Miss Clifton is too ill to write."

"I will write the order."

"And she can sign it?"

"Yes."

The lawyer seated himself at the table, and was engaged in writing for some moments.

Significant and anxious glances passed between the plotters, as the form on the couch seemed to move with suppressed emotion.

The lawyer arose at last, the written document and a pen in his hand.

"Will you please sign your name, Miss Clifton?" he asked, approaching the couch.

The prostrate form lifted itself with difficulty.

Vincent Morton, absorbingly watching the impressive scene, could scarcely repress a cry of surprise and concern as her pale face was revealed to his gaze.

It was wofully white, and the hunted, despairing expression in Ethel Clifton's eyes told how the miscreants had made her suffer.

She shrank from the pen and paper, and seemed about to cry out, as if to reveal all the truth of the nefarious scheme in which she was compelled to follow the bidding of her relentless captors.

Talcott's burning glance menaced her, however, and she seized the pen, tremblingly wrote her name on the document in the lawyer's hand, and sank back to the couch with a low moan of distress.

"Miss Clifton's, indeed, in a pitiable condition," murmured the lawyer anxiously.

"Yes, her grief for her murdered relative has completely overwhelmed her," replied Talcott.

The lawyer bowed to the occupants of the room, and placed the paper Ethel Clifton had signed in his pocket.

Talcott arose to accompany him to the front door of the house.

They passed directly by Vincent, but neither noticed him in the growing darkness of the room.

Alstyn and Viola arose as soon as Talcott left the apartment.

They silently opened the door of an adjoining room of the suite, and wheeled Ethel's couch from the place.

Vincent glided into the room they had just vacated.

"What had I better do?" he reflected rapidly. "I will be discovered if I remain here. Ha! what is that?"

There was a safety vault of iron built into the wall of the room he was in.

Its door was half open and he sprang suddenly behind it as he uttered the ejaculation noted.

Peering through the crack of the door he fixed his glance on a single window looking out into the garden of the place.

The occasion of his alarm had been the appearance at this window of a strange face.

Its possessor looked cautiously into the room, and, Vincent imagined, glanced curiously at the vault as if he had seen him enter it.

He was deeply mystified at the appearance of the stranger.

It was not Bartley or any of the fellow-conspirators of Talcott that Vincent had heretofore seen.

No; whoever the man was, he was beyond doubt an enemy to the plotters, and, like Vincent, a spy upon their movements.

His stealthy manner told the lurking foe, his fierce glance and pale face revealed the interested and indignant friend of Ethel Clifton.

"It cannot be either Langdon or Howard," murmured the perplexed Vincent. "Who can it be?"

He was soon to know this new and dangerous foe to the interests of Harvey Talcott and his accomplices.

Just then the man at the window drew back and tenly.

At the same moment Vincent retreated into the vault.

Harvey Talcott and Alstyn had entered the apartment, and with a triumphant face the former had uttered the exultant words: "Success, Alstyn! The Clifton millions are ours at last!"

CHAPTER XII.

PLOTTERS IN COUNCIL.

Talcott had evidently just seen the lawyer leave the house, while Alstyn had come from the next apartment into which Ethel Clifton had been conveyed.

The face of the chief plotter in the scheme to defraud the Clifton estate of its coveted millions betrayed the profoundest satisfaction and delight.

"The lawyer is completely deceived," he said. "Our restoring the original picture of Ethel Clifton to the frame in the library has deluded him."

"And the acquiescence of the girl in our plans," suggested Alstyn.

"Yes. She fears to refuse to submit, for she believes her uncle is still in our power."

"And you think he is dead?"

"Undoubtedly."

"And Langdon?"

"Did we not see him perish before our eyes?"

"Then the coast is clear."

"Yes. Howard is our prisoner in a lonely country mill, and Vincent Morton has undoubtedly fled the country."

Alstyn looked complacent and satisfied.

"Then to-morrow we obtain the fortune?" he asked.

"Enough of it to last until the real estate becomes ours."

"Will the girl continue to obey us?"

"She must."

"And then we leave the country?"

"It would perhaps be best."

"Viola has forgotten Morton."

"No; she only awaits the culmination of our plans to find him again."

Alstyn's brow darkened, but he changed the subject by asking:

"You have set the men at work here?"

"Yes."

"At their old task?"

"Exactly."

"Isn't it a little dangerous?"

"What?"

"Counterfeiting."

"Why?"

"Because if detected we would all get in trouble."

"But we are safe here."

"Perhaps," replied Alstyne; "still we have enough money coming in without running that risk."

"From the Clifton fortune?" asked Talcott.

"Yes."

"Still Bartley wanted the counterfeit plates as his pay for services."

"And he and the men are working at them?"

"In the basement, yes."

"They form part of the Clifton secret?"

"Yes."

"And the papers?"

"Are in the vault, yonder."

The listening Vincent started violently.

At the same moment he prepared for a struggle in case the men should come to his place of concealment.

Evidently such was their purpose, for he heard Talcott cross the floor in the direction of the vault.

The door moved, Vincent held his breath with suspense.

The lock jarred and the iron bolts jangled noisily.

Then, with an echoing slam, the ponderous door closed upon the dismayed Vincent Morton, a prisoner within the vault.

CHAPTER XLII

IN THE VAULT.

For a moment Vincent Morton's heart stood still as the closing door grated harshly on his hearing.

Then utter silence, tomb-like and somber, accompanied a suffocating sense of peril.

He was shut in the vault, and he knew not how soon he might perish for want of fresh air.

All sounds from the outside apartment were now shut out from his hearing, but he decided that Talcott and Alstyne must have left the room.

After a moment or two he tried the door, but it resisted his most strenuous efforts to turn back the ponderous bolts.

Blindly, despairingly groping his way about the vault, Vincent thrilled to sudden hopefulness as his hand touched a lamp upon one of the shelves at the side of the compartment.

He had soon lit a match, and, as it ignited the lamp, a dim glare of radiance revealed the interior of the vault.

He could tell by its flame, and from the fact that there was a small ventilator in one corner of the room, that, while he might suffer some discomfort, there was no likelihood of suffocation.

"I will have to remain here until the vault is again opened," he decided, "unless I can force the lock. Meantime a search among the papers I see here may not prove profitless."

He remembered having heard Talcott tell Alstyne that the papers referring to the Clifton secret were concealed within the vault.

There was a mass of documents in the place, and over these, by the aid of the lamp he had lighted, Vincent pored for over an hour.

His eye brightened, and he uttered an ejaculation of interest and delight as he at last unearthed a time-worn packet hidden away in a remote corner of a shelf.

It was inclosed in a large envelope, and bore the inscription, "Papers relating to Clifton secret," evidently in Talcott's handwriting.

He tore open the envelope, curious, eager to scan its inclosure. He glanced at one of the documents with startled eyes, and then hastily thrust the packet into his pocket.

There had sounded a suspicious click at the door.

With bated breath and concerned, suspenseful eyes Vincent watched the door, and saw its bolts, from some outside pressure on the knob of the vault, slowly, cautiously move back in their sockets.

Friend or foe, he must be ready for a conflict.

Vincent blew out the lamp and merged the interior of the vault into darkness.

The door opened. There was no lamp in the outside apartment, but the dying light of day outlined a man's form between the open doorway and the window of the apartment beyond.

Vincent determined on a bold dash for liberty, as he would certainly be discovered by any one entering the vault.

A strong hand barred his progress as he attempted to spring over the threshold of the vault.

Its grasp held him a close prisoner.

"Who are you?" spoke a hoarse, impressive voice in his ear.

Vincent did not at first reply, but he stared fixedly at the face of his captor as both retreated into the apartment.

"The man who was watching at the window?" he murmured.

"Yes."

"Then you are not a friend to these people?"

"No, a deadly enemy; and you—"

"I am a victim of their most cruel plots."

"Your name?"

"Vincent Morton."

The stranger started slightly. Then his pale face lit up with a fierce, satisfied light. "We can combine in defeating the plots of these villains, then," he said.

"But I do not know you."

"You shall in time."

"And why not now?"

"Because, if we fail, it is better that I am believed to be dead, as I have been for years."

Vincent stared strangely at the other.

"Your interest in this case—" he began.

"Results in the unmasking of Harvey Talcott and his evil accomplices, and in the rescue of their unfortunate victim, Ethel Clifton."

"Then you know her?"

"Yes. Listen; you are mystified at my possible connection with this case."

"Let it suffice that I know all its mystery, and know you, also."

"Brave, sacrificing friend of General Clifton, the end of all these plots, involving your safety and happiness, has nearly arrived."

"When Harvey Talcott and his emissaries know who I am, they will fly like cowards from the approaching doom which menaces them."

"Ethel Clifton must be rescued this very night—this very hour, if possible."

"When she is once beyond the power of these villains, justice shall be done, speedily and effectively."

There was the ring of impressive, earnest sincerity and confidence in the stranger's tones.

Despite himself, Vincent Morton could not but trust in his statements.

"Whoever you are," he said, impressively, "I believe in you, and trust to your guidance."

"Then come; we must not delay in surprising and arresting these villains at once."

He led the way from the room as he spoke. They found the hall deserted and in darkness.

Groping their way about, and endeavoring to locate the persons they sought, they penetrated several dark corridors.

Talcott and his men, had apparently deserted the lower portion of the building, for no lights were visible.

The stranger had told Vincent about seeing him locked in the vault, and afterward hearing Talcott tell Alstyne that they would be safer in the upper portion of the next building.

The structure they referred to was evidently one connecting at the rear with the low stone residence.

They found a door leading through a narrow hallway, and, traversing this, came to a large, unfurnished apartment.

Somewhat or other they became separated, and Vincent dared not call to his missing friend for fear of being overheard by some lurking foe.

Wandering about, he paused as he came to what looked like an immense light shaft running from the roof to the cellar of the building.

Several windows on the various floors of the structure faced on this shaft.

No lights were visible at any of these, however, except upon the top floor.

Glancing upward, Vincent saw a broad glare of light emanating from one, and a shadow ever and anon crossing its radius told that the apartment beyond had one or more occupants.

There was a light frame ladder secured to the side of the light shaft.

This seemed to be employed to ascend and descend to clean the windows, or, in emergency, as a fire-escape.

Vincent's dauntless bravery suggested an inspection of the apartment where the light was located.

He opened a window leading into the light shaft and seized the ladder.

Then slowly and cautiously he began its ascent.

As he neared the window whence the light emanated, he peered stealthily within the room beyond.

It was a comfortably furnished apartment, and held two occupants, whom Vincent could see plainly.

The window, too, was open for purposes of ventilation, and he could overhear what they were saying.

Talcott was seated at a table, with writing materials before him, and Alstyne was standing at the door as if ready to depart.

"The girl is safe?" Talcott was inquiring.

"Yes, safe and quiet for the night."

"Watch her closely, for one more night's vigilance and patience ends our long task."

"All right."

"And report to me if anything occurs during the night."

Alstyne left the room. Talcott was alone. He sat at the table with his back to the window, a pen in his hand, apparently reflecting deeply.

For some moments Vincent Morton watched his enemy in silence.

At last he saw him alone and apparently isolated from his associates and confederates.

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bold, prompt effort to finally outwit and defeat this unprincipled plotter.

He had a revolver in his pocket, and getting it ready for immediate use he climbed noiselessly into the room.

Silently he stole around the table, and quietly glided to a chair directly opposite Harvey Talcott.

There was a determined glitter in Vincent Morton's eyes, and his lips were compressed, his face stern and resolute.

Talcott suddenly looking up, recoiled with a violent start.

He sat staring at the intruder for a moment or two in open-mouthed bewilderment.

"Who are you? How came you here?" he finally gasped forth.

Evidently he did not recognize Vincent. "I am your deadliest enemy," came the slow, solemn response, "and I have come here to kill you if you do not instantly accede to my demands."

"Vincent Morton!" breathed Talcott, turning deadly pale and recognizing the voice of the man he supposed to be dead or a fugitive from justice.

Vincent lifted the revolver to a level with Harvey Talcott's heart.

"Move, or make an alarm, and you are a dead man," he said impressively. "Harvey Talcott, the end of all your evil schemes has come. Push over to me the writing materials before you."

With a craven face and sullen yet affrighted manner the plotter obeyed Vincent's mandate.

"Now, then, I will begin. Remember, if you make a treacherous move I will fire," warned Vincent menacingly.

He held his revolver in one hand.

With the other he seized a pen from the table, dipped it into the ink and remarked calmly:

"Harvey Talcott, your career of fraud and crime terminates here and now. I will write, and you will sign."

"Sign what?" choked out the craven Talcott.

"Your death warrant!" fell mercilessly and impressively from Vincent Morton's lips.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE CONFESSION.

A quick pallor overspread Harvey Talcott's face at the ominous words of the intruder.

He had but to glance at the determined face and menacing eyes of Vincent Morton to know that his mission was a serious and deadly one.

Fascinated, spellbound, terrified, he sat

glaring at the enemy so suddenly and mysteriously revealed.

"My death warrant?" he repeated hoarsely.

"Yes."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I shall write out something for you to sign."

"A statement—a letter——"

"Yes, a confession of your crimes."

A shudder convulsed the frame of the desperado.

He was at bay, the tables completely turned, and in the power of an implacable enemy.

He did not speak further, but sat leaning back in his chair immovable, as Vincent Morton began writing.

His hand flew rapidly over the white page, his eye keeping a side watch upon the man he had determined to hunt to his doom.

The page was finished at last. Vincent looked up at his enemy.

"Beginning with your first appearance in the Clifton tragedy," he said firmly, "I have briefly outlined your crimes. Harvey Talcott, I wish you to sign that paper."

"And if I refuse?" quavered on the craven's lips.

"You invite your death. Choose, and quickly. I am determined."

There was an ominous click of the revolver.

Talcott grated his teeth vengefully, but took up the pen.

"Sign!" commanded Vincent sternly.

Talcott, about to obey him, paused strangely.

At the same moment the revolver was torn from Vincent's hand.

Alstynne returning to the room unexpectedly had prevented the consummation of Vincent Morton's design.

The latter arose to his feet, disarmed and dismayed.

With blazing eyes and malignant, triumphant face, Harvey Talcott waved aloft the paper Vincent had written.

"My death warrant!" he cried exultantly.

"Ha, ha! it is your own. Vincent Morton, this document, a vague confession of the crime in which you were concerned, would send you to the gallows."

"It is in your own handwriting, apparently a confession you began, but failed to sign. Now, who is the victor?"

Vincent Morton did not reply.

Instead, he made a quick dash for the door.

Before his enemies could obstruct his onward progress he was in the hall without and rushing down its length.

A shot whizzed by his head, as in the

darkness he ran straight to a door apparently leading to the outside.

So precipitately did he dash it open that as he reached a landing he did not wait to see what lay beyond.

Fatal mistake! He discovered its perils a moment later.

The landing had no stairs, nor even a railing around it.

Before he was aware of it he went tumbling through space with frightful velocity.

A fall to the ground with that impetus and at that distance meant inevitable death.

Suddenly his downward course was abruptly stopped.

He felt his outstretched arms catch at some obstruction midway to the earth.

It proved to be a heavy wire that ran from the top of the building across a yard where a boiler-room or engine-house to the building, evidently at one time a factory, was located.

Vincent clung to this frail and swaying wire with desperate tenacity.

It strained and caved with alarming tension, however, and he began to descend its inclined length.

He clung to it resolutely, although it cut his hands.

He reached the ground with a shock, and sank to the earth confused and half-stunned.

A thought that the place might be searched for some trace of him by his enemies caused him to seek some place of concealment, and he cast about him for some avenue of exit from the court into which he had fallen.

His fall had deprived him momentarily of a perfect, active control of his limbs, and as he saw an opening leading apparently into the cellar of the building he climbed through it.

"Let them search for me now," he muttered, as he found himself temporarily safe. "I can remain quiet here until the chase is over if they look for me at all."

The place he had gained, as has been stated, seemed to be the abandoned boiler-room and engine-house of some old factory.

The floor was covered with ashes, and Vincent observed that the place was built on to the main structure.

"This may lead into the building I have just left," he soliloquized, "and thence to the street."

He found, as he crossed the floor in the darkness, that the main cellar of the entire structure was indeed open to him; for, glancing ahead, a dim halo of light showed activity and life in a portion of the basement some distance away.

He began to walk toward this, his curiosity and interest fully aroused.

Near the front of the basement a pair of stairs led to the upper floors.

A rough board partition inclosed quite a large space that was more habitable than the rest of the cellar.

Here there were several persons engaged in working at some mysterious occupation.

That this labor was of a nefarious character Vincent did not doubt, when he remembered Talcott's allusion to certain counterfeit plates in his conversation with his accomplice, Alstyne.

Finally Vincent elided around the edge of the partition and behind a large box.

Peering cautiously from his new place of concealment, he began to study the details of the scene before him.

There were some four men in the cellar. All of them were rough, evil-visaged persons, whom he decided at a glance to be members of the criminal fraternity.

One of them he recognized as Bartley, and he watched his movements closely.

The latter seemed to be the leader in the business under operation in the cellar.

He was fitting hither and thither directing the men, whom Vincent could make out were engaged in some engrossing occupation.

He finally made out what they were about.

There was a rough hand-press, and this two men were manipulating.

Their companions were folding away sheets of paper as fast as they left the press.

"These men are counterfeiting," murmured Vincent.

"In some way, I judge, from what I heard Talcott say, some counterfeit plates formed an element in the Clifton secret."

"These plates Talcott has given to Bartley as his reward for his services in the past against the Clifton estate."

"Bartley and his colleagues are printing off the bills here and now."

"If I could only secure their rest at such a time, it would involve Talcott in a new complication he could not readily explain away."

Vincent drew back out of sight as he saw a man come down the stairs from the floor above.

It was Alstyne, and with a serious face he beckoned to Bartley.

The latter followed him out of range of the heating of the other workmen.

They stood within only a few feet of the spot where Vincent was concealed.

The latter listened intently to the conversation that ensued.

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"What is it?" Bartley had asked in a tone of surprise.

"Danger," was Alstyn's anxious reply.

"How—where?"

"Now, and in this place; Talcott sent me to you, Bartley."

"Well?"

"He thinks you had better leave here."

"Just as we are getting started," grumbled Bartley.

"He can't take any risks, nor you, either."

"What risk is there?"

"Lurking spies and enemies. We have been traced here."

"And you intend to move?"

"No; we are safe enough, for all our plans are fully guarded, but if a counterfeiting outfit was found here it would involve us in serious trouble."

"Well, we'll pack up and leave."

"You had better do so at once."

"And get the plates away to another place?"

"Yes."

"Very well."

Alstyn left the cellar.

Bartley went to where his workmen were and ordered them to suspend operation for the present.

Vincent, watching their every movement, resolved that justice should not be baffled in the safe removal of the counterfeit plates if he could help it.

He resolved to either secure possession of them or follow and cause the arrest of their present owners.

Amid new complications and perils in the long trail of Harvey Talcott and his accomplices, Vincent's arduous task was nearly at an end.

Withing the next hour the great Clifton case was destined to practically end, so far as he was concerned.

He saw Bartley busy himself about the press and give quick orders to his men.

"We will get the plates and printed bills out of here as soon as possible," he said to his companions.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE COUNTERFEIT PLATES.

Bartley removed the steel counterfeit plates from the press and placed them on a bench near by.

Then going to another part of the cellar, he secured a small sachel, and placed the plates in it.

This he left on the floor, ready to leave as soon as his fellow-workmen completed their operations.

One of them approached and addressed him.

"Where are we going to?" he asked, cautiously.

"I don't know yet. We'll find some safe refuge where we can pursue our work in safety. How do the plates print?"

"Excellently."

"How many are done?"

"Ten thousand dollars' worth."

"The pile of paper on the table yonder is all of them?"

"Yes."

"Tie them up, and we will finish them later."

"All right."

As Bartley and his companion left the spot, Vincent moved from his place of concealment.

His interest was centered on the sachel in which he had seen Bartley place the plates.

He knew how dangerous to the community and troublesome to the police was such an outfit in the hands of expert criminals.

He managed to reach the place where the sachel was, unperceived by Bartley or any of his men.

It was not locked, and he opened it readily.

One by one he removed the four steel plates it contained.

These he secreted about his person, and, closing the bag, crept out of view again.

Bartley was superintending the packing of the bills already printed in a small box.

Even deprived of the plates, the possession of the bills gave Bartley the power of executing a fraud against the community.

Vincent would be satisfied if he could only secure the box of bills.

He thought out a means of escape by the way he had reached the cellar, and decided to make a bold move to battle the counterfeiters completely.

He waited until Bartley and his men had completed packing the bills.

Then he began to move toward the box in which they were contained.

The movement was attended with only partial success.

Vincent secured the box, but at the moment his hands clasped it a loud shout told him that he was discovered.

Instantly Bartley and the others rushed toward him.

A stranger and an intruder could only be a detective or an enemy, and his escape meant disaster to their plans.

Then an exciting scene ensued.

Vincent started to return to the court by the way he had left it.

In the darkness, and unfamiliar with the place, he became confused and lost his way.

As he paused, his pursuers were upon him.

A brief but decisive struggle ensued.

Vincent was overpowered and dragged back to the work-room of the counterfeiters. The box was wrested from his grasp, but the stolen plates were not yet missed.

Bartley glared suspiciously, ferociously at his captive.

Then he hastened up the stairs, and was gone for some time.

When he returned, Alstyne accompanied him.

The latter surveyed the captive with malignant satisfaction.

"I have seen this man before," he cried, at a single glance at Vincent.

"Who is he?" asked Bartley, curiously.

"The man who an hour since very nearly outwitted Talcott."

"You mean——"

"Vincent Morton."

Bartley started violently.

"I thought he was dead?"

"He will soon be. Bind him and take him into the next room."

Vincent's hands were bound behind him. He was led into a small apartment beyond the work-room.

His arms were securely tied, and as they reached the apartment a second rope was secured to them and then to a timber in the wall.

"Come here."

This order Alstyne shouted to the men.

They came to where he was.

"This man must die," spoke Alstyne, briefly.

The men looked startled, but were silent.

"We will draw lots to see who will be his executioner."

Alstyne wrote several numbers on a piece of paper and tore it into strips.

"The lowest number must kill this man," he said.

The men drew the papers, and read the numbers written on them.

"One," spoke a deep, cadaverous voice.

The possessor instantly stepped forward. He had drawn a revolver, and without another word advanced to where Vincent stood.

The other watched him with breathless interest.

Vincent Morton started as the man reached his side.

The latter had breathed a few quick words into his ear.

"When I fire, pretend to be fatally shot."

"Merciful heavens! my mysterious friend at the vault," ejaculated Vincent.

"Yes, in disguise, and bent on saving you. Do as I say. There is no bullet in the revolver. We must delude these villains."

"Fire!" ordered Alstyne, impatiently.

The stranger lifted his revolver.

There was a flash and a report.

With an apparent cry of pain Vincent Morton's head fell upon his breast.

To all semblance the single shot had killed the last enemy to the counterfeiters and to Harvey Talcott's plots.

CHAPTER XLV.

AT THE MANSION.

It was ten o'clock the morning after the appearance of the lawyer at the new rendezvous of Harvey Talcott and his accomplices.

The episodes of the night previous had terminated, as the plotters supposed, in the death of Vincent Morton in the cellar of the house.

They were unaware of the existence of the new friend Vincent had found.

Nor did they know that he had left this place with Bartley and his men.

He had managed to impose himself cleverly on the counterfeiting band as a friend sent by Talcott.

Amid the excitement of the hour his deception had not been investigated or discovered.

Thus Talcott adjudged all his enemies defeated in their attempts to thwart the success of his plans.

He supposed that he would receive that day from the lawyer a large portion of Vincent Morton's fortune.

He had some time previous sent General Clifton's will to the lawyer.

This he asserted Ethel Clifton had found in the library immediately after the murder of her uncle.

Ethel herself was completely under the power of Talcott.

His menaces of killing her uncle if she refused to aid him in securing the fortune had led her to despairingly obey his mandates.

He pretended that General Clifton was his prisoner in some secluded spot.

At ten o'clock Harvey Talcott was awaiting a reply to a letter he had sent to the lawyer.

Alstyne had been his messenger, and the note he carried informed the lawyer that they awaited his pleasure in the matter of the settlement of the Clifton fortune.

Alstyne returned about an hour later.

He handed his accomplice a letter which Talcott tore open eagerly.

His brow clouded as he perused the brief inclosure.

"I would prefer that you meet at the Clifton mansion," the letter read, and appointed a late hour in the afternoon for the interview.

The delay irritated Talcott and aroused his suspicions.

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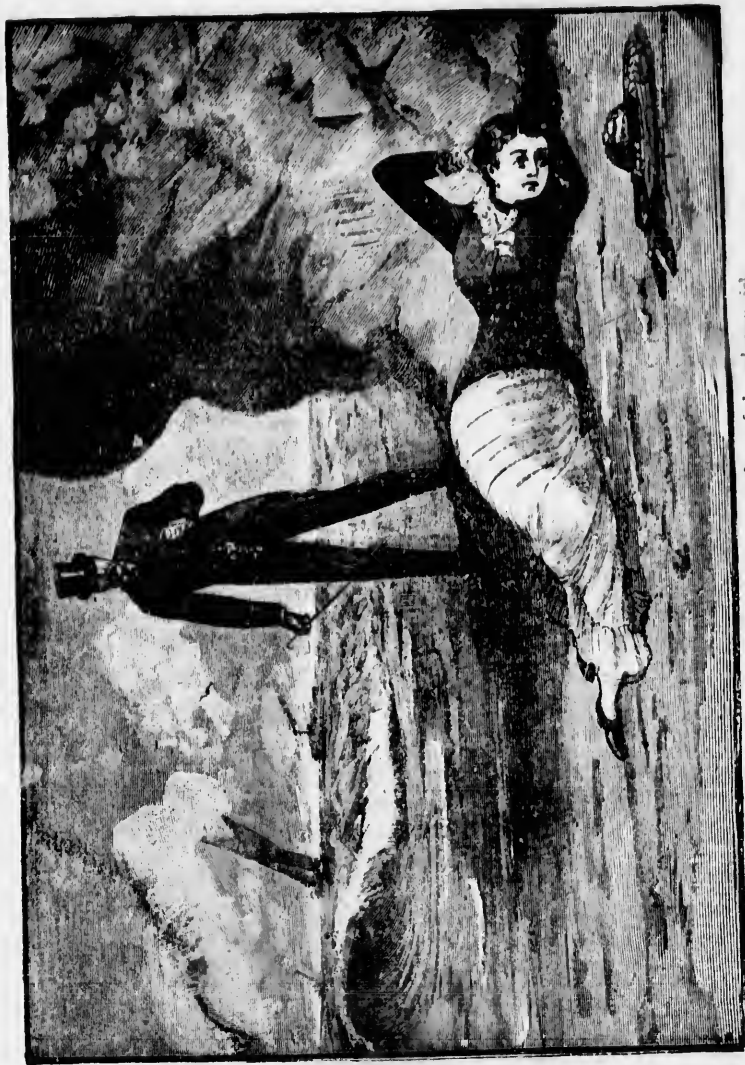
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These latter, however, he allayed as he recalled the fact that his enemies had all been safely disposed of.

"The old lawyer is notional," he decided, "and perhaps it is as well that we close the matter at the Clifton mansion."

All that day he reveled in anticipation of the royal fortune within his grasp.

He would pretend later that Ethel Clifton had returned to Europe.

Armed with a power of attorney, he would secure the balance of the fortune as soon as the estate was finally settled.

It was shortly before night that a carriage left the place where Vincent had traced the lawyer the evening previous.

It contained Talcott, Alstyne, Viola Dale, and Ethel Clifton.

The latter was veiled, and seemed ill and dependant.

"Remember," was Talcott's warning to her. "If you aid us in securing this money you shall be free."

"And my uncle?"

"Shall be restored to you."

They were welcomed at the mansion by Marie the housemaid, and shown into the library.

Here the Clifton tragedy had begun its fateful course.

Here it was destined to end, although in a manner entirely adverse to the cherished plans of Harvey Talcott.

Within the library two men were seated as Talcott and his companion entered the apartment.

One of them was the family lawyer.

The other was a stranger to Talcott.

The latter stared searchingly and suspiciously at the stranger, who was a dignified, august man about sixty years old.

"You will wonder at my asking you to come here," spoke the lawyer, arising to his feet as the others became seated, "but it was on account of this gentleman."

He indicated the white-haired stranger as he spoke.

"What interest has he in the matter, may I ask?" inquired Talcott, resentfully.

"Only that of a friend of General Clifton."

"What of it?"

"He desires to see justice done."

Talcott was mystified and silent.

"He desires, before this money you ask is paid over to Miss Clifton, that further proofs of the death of her uncle be furnished."

Talcott grew pale with ill-concealed rage and chagrin at this unforeseen interruption to his carefully arranged plans.

"I imagined that the death of General Clifton had been accepted as undeniable," he remarked.

"There are no actual proofs," replied the lawyer, calmly.

"Why not?"

"Because his body has not been found."

"You were willing to assume his decease yesterday?"

"That is true, but I have changed my mind since then."

Talcott began to grow uneasy. He foresaw trouble in the near future, and was becoming alarmed.

"Have you found any proofs tending to show that General Clifton is still alive?" he asked, as calmly as he could.

"I have."

Talcott started.

"What are they?" he asked, anxiously.

"This gentleman here has seen him since the time of his supposed death."

"Impossible!"

"It is true."

The stranger had spoken. His eyes fixed unflinchingly on Talcott, he uttered the words impressively and calmly.

Something in his voice caused the schemer to start and pale visibly.

"You say you have seen General Clifton?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Within a week."

"You must have been mistaken."

"No, I am not."

The schemer was silent.

"I even spoke with him."

Talcott turned to the lawyer.

"Do you believe this incredible story of mistaken identity?" he asked.

"I am bound to consider and investigate it," was the discouraging reply.

"But if General Clifton is alive why has he not returned to his home?"

"I do not know."

"I do," cried Talcott, angrily. "This is a plot on the part of some meddling relative to defraud Miss Clifton of her rightful fortune."

"That cannot be," replied the lawyer, calmly.

"Why not?"

"Because another litigant stands between her and the fortune."

"I do not understand you," stammered Talcott, in a mystified tone of voice. "Another litigant?"

"Yes."

"To the Clifton fortune?"

"Exactly."

"May I ask who it is?"

"Yes," came the reply, driving back Harvey Talcott as if he were dealt a sudden, crushing blow. "It is the son of

General Clifton, supposed to be dead. Ernest Clifton is alive!"

CHAPTER XLVI.

MANACLE AND BRACELET.

For some moments Harvey Talcott stood like one petrified.

There was the echo of sincerity and confidence in the lawyer's tones, and the stranger emphasized his utterances by keeping his eyes fixed steadily on Talcott's face.

In a moment the latter had seen his fondest plans shattered at a blow.

He had reason also to fear the return of the son of the millionaire.

Defeated, baffled, he was not yet vanquished.

Alstyn and Vio's Dale looked startled and inclined to leave the place, but Talcott stood his ground firmly.

A low cry of surprise from Ethel Clifton betokened that she had heard what had been said.

Her attitude was one of aroused attention and hopefulness.

"I cannot believe what you say," spoke Talcott at last.

The lawyer was about to speak, but the stranger anticipated him.

"Then I will prove that it is true. Harvey Talcott, your very scheme is known to us.

"You have not come here to carry away the fortune you expected.

"You have come here only to be unmasked, arrested, and punished.

"You start; you are alarmed at last. You would seek to fly. Beware.

"Since you arrived in this house every avenue of escape has been cut off.

"The police now guard every exit with orders to deal summarily with you or any of your band who attempt to leave here.

"Harvey Talcott, the end of all your evil schemes has come at last, and you are in the power of the law."

"Who are you?"

Talcott, white as death, trembling in every limb, propounded the question gaspingly.

"I am the man whom of all others you hate; whom you have unsuccessfully endeavored to hound to death. Behold!"

With a sudden movement the stranger tore from his face his false beard.

"Langdon, the detective!" came in an appalled murmur from Talcott's lips.

"Yes; not dead as, you supposed, but here to confront you in the midst of your dark villainy at the moment of your expected success. Sit down. A true to life drama will be enacted in this room ere you leave it, and you must be its witness."

Before the stern, accusing face of the detective the amazed and startled Talcott recoiled speechless.

He sank to a chair, and, an expression of sullen chagrin and hate on his craven face, listened to Langdon's impressive words.

"It was you," began the detective, "who attempted to murder General Clifton.

"His own words will convict you.

"It was you who have sought to kill myself.

"When you left me for dead in the flat boat I escaped.

"A window at the end of the boat enabled me to gain the water and then the land.

"I was badly bruised and injured, but in a week I was again ready to resume the lost trail.

"By accident I ran across a man living in an old hut near the scene of the flat-boat episode.

"There I found General Clifton, ill to death and delirious.

"I nursed him back to health. Together to-day we returned to the city.

"He is here now."

The curtains of the alcove adjoining the library were thrust aside at that moment.

On the threshold, pale, and thin, and phantom-like, stood the owner of the Clifton millions.

He cast one look of deep condemnation on Talcott and his dismayed associates.

Then his arms opened to receive to their loving embrace the form of his beloved niece.

Ethel Clifton was sobbing on his shoulder, as Langdon continued his story.

"We went to the lawyer and learned all. This very day, too, we learned that Ernest Clifton was alive. He is here."

A second form stepped from the alcove. It was the man who had saved Vincent Morton from the vault and from death in the cellar of Talcott's new rendezvous the previous evening.

"This man," continued Langdon, "is the suffering victim of a long plot on your part.

"Escaped from the servitude to which you condemned him years ago, he returned in time to penetrate your haunts, and to save the life of Vincent Morton, doomed to death by your associates.

"Thus you are confronted with the terrible evidence of all your crimes.

"You cannot escape. The hands of justice surely, relentlessly hold you within their grasp.

"Bartley and his accomplices were arrested at Ernest Clifton's instigation last night, after he had destroyed their counterfeit money.

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"We have a trace of the detective How-
ard, whom you lured to imprisonment.

"Vincent Morton, escaped the death you
menaced him, will soon be here.

"Marie, the housemaid, your accomplice,
has confessed all.

"For cruelly murdering a fellow detec-
tive years ago I swore to hunt you down,
Harvey Talcott.

"I have kept my promise. You will be
terribly punished. What do you say now?"

So dramatic had been the rapid denoue-
ment of the library interview that Talcott
had seemed like a statue.

Now, however, he aroused himself.

A sullen glow of hate came into his eyes
as he glared malignantly at the rennited
Cliftons.

With a powerful effort he called to his
aid all his fiercest defiance and boldness.

"I say—beware!" he hissed out, malig-
nantly.

"Of what?" demanded the detective,
calmly.

"Of my vengeance."

"You are disarmed, powerless."

"No I am not. I confess I attempted to
kill General Clifton. I acknowledge I
schemed for his fortune. I have lost.
Well and good, but you dare not arrest
me."

"Are you mad?" uttered Langdon, dis-
dainfully.

"No. General Clifton, again I say be-
ware. I can blast your fair name. My old
power still remains. Arrest me and I will
reveal the fatal Clifton secret."

General Clifton shuddered and recoiled
at the direful menace which still had ap-
parent influence over his mind.

Ethel moaned in despair, as if all
their old trouble had returned suddenly.

Only Langdon was calm, incredulous, in-
different.

But a new speaker was aroused to action
at Talcott's words.

It was Ernest Clifton.

"Coward! knave!" he cried, in wild ex-
citement, "no longer cling to that baseless
fabric of a lie and a fraud. Father, this
man has imposed upon you—"

"Allow me to deal with this mercenary
scoundrel," interrupted Langdon.

"Harvey Talcott, your old threats have
no longer any power over your former vic-
tims."

"Listen, General Clifton, till I tell you
the truth of the secret that this man has
caused to embitter your life.

"Some years ago your son, Ernest Clif-
ton, was an engraver in a neighboring city.

"He chose the business because he did
not wish to idle his time away.

"Your distant relative, Viola Dale, had

attempted to ensnare him into a marriage
and failed.

"She and Harvey Talcott then devised a
scheme to get him into trouble.

"Talcott, whom he had never seen before,
got acquainted with him and pretended he
wished some bank-note plates made for a
company of which he was the President.

"Several letters passed between them.
Your son made the plates.

"It was then that Talcott informed him
that he had so conducted the affair that it
would look as if he was a deliberate coun-
terfeiter.

"Your son fled when Talcott insisted, as
the price of his silence, that he wed Viola
Dale.

"He believed he stood in peril of the re-
sults of a deep plot in which he was inno-
cent of any crime.

"He fled to the West and was reported
dead.

"Later some accomplices of Talcott im-
prisoned him at Talcott's instigation.

"He escaped a month since and came
here.

"When you first learned of his flight you
went to the city where he had lived.

"You found the counterfeit plates and
believed your son a criminal.

"Harvey Talcott had the letters, you the
plates, which apparently showed a deep
crime.

"For months he endeavored to secure a
large reward from you for their delivery.

"The night of your attempted murder
you intended to have Vincent Morton con-
vey these plates in a box to a safe place.

"Harvey Talcott secured them and placed
a dagger and some papers in the box, which
later, found in Vincent's possession, seemed
to implicate him in your murder deeply.

"These plates were afterward buried in a
casket, and then given by Talcott to his ac-
complice, Bartley.

"This is the entire story. Your son, like
yourself, innocent of intended crime, fell a
victim to the evil machinations of an un-
principled plotter."

"Can you prove that?" broke sullenly
from Talcott's lips, as the detective con-
cluded his story.

"Yes."

"And the letters and the plates prove
otherwise. Bring it to a court of law, and
see if I did not indeed lay a cunning snare
to entrap Ernest Clifton in crime."

Langdon looked serious, but said calmly:
"You have not got the letters."

"I know where they are."

"You do not."

A voice spoke at the window suddenly,
clearly, startling every occupant of the li-
brary.

At the same moment a glittering object was flung to the table in the center of the apartment.

Thud!

Every eye stared curiously at it. Harvey Talcott recoiled with a shudder of dread, and uttered a startled ejaculation.

For, interlinked one with the other, there on the table lay a manacle and a bracelet!

CHAPTER XLVII.

CONCLUSION.

The next moment Vincent Morton sprang from the garden through the open window into the library.

It was he who had flung the manacle and bracelet upon the table.

He had followed the action by appearing himself.

Now, flushed with excitement, he cast one tender look upon the woman he loved, and then fixed his glance on Harvey Talcott.

"Do you see them?" he cried, pointing to the objects on the table.

"That manacle is the one by which your accomplice, Alstyn, bound me to a horrible death, whence I providentially escaped.

"It is emblematical of the iron will and cruelty of your band of criminals.

"The bracelet, typical of the gold in plotting for which you risked all, comprises with the manacle a memento of evidence against you in the terrible persecution to which you have subjected your victims.

"To-day they confront you. To-day I—rescued last night by Ernest Clifton and escaped my bonds an hour later, and on your trail till now—assert that you do not know where the letters are with which you have so long menaced the welfare of the Clifton family."

Talcott was silent.

"The letters I took from the vault where you placed them; the counterfeit plates are in my possession."

A sudden cry of rage escaped from Talcott's lips.

"Foiled! baffled!" he raved. "But I will not be dragged to the jail like a common criminal. Alstyn, a bold break for liberty, ere it is too late!"

Talcott had sprung to the window.

"Be warned!" cried Langdon, menacingly. "You cannot escape. Every exit is guarded by the police."

A cry of pain and a quick shot were heard as Talcott disappeared.

A moment later a lieutenant of police entered the library.

He informed Langdon that Talcott, a fugitive fleeing from arrest, had been shot dead.

One hour later every element of distraction

and crime in the Clifton case had been banished from the mansion.

Alstyn and Viola Dale had been taken to jail, charged with conspiracy and attempted murder.

The woman had only once spoken to the man she loved.

"You are absolved from your promise," she said, sadly. "You could never love me, now that Ethel Clifton is restored to you and through no aid of mine."

In the drawing-room of the mansion that night there was a happy family reunion.

General Clifton, blessed by the presence of his son and niece, heard Langdon again detail all the tragic occurrences of the past few weeks.

Every mystery was explained away, and the satisfied detective confessed the case just ended to be the most difficult, yet signally successful, of all his eventful career.

Ethel and Vincent were entirely reconciled when the latter explained how, to save the life of his affianced wife, he had agreed to wed the siren, Viola Dale.

Langdon returned that same evening the diamonds he had recovered from Harvey Talcott.

With tears of gratitude General Clifton bade the brave detective good-night, when the family party disbanded.

Later he insisted on awarding Langdon a princely gift for all his unselfish devotion to himself and his loved ones.

For many days thereafter the community was intensely startled over the revelation of the true details of the Clifton case.

Only that portion of it referring to the counterfeit plates was kept secret.

Then amid the excitement of similar and more recent tragedies, it became a story of the past.

Viola Dale was not punished for her share in Harvey Talcott's crimes, but was sent out of the country at her own request.

Alstyn, Bartley, and Barnet were, however, tried on several charges, and sentenced to long terms of imprisonment in the State penitentiary.

Marie, the housemaid, was discharged from service, and with a wholesome fear of the police went to another city.

Howard, the detective, was found imprisoned in a suburban haunt of Talcott's accomplices and liberated.

Thus at last the tangled skeins of destiny were unraveled, and all the past made clear.

There was a happy wedding at the Clifton mansion when Vincent Morton led to the altar the millionaire's beautiful niece.

Happier still were the long golden years succeeding that event, when General Clif-

ton and his son again knew the delights and peacefulness of a home blessed with wealth and contentment.

Within its portals Langdon, the detective, was ever a welcome guest.

Often, when he revives the dark past by alluding to its mysteries, he exhibits the manacle and bracelet he keeps as a memento of the Clifton case.

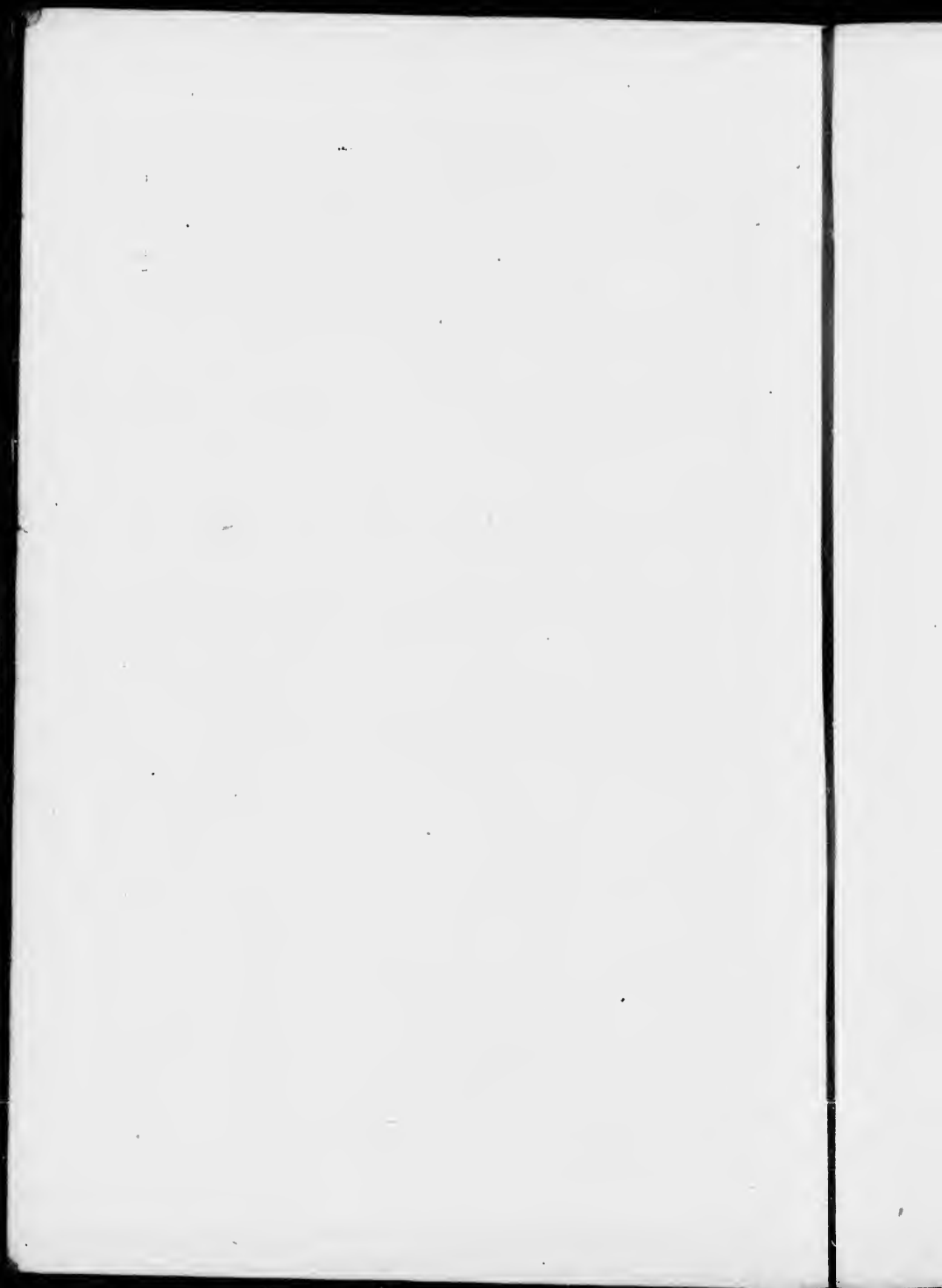
It tells how brave, reliant hearts evolved light from darkness, happiness from misery.

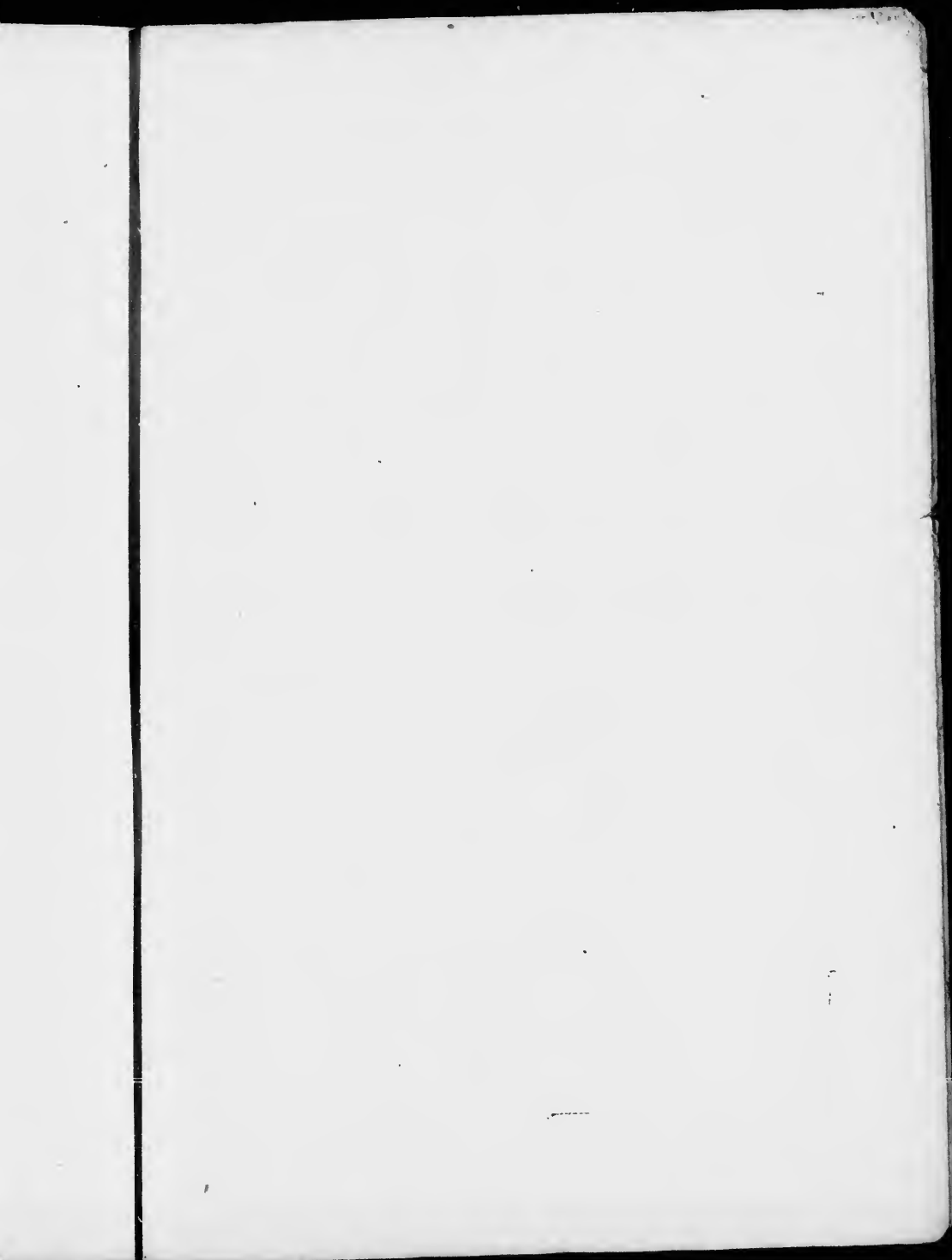
It also tells of the certain, inevitable doom that ever overtakes the criminal.

Iron and gold, manacle and bracelet, iron warp, golden woof, it is emblematical of all the lights and shadows of life.

And the happy denizens of the Clifton mansion never regard it without again living over the past, in which that same Manacle and Bracelet bore so mystical a part in bringing to light what was esteemed to be The Dead Man's Secret.

THE END.







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