

Wells Carolyn

The Man Who Fell Through the Earth



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CHAPTER I

Moving Shadow-Shapes

One of the occasions when I experienced “that grand and glorious feeling” was when my law business had achieved proportions that justified my removal from my old office to new and more commodious quarters. I selected a somewhat pretentious building on Madison Avenue between Thirtieth and Fortieth Streets, and it was a red-letter day for me when I moved into my pleasant rooms on its top floor.

The Puritan Trust Company occupied all of the ground floor and there were also some of the private offices of that institution on the top floor, as well as a few offices to be let.

My rooms were well located and delightfully light, and I furnished them with care, selecting chairs and desks of a dignified type, and rugs of appropriately quiet coloring. I also selected my stenographer with care, and Norah MacCormack was a red-haired piece of perfection. If she had a weakness, it was for reading detective stories, but I condoned that, for in my hammocky moods I, too, dipped into the tangled-web school of fiction.

And, without undue conceit, I felt that I could give most specimens of the genus Sherlock cards and spades and beat them at their own game of deduction. I practiced it on Norah sometimes. She would bring me a veil or glove of some friend of hers, and I would try to deduce the friend's traits of character. My successes and failures were about fifty-fifty, but Norah thought I improved with practice, and, anyway, it exercised my intelligence.

I had failed to pass examination for the army, because of a defect, negligible, it seemed to me, in my eyesight. I was deeply disappointed, but as the law of compensation is usually in force, I unexpectedly proved to be of some use to my Government after all.

Across the hall from me was the private office of Amos Gately, the President of the Puritan Trust Company, and a man of city-wide reputation. I didn't know the great financier personally, but everyone knew of him, and his name was a synonym for all that is sound, honorable, and philanthropic in the money mart. He was of that frequently seen type, with the silver gray hair that so becomingly accompanies deep-set dark eyes.

And yet, I had never seen Mr. Gately himself. My knowledge of him was gained from his frequent portraiture in the papers or in an occasional magazine. And I had gathered, in a vague way, that he was a connoisseur of the fine arts, and that his offices, as well as his home, were palatial in their appointments.

I may as well admit, therefore, that going in and out of my own rooms I often looked toward his door, in hopes that I might get a glimpse, at least, of the treasures within. But so far I had not done so.

To be sure, I had only occupied my own suite about a week and then again Mr. Gately was not always in his private offices during business hours. Doubtless, much of the time he was down in the banking rooms.

There was a yellow-haired stenographer, who wore her hair in ear-muffs, and who was, I should say, addicted to the vanity-case. This young person, Norah had informed me, was Jenny Boyd.

And that sums up the whole of my intimate knowledge of Amos Gately – until the day of the black snow squall!

I daresay my prehistoric ancestors were sun-worshippers. At any rate, I am perfectly happy when the sun shines, and utterly miserable on a gloomy day. Of course, after sunset, I don't care, but days when artificial light must be used, I get fidgety and am positively unable to concentrate on any important line of thought.

And so, when Norah snapped on her green-shaded desk light in mid-afternoon, I impulsively jumped up to go home. I could stand electrically lighted rooms better in my diggings than in the work-compelling atmosphere of my office.

"Finish that bit of work," I told my competent assistant, "and then go home yourself. I'm going now."

"But it's only three o'clock, Mr. Brice," and Norah's gray eyes looked up from the clicking keys.

"I know it, but a snow storm is brewing, – and Lord knows there's snow enough in town now!"

"There is so! I'm thinking they won't get the black mountains out of the side streets before Fourth of July, – and the poor White Wings working themselves to death!"

"Statistics haven't yet proved that cause of death prevalent among snow-shovelers," I returned, "but I'm pretty sure there's more chance for it coming to them!"

I hate snow. For the ocular defect that kept me out of the army is corrected by not altogether unbecoming glasses, but when these are moistened or misted by falling snow, I am greatly incommoded. So I determined to reach home, if possible, before the squall which was so indubitably imminent.

I snugged into my overcoat, and jammed my hat well down on my head, for the wind was already blowing a gale.

"Get away soon, Norah," I said, as I opened the door into the hall, "and if it proves a blizzard you needn't show up tomorrow."

"Oh, I'll be here, Mr. Brice," she returned, in her cheery way, and resumed her clicking.

The offices of Mr. Gately, opposite mine, had three doors to the hall, meaning, I assumed, three rooms in his suite.

My own door was exactly opposite the middle one of the three. On that was the number two. To its left was number one, and to its right, number three.

Each of these three doors had an upper panel of thick, clouded glass, and, as the hall was not yet lighted and Mr. Gately's rooms were, I could see quite plainly the shadows of two heads on the middle door, – the door numbered two.

Perhaps I am unduly curious, perhaps it was merely a natural interest, but I stood still a moment, outside my own door, and watched the two shadowed heads.

The rippled clouding of the glass made their outlines somewhat vague, but I could distinguish the fine, thick mane of Amos Gately, as I had so often seen it pictured. The other was merely a human shadow with no striking characteristics.

It was evident their interview was not amicable. I heard a loud, explosive "No!" from one or other of them, and then both figures rose and there was a hand-to-hand struggle. Their voices indicated a desperate quarrel, though no words were distinguishable.

And then, as I looked, the shadows blurred into one another, – swayed, – separated, and then a pistol shot rang out, followed immediately by a woman's shrill scream.

Impulsively I sprang across the hall, and turned the knob of door number two, – the one opposite my own door, and the one through which I had seen the shadowed actions.

But the door would not open.

I hesitated only an instant and then hurried to the door next on the right, number three.

This, too, was fastened on the inside, so I ran back to the only other door, number one, – to the left of the middle door.

This door opened at my touch, and I found myself in the first of Amos Gately's magnificent rooms.

Beyond one quick, admiring glance, I paid no attention to the beautiful appointments, and I opened the communicating door into the next or middle room.

This, like the first, contained no human being, but it was filled with the smoke and the odor of a recently fired pistol.

I looked around, aghast. This was the room where the altercation had taken place, where two men had grappled, where a pistol had been fired, and moreover, where a woman had screamed. Where were these people?

In the next room, of course, I reasoned.

With eager curiosity, I went on into the third room. It was empty.

And that was all the rooms of the suite.

Where were the people I had seen and heard? That is, I had seen their shadows on the glass door, and human shadows cannot appear without people to cast them. Where were the men who had fought? Where was the woman who had screamed? And who were they?

Dazed, I went back through the rooms. Their several uses were clear enough. Number one was the entrance office. There was an attendant's desk, a typewriter, reception chairs, and all the effects of the first stage of an interview with the great man.

The second office, beyond a doubt, was Mr. Gately's sanctum. A stunning mahogany table-desk was in the middle of the floor, and a large, unusually fine swivel-chair stood behind it. On the desk, things were somewhat disordered. The telephone was upset, the papers pushed into an untidy heap, a pen-tray overturned, and a chair opposite the big desk chair lay over on its side, as if Mr. Gately's visitor had risen hurriedly. The last room, number three, was, clearly, the very holy of holies. Surely, only the most important or most beloved guests were received in here. It was furnished as richly as a royal salon, yet all in most perfect taste and quiet harmony. The general coloring of draperies and upholstery was soft blue, and splendid pictures hung on the wall. Also, there was a huge war map of Europe, and indicative pins stuck in it proved Mr. Gately's intense interest in the progress of events over there.

But though tempted to feast my eyes on the art treasures all about, I eagerly pursued my quest for the vanished human beings I sought.

There was no one in any of these three rooms, and I could see no exit, save into the hall from which I had entered. I looked into three or four cupboards, but they were full of books and papers, and no sign of a hidden human being, alive or dead, could I find.

Perhaps the strangeness of it all blunted my efficiency. I had always flattered myself that I was at my best in an emergency, but all previous emergencies in which I had found myself were trivial and unimportant compared with this.

I felt as if I had been at a moving picture show. I had seen, as on the screen, a man shot, perhaps killed, and now all the actors had vanished as completely as they do when the movie is over.

Then, for I am not entirely devoid of conscience, it occurred to me that I had a duty, – that it was incumbent upon me to report to somebody. I thought of the police, but was it right to call them when I had so vague a report to make? What could I tell them? That I had seen shadows fighting? Heard a woman scream? Smelled smoke? Heard the report of a pistol? A whimsical thought came that the report of the pistol was the only definite report I could swear to!

Yet the whole scene was definite enough to me.

I had seen two men fighting, – shadows, to be sure, but shadows of real men. I had heard their voices raised in dissension of some sort, I had seen a scuffle and had heard a shot, of which I had afterward smelled the smoke, and, – most incriminating of all, – I had heard a woman's scream. A scream, too, of terror, as for her life!

And then, I had immediately entered these rooms, and I had found them empty of all human presence, but with the smoke still hanging low, to prove my observations had been real, and no figment of my imagination.

I believed I had latent detective ability. Well, surely here was a chance to exercise it!

What more bewildering mystery could be desired than to witness a shooting, and, breaking in upon the scene, to find no victim, no criminal, and no weapon!

I hunted for the pistol, but found no more trace of that than of the hand that had fired it.

My brain felt queer; I said to myself, over and over, “a fight, a shot, a scream! No victim, no criminal, no weapon!”

I looked out in the hall again. I had already looked out two or three times, but I had seen no one. However, I didn’t suppose the villain and his victim had gone down by the elevator or by the stairway.

But where were they? And where was the woman who had screamed?

Perhaps it was she who had been shot. Why did I assume that Mr. Gately was the victim? Could not he have been the criminal?

The thought of Amos Gately in the rôle of murderer was a little too absurd! Still, the whole situation was absurd.

For me, Tom Brice, to be involved in this baffling mystery was the height of all that was incredible!

And yet, was I involved? I had only to walk out and go home to be out of it all. No one had seen me and no one could know I had been there.

And then something sinister overcame me. A kind of cold dread of the whole affair; an uncanny feeling that I was drawn into a fearful web of circumstances from which I could not honorably escape, if, indeed, I could escape at all. The three Gately rooms, though lighted, felt dark and eerie. I glanced out of a window. The sky was almost black and scattering snowflakes were falling. I realized, too, that though the place was lighted, the fixtures were those great alabaster bowls, and, as they hung from the ceiling, they seemed to give out a ghostly radiance that emphasized the strange silence.

For, in my increasingly nervous state, the silence was intensified and it seemed the silence of death, – not the mere quiet of an empty room.

I pulled myself together, for I had not lost all sense of my duty. I *must* do something, I told myself, sternly, – but what?

My hand crept toward the telephone that lay, turned over on its side, on Mr. Gately’s desk.

But I drew back quickly, not so much because of a disinclination to touch the thing that had perhaps figured in a tragedy but because of a dim instinct of leaving everything untouched as a possible clew.

Clew! The very word helped restore my equilibrium. There had been a crime of some sort, – at least, there had been a shooting, and I had been an eye-witness, even if my eyes had seen only shadows.

My rôle, then, was an important one. My duty was to tell what I had seen and render any assistance I could. But I wouldn’t use that telephone. It must be out of order, anyway, or the operator downstairs would be looking after it. I would go back to my own office and call up somebody. As I crossed the hall, I was still debating whether that somebody would better be the police or the bank people downstairs. The latter, I decided, for it was their place to look after their president, not mine.

I found Norah putting on her hat. The sight of her shrewd gray eyes and intelligent face caused an outburst of confidence, and I told her the whole story as fast as I could rattle it out.

“Oh, Mr. Brice,” she exclaimed, her eyes wide with excitement, “let me go over there! May I?”

“Wait a minute, Norah: I think I ought to speak to the bank people. I think I’ll telephone down and ask if Mr. Gately is down there. You know it may not have been Mr. Gately at all, whose shadow I saw – ”

“Ooh, yes, it was! You couldn’t mistake his head, and, too, who else would be in there? Please, Mr. Brice, wait just a minute before you telephone, – let me take one look round, – you don’t want to make a – to look foolish, you know.”

She had so nearly warned me against making a fool of myself, that I took the hint, and I followed her across the hall.

She went in quickly at the door of room number one. One glance around it and she said, “This is the first office, you see: callers come here, the secretary or stenographer takes their names and all that, and shows them into Mr. Gately’s office.”

As Norah spoke she went on to the second room. Oblivious to its grandeur and luxury, she gave swift, darting glances here and there and said positively: “Of course, it was Mr. Gately who was shot, and by a woman too!”

“The woman who screamed?”

“No: more likely not. I expect the woman who screamed was his stenographer. I know her, – at least, I’ve seen her. A little doll-faced jig, who belongs about third from the end, in the chorus! Be sure she’d scream at the pistol shot, but the lady who fired the shot wouldn’t.”

“But I saw the scrimmage and it was a man who shot.”

“Are you sure? That thick, clouded glass blurs a shadow beyond recognition.”

“What makes you think it was a woman, then?”

“This,” and Norah pointed to a hatpin that lay on the big desk.

It was a fine-looking pin, with a big head, but when I was about to pick it up Norah dissuaded me.

“Don’t touch it,” she warned; “you know, Mr. Brice, we’ve really no right here and we simply must not touch anything.”

“But, Norah,” I began, my common sense and good judgment having returned to me with the advent of human companionship, “I don’t want to do anything wrong. If we’ve no right here, for Heaven’s sake, let’s get out!”

“Yes, in a minute, but let me think what you ought to do. And, oh, do let me take a minute to look round!”

“No, girl; this is no time to satisfy your curiosity or, to enjoy a sight of these – ”

“Oh, I don’t mean that! But I want to see if there isn’t some clew or some bit of evidence to the whole thing. It is too weird! too impossible that three people should have disappeared into nothingness! Where are they?”

Norah looked in the same closets I had explored; she drew aside window draperies and portières, she hastily glanced under desks and tables, not so much, I felt sure, in expectation of finding anyone, as with a general idea of searching the place thoroughly.

She scrutinized the desk fittings of the stenographer.

“Everything of the best,” she commented, “but very little real work done up here. I fancy these offices of Mr. Gately’s are more for private conferences and personal appointments than any real business matters.”

“Which would account for the lady’s hatpin,” I observed.

“Yes; but how did they get out? You looked out in the hall, at once, you say?”

“Yes; I came quickly through these three rooms, and then looked out into the hall at once, and there was no elevator in sight nor could I see anyone on the stairs.”

“Well, there’s not much to be seen here. I suppose you’d better call up the bank people. Though if they thought there was anything queer they’d be up here by this time.”

I left Norah in Mr. Gately's rooms while I went back to my own office and called up the Puritan Trust Company.

A polite voice assured me that they knew nothing of Mr. Gately's whereabouts at that moment, but if I would leave a message he would ultimately receive it.

So, then, I told them, in part, what had happened, or, rather, what I believed had happened, and still a little unconcerned, the polite man agreed to send somebody up.

"Stuffy people!" I said to Norah, as I returned to the room she was in. "They seemed to think me officious."

"I feared they would, Mr. Brice, but you had to do it. There's no doubt Mr. Gately left this room in mad haste. See, here's his personal checkbook on his desk, and he drew a check today."

"Nothing remarkable in his drawing a check," I observed, "but decidedly peculiar to leave his checkbook around so carelessly. As you say, Norah, he left in a hurry."

"But how did he leave?"

"That's the mystery; and I, for one, give it up. I'm quite willing to wait until some greater brain than mine works out the problem."

"But it's incomprehensible," Norah went on; "where's Jenny?"

"For that matter," I countered, "where's Mr. Gately? Where's his angry visitor, male or female? and, finally, where's the pistol that made the sound and smoke of which I had positive evidence?"

"We may find that," suggested Norah, hopefully.

But careful search failed to discover any firearms, as it had failed to reveal the actors of the drama.

Nor did the representative from the bank come up at once. This seemed queer, I thought, and with a sudden impulse to find out something, I declared I was going down to the bank myself.

"Go on," said Norah, "I'll stay here, for I must know what they find out when they do come."

I went out into the hall and pushed the "Down" button of the elevator.

"Be careful," Norah warned me, as the car was heard ascending, "say very little, Mr. Brice, except to the proper authorities. This may be a terrible thing, and you mustn't get mixed up in it until you know more about it. You were not only the first to discover the disappearance, – but you and I are apparently the only ones in this corridor who know of it yet, we may be –"

"Suspected of the abduction of Amos Gately! Hardly! Don't let your detective instinct run away with you Norah!"

And then the elevator door slid open and I got into the car.

CHAPTER II

Jenny's Version

The elevators in the building were run by girls, and the one I entered was in charge of Minny Boyd, a sister of Jenny, who was in Mr. Gately's office.

As soon as I stepped into the car I saw that Minny was in a state of excitement.

"What's the matter?" I asked, sympathetically.

"Oh, Mr. Brice," and the girl burst into tears, "Jenny said – "

"Well," I urged, as she hesitated, "what did Jenny say?"

"Don't you know anything about it?"

"About what?" I asked, trying to be casual.

"Why, about Mr. Gately."

"And what about him?"

"He's gone! Disappeared!"

"Amos Gately? The president of the Puritan Trust Company! Minny, what do you mean?"

"Why, Mr. Brice, only a little while ago, I took Jenny down. She was crying like everything and she said that Mr. Gately had been shot!"

"Shot?"

"Yes, that's what she said – "

"Who shot him?"

"I don't know, but Jenny was nearly crazy! I told her to go to the lunchroom, – that's where the girls go when off duty, – and I said I'd come to her as soon as I could. I can't leave my car, you know."

"Of course not, Minny," I agreed; "but what did Jenny mean? Did she see Mr. Gately shot?"

"No, I don't think so, – but she heard a pistol fired off, and she – she – "

"What did she do?"

"She ran into Mr. Gately's private office, – and, he wasn't there! And then she – oh, I suppose she hadn't any right to do it, – but she ran on to his own personal room, – the one where she is never allowed to go, – and there wasn't anybody there! So Jenny was scared out of her senses, and she ran out here, – to the hall, I mean, – and I took her downstairs, – and oh, Mr. Brice, I've got to stop at this floor, – there's a call, – and please don't say anything about it, – I mean don't tell I said anything – for Jenny told me not to – "

I saw Minny was in great perturbation, and I forebore to question her further, for just then we stopped at the seventh floor and a man entered the elevator.

I knew him, – that is, I knew he was George Rodman, – but I wasn't sufficiently acquainted to speak to him.

So the three of us went on down in silence, past the other floors, and reached the ground floor, where Rodman and I got out.

Waiting to go up, I found Mr. Pitt, a discount clerk of the Puritan Trust Company.

"This is Mr. Brice?" he said, in a superior way.

I resented the superiority, but I admitted his soft impeachment.

"And you say there is something to be investigated in Mr. Gately's offices?" he went on, as if I were a Food Administrator, or something.

"Well," I returned, a little curtly, "I chanced to see and hear and smell a pistol shot, – and further looking into the matter failed to show anybody killed or wounded or – in fact, failed to disclose anybody whatever on the job, and I confess it all looks to me mighty queer!"

"And may I ask why it appeals to you as queer?"

I looked Friend Pitt square in the eye, and I said, "It seems to me queer that a bank president should drop out of existence and even out of his business affiliations in one minute without any recognition of the fact."

"Perhaps you overestimate an outside interest," said Pitt. "You must know it is really none of the business of the Puritan Trust Company what Mr. Gately does in his leisure hours."

"Very well, Mr. Pitt," I returned, "then let us go and interview the young woman who is Mr. Gately's stenographer and who is even now in hysterics in the employees' lunchroom."

Mr. Pitt seemed duly impressed and together we went to find Jenny.

The lunchroom for the employees of the building was a pleasant place, on the ground floor, and therein we found Jenny, the yellow-haired stenographer of Amos Gately.

The girl was, without doubt, hysterical, and her account of the shooting was disjointed and incoherent.

Moreover, Mr. Pitt was of the supercilious type, the kind who never believes anything, and his manner, as he listened to Jenny's story, was incredulous and almost scoffing.

So Jenny's story, though to me illuminating, was, I felt sure, to Pitt, of little value.

"Oh," Jenny exclaimed, "I was in my room, the first room, and I didn't mean to listen, – I never do! and then, all of a sudden, I heard somebody threatening Mr. Gately! That made me listen, – I don't care if it was wrong – and then, I heard somebody quarreling with Mr. Gately."

"How do you know they were quarreling?" interposed Pitt's cold voice.

"I couldn't help knowing, sir. I heard Mr. Gately's usually pleasant voice raised as if in anger, and I heard the visitor's voice, high and angry too."

"You didn't know the visitor's voice? you had never heard it before?" asked Pitt.

"No, sir; I've no idea who he could have been!" and the foolish little Jenny bridled and looked like an innocent *ingénue*.

I broke in.

"But didn't you admit all visitors or callers to Mr. Gately?" I demanded.

Jenny looked at me. "No, sir," she replied; "I received all who came to my door, but there were others!"

"Where did they enter?" asked Pitt.

"Oh, they came in at the other doors. You see, I only looked after my own room. Of course, if Miss Raynor came, – or anybody that Mr. Gately knew personally –" Jenny paused discreetly.

"And did Miss Raynor come this morning?" I asked.

"Yes," Jenny replied, "she did. That is, not this morning, but early this afternoon. I know Miss Raynor very well."

Mr. Pitt seemed a little disturbed from his usual calm, and with evident reluctance said to me, "I think, Mr. Brice, that this matter is more serious than I thought. It seems to me that it would be wise to refer the whole matter to Mr. Talcott, the secretary of the Trust Company."

Now, I was only too glad to refer the matter to anybody who could be considered authoritative, and I agreed at once.

"Moreover," said Mr. Pitt, as he gave an anxious glance at Jenny, "I think it well to take this young woman along, as she is the secretary of Mr. Gately and may know –"

"Oh, no, sir," cried Jenny, "I don't know anything! Please don't ask me questions!"

Jenny's perturbation seemed to make Mr. Pitt's intentions more definite, and he corralled the young woman, as he also swept me along.

In a moment, we were all going into the offices of the Puritan Trust Company.

And here, Mr. Pitt faded from view, and he left us in the august presence of Mr. Talcott, the secretary of the Company.

I found myself in the quiet, pleasant atmosphere of the usual banker's office, and Mr. Talcott, a kindly gentleman of middle-aged aristocracy, began to question me.

“It seems to me, Mr. Brice,” he began, “that this story of yours about Mr. Gately is not only important but mysterious.”

“I think so, Mr. Talcott,” I responded, “and yet, the whole crux of the matter is whether Mr. Gately is, at present, in some one of his offices, or, perhaps at his home, or whether his whereabouts are undetermined.”

“Of course, Mr. Brice,” the secretary went on, “it is none of our business where Mr. Gately is, outside of his banking hours; and yet, in view of Mr. Pitt’s report of your account, it is incumbent upon us, the officers of the Trust Company, to look into the matter. Will you tell me, please, all you know of the circumstances pertaining to Mr. Gately’s disappearance, – if he has disappeared?”

“If he has disappeared!” I snapped back; “and, pray, sir, if he has not disappeared, where is he?”

Mr. Talcott, still unmoved, responded, “That is aside the question, for the moment. What do you know of the matter, Mr. Brice?”

I replied by telling him all I knew of the whole affair, from the time I first saw the shadows until the moment when I went down in the elevator and met Mr. Pitt.

He listened with deepest attention, and then, seemingly unimpressed by my story, began to question Jenny.

This volatile young lady had regained her mental balance, and was more than ready to dilate upon her experiences.

“Yes, sir,” she said, “I was sitting at my desk, and nobody had come in for an hour or so, when, all of a sudden, I heard talking in Mr. Gately’s room.”

“Do callers usually go through your room?” Mr. Talcott inquired.

“Yes, sir, – that is, unless they’re Mr. Gately’s personal friends, – like Miss Raynor or somebody.”

“Who is Miss Raynor?” I broke in.

“His ward,” said Mr. Talcott, briefly. “Go on, Jenny; nobody had gone through your room?”

“No, sir; and so, I was startled to hear somebody scrapping with Mr. Gately.”

“Scrapping?”

“Yes, sir; sort of quarreling, you know; I – ”

“Did you listen?”

“Not exactly that, sir, but I couldn’t help hearing the angry voices, though I didn’t make out the words.”

“Be careful, Jenny,” Talcott’s tones were stern, “don’t assume more than you can be sure was meant.”

“Then I can’t assume anything,” said Jenny, crisply, “for I didn’t hear a single word, – only I did feel sure the two of ’em was scrapping.”

“You heard, then, angry voices?”

“Yes, sir, just that. And right straight afterward, a pistol shot.”

“In Mr. Gately’s room?”

“Yes, sir. And then I ran in there to see what it meant, – ”

“Weren’t you frightened?”

“No, sir; I didn’t stop to think there was anything to be frightened of. But when I got in there, and saw – ”

“Well, go on, – what did you see?”

“A man, with a pistol in his hand, running out of the door – ”

“Which door?”

“The door of number three, – that’s Mr. Gately’s own particular private room, – well, he was running out of that door, with a pistol in his hand, – and the pistol was smoking, sir!”

Jenny's foolish little face was red with excitement and her lips trembled as she told her story. It was impossible to disbelieve her, – there could be no doubt of her fidelity to detail.

But Talcott was imperturbable.

"The pistol was smoking," he repeated, "where did the man go with it?"

"I don't know, sir," said Jenny; "I ran out to the hall after him, – I think I saw him run down the staircase, but I, – I was so scared with it all, I jumped into the elevator, – Minny's elevator, – and came downstairs myself."

"And then?" prompted Talcott.

"Then, sir, – oh, I don't know, – I think I lost my head – it was all so queer, you know – "

"Yes, yes," said Talcott, soothingly, – he was a most courteous man, "yes, Miss Jenny, – I don't wonder you were upset. Now, I think, if you will accompany us, we will go upstairs to Mr. Gately's rooms."

It seemed to me that Mr. Talcott did not pay sufficient attention to my presence, but I forgave this, because I felt sure he would be only too glad to avail himself of my services later on. So I followed him and the tow-headed Jenny up to the offices of the bank president.

We did not go up in Minny's elevator, but in another one, and our appearance at the door of Mr. Gately's office number one, was met by Norah, – my Norah, who received us with an air of grave importance.

She was unawed by the sight of Mr. Talcott, imposing though he was, and was clearly scornful of Jenny, who had already assumed a jaunty manner.

But Jenny was quite self-possessed, and with a toss of her head at Norah she started to explain.

"I was in here, at my desk, Mr. Talcott," she began, volubly; "and in Mr. Gately's office, I heard somebody talking pretty sharp – "

"A man?"

"Yes, sir."

"How did he get in, if not through your room?"

"Oh, people often went through the hall doors of number two or three, and sometimes they came through my room."

"Who went through your room this afternoon?"

"Only three people. An old man named Smith – "

"What was his business?"

"I'm not quite sure, but it had to do with his getting a part salary from Mr. Gately; he was a down-and-outer, and he hoped Mr. Gately would help him through."

"And did he?"

"Oh, yes, sir! Mr. Gately always was soft-hearted and never turned down anybody in need."

"And the other callers?"

"There was an old lady, to see about her husband's pension, – and – "

"Well? I suppose not all the callers were beneficiaries?"

"No, sir. One was a – a lady."

"A lady? Describe her."

"Why, she was Miss Olive Raynor, – Mr. Gately's ward."

"Oh, Miss Raynor. Well, there's no use discussing her. Were there any other ladies?"

"No, sir."

"Nor any other men?"

"No, sir; that is, not through my room. You know, people could go in to Mr. Gately's private offices without going through my room."

"Yes, I know. But couldn't you see them?"

"Only dimly, – through the clouded glass window between my room and Mr. Gately's."

“And what did you see of the callers in Mr. Gately’s room just before you heard the shot fired?”

Jenny looked dubious. She seemed inclined not to tell all she knew. But Mr. Talcott spoke sharply.

“Come,” he said; “speak up. Tell all you know.”

“I didn’t hear anybody come in,” said Jenny, slowly; “and then, all of a sudden, I heard loud voices, – and then, I heard quarrelly words – ”

“Quarrelly?”

“Yes, sir, as if somebody was threatening Mr. Gately. I didn’t hear clearly, but I heard enough to make me look through the window between the two rooms – ”

“This window?”

“Yes, sir,” and Jenny nodded at the clouded glass pane between her room and Mr. Gately’s office. “And I saw sort of shadows, – and then in a minute I saw the shadows get up – you know, Mr. Gately and another man, – and then, – I heard a pistol fired off, and I yelled!”

“It was your scream I heard, then!” I exclaimed.

“I don’t know,” Jenny replied, “but I did scream, because I am fearfully scared of pistol shots, and I didn’t know who was shooting.”

“What did you do next?” asked Mr. Talcott, in his quiet way.

“I ran into Mr. Gately’s room – ”

“And you weren’t frightened?”

“Not for myself. I was frightened of the shot, – I always am afraid of firearms, but I wanted to know what was doing. So, I opened the door and ran in – ”

“Yes; and?”

“I saw nobody in Mr. Gately’s room, – I mean this room next to mine, – so I ran on, to the third room, – I am not supposed to go in there, – but I did, and there I saw a man just going out to the hall and in his hand was a smoking revolver.”

“Out to the hall? Did you follow him?”

“Of course I did! But he ran down the staircase. I didn’t go down that way, because I thought I’d get down quicker and head him off by going down in the elevator.”

“So you went down in the elevator?”

“Yes, sir. It was Minny’s elevator, – Minny’s my sister, – and after I got in, – and saw Minny, I got sort of hysterical and nervous, and I couldn’t remember what I was about.”

“What became of the man?” asked Talcott, uninterested in Jenny’s nerves.

“I don’t know, sir. I was so rattled, – and I only saw him a moment, – and – ”

“Would you know him if you saw him again?”

“I don’t know, – I don’t think so.”

“I wish you could say yes, – it may be of gravest importance.”

But Jenny seemed to resent Mr. Talcott’s desire.

“I don’t see how you could expect it, sir,” she said, pettishly; “I saw him only in a glimpse, – I was scared to death at the sound of the pistol shot, – and when I burst into this room and found Mr. Gately gone I was so kerflummixed I didn’t know what I was about! That I didn’t!”

“And yet,” Norah remarked, quietly, “after you went downstairs and these gentlemen found you in the lunchroom, you were perfectly calm and collected – ”

“Nothing of the sort!” blazed back Jenny; “I’m all on edge! My nerves are completely unstrung!”

“Quite so,” said Mr. Talcott, kindly, “and I suggest that you go back to the lunchroom, Miss Jenny, and rest and calm yourself. But please remain there, until I call for you again.”

Jenny looked a little disappointed at being thus thrust out of the limelight, but as Mr. Talcott held the door open for her, she had no choice but to depart, and we presently heard her go down in her sister's elevator.

"Now," Mr. Talcott resumed, "we will look into this matter further.

"You see," he proceeded, speaking, to my surprise, as much to Norah as to myself, "I can't really apprehend that anything serious has happened to Mr. Gately. For, if the shot which Jenny heard, and which you, Mr. Brice, heard, – had killed Mr. Gately, the body, of course, would be here. Again, if the shot had wounded him seriously, he would in some way contrive to make his condition known. Therefore, I feel sure that Mr. Gately is either absolutely all right, or, if slightly wounded, he is in some anteroom or in some friend's room nearby. And, if this is the case, – I mean, if our Mr. Gately is ill or hurt, we must find him. Therefore, careful search must be made."

"But," spoke up Norah, "perhaps Mr. Gately went home. There is no positive assurance that he did not."

Mr. Talcott looked at Norah keenly. He didn't seem to regard her as an impertinent young person, but he took her suggestion seriously.

"That may be," he agreed. "I think I will call up his residence."

He did so, and I gathered from the remarks he made on the telephone that Amos Gately was not at his home, nor was his niece, Miss Olive Raynor, there.

Talcott made another call or two, and I finally learned that he had located Miss Raynor.

For, "Very well," he said; "I shall hope to see you here in ten or fifteen minutes, then."

He hung up the receiver, – he had used the instrument in Jenny's room, and not the upset one on Mr. Gately's desk, – and he vouchsafed:

"I think it is all right. Miss Raynor says she saw her uncle here this afternoon, shortly after luncheon, and he said he was about to leave the office for the day. She thinks he is at his club or on the way home. However, she is coming around here, as she is in the limousine, and fearing a storm, she wants to take Mr. Gately home."

CHAPTER III

The Elevator

Mr. Talcott returned to the middle room and looked more carefully at the disturbed condition of things around and on Mr. Gately's desk.

"It is certain that Mr. Gately left the room in haste," he said, "for here is what is undoubtedly a private and personal checkbook left open. I shall take on myself the responsibility of putting it away, for the moment, at least."

Mr. Talcott closed the checkbook and put it in a small drawer of the desk.

"Why don't you put away that hatpin, too?" suggested Norah, eyeing the pin curiously. "I don't think it belongs to Miss Raynor."

"Take it up by the edge," I warned; "I may be jumping to conclusions, but there is a possibility that a crime has been committed, and we must preserve what *may* be evidence."

"Quite right, Mr. Brice," agreed Talcott, and he gingerly picked up the pin by taking the edges of its ornate head between his thumb and forefinger. The head was an Egyptian scarab, – whether a real one or not I couldn't tell, – and was set on a flat backing of gold. This back might easily retain the thumb print of the woman who had drawn that pin from her hat in Mr. Gately's office. And who, Norah surmised, was the person who had fired the pistol that I had heard discharged.

Placing the hatpin in the drawer with the checkbook, Mr. Talcott locked the drawer and slipped the key in his pocket.

I wondered if he had seen some entry in the book that made him wish to hide Mr. Gately's private affairs from curious eyes.

"There is indeed a possibility of something wrong," he went on, "at first I couldn't think it, but seeing this room, that overturned chair and upset telephone, in connection with the shooting, as you heard it, Mr. Brice, it certainly seems ominous. And most mysterious! Two people quarreling, a shot fired by one or other of them, and no sign of the assailant, his victim, or his weapon! Now, there are three propositions, one of which *must* be the truth. Mr. Gately is alive and well, he is wounded, or he is killed. The last seems impossible, as his body could not have been taken away without discovery; if he were wounded, I think that, too, would have to be known; so, I still feel that things are all right. But until we can prove that, we must continue our search."

"Yes," I agreed, "search for Mr. Gately and also, search for the man who was here and who quarreled with him."

"Or the woman," insisted Norah.

"I can't think it was a woman," I said. "Although the shadow was indistinct, it struck me as that of a man, the motions and attitudes were masculine, as I recall them. The hatpin may have been left here this morning or any time."

"The visitor must be found," declared Mr. Talcott, "but I don't know how to go about it."

"Ask the elevator girls," I suggested; "one of them must have brought the caller up here."

We did this, but the attendants of the three elevators all denied having brought anyone up to Mr. Gately's offices since the old man and the elderly lady who had been mentioned by Jenny.

Miss Raynor had been brought up by one of the girls also, but we couldn't quite ascertain whether she had come before or after the other two.

While waiting for Miss Raynor to come again, I tried to do a little scientific deduction from any evidence I might notice.

But I gained small information. The desk-blotter, inkwell, and pens were in immaculate order, doubtless they were renewed every day by a careful attendant. All the minor accessories, such as paperweights and letter openers were of individual styles and of valuable materials.

There was elaborate smoking paraphernalia and a beautiful single rose in a tall silver vase.

"Can you read anything bearing on the mystery, Mr. Brice," asked Talcott, noting my thoughtful scrutiny.

"No; nothing definite. In fact, nothing of any importance. I see that on one occasion, at least, Mr. Gately kept a chauffeur waiting an unconscionably long time, and the man was finally obliged to go away without him."

"Well, now, how do you guess that?" and Mr. Talcott looked decidedly interested.

"Like most of those spectacular deductions," I responded, "the explanation takes all the charm out of it. There is a carriage check on the desk, – one of those queer cards with a lot of circular holes in it. That must have been given to Mr. Gately when he left his car, or perhaps a taxicab, outside of some hotel or shop. As he didn't give it up, the chauffeur must have waited for him until he was tired."

"He may have gone off with some friend, and sent word to the man not to wait," offered Talcott.

"But then he would have sent the call-check out to identify him. What a queer-looking thing it is," and I picked up the card, with its seven round holes in a cabalistic array.

"Perhaps the caller left it," spoke up Norah; "perhaps he, or she, came here in a cab, or a car, and –"

"No, Norah," I said, "such checks are not given out at a building of this sort. Only at hotels, theaters, or shops."

"It's of no importance," and Mr. Talcott gave a slight shrug of impatience; "the thing is, where is Mr. Gately?"

Restless and unable to sit still, I wandered into the third room. I had heard of this sanctum, but I had never expected to see inside of it. The impulse came to me now to make the most of this chance, for when Mr. Gately returned I might be summarily, if courteously, ejected.

The effect of the room was that of dignified splendor. It had evidently been done but not overdone by a decorator who was a true artist. The predominant color was a soft, deep blue, and the rugs and textile fabrics were rich and luxurious. There were a few fine paintings in gold frames and the large war map occupied the greater part of a paneled wall space. The chairs were spacious and cushioned, and a huge davenport stood in front of a wide fireplace, where some logs were cheerily burning.

A cozy place to entertain friends, I ruminated, and then, turning back to the middle room, I reconstructed the movements of the two people I had seen shadowed.

"As they rose," I said to Mr. Talcott, "Amos Gately was behind this big table-desk, and the other man, – for I still think it was a man, – was opposite. The other man upset his chair, on rising, so he must have risen hastily. Then the shot was fired, and the two disappeared. As Jenny came into the room at once, and saw the strange man going through the third room and on out to the stairs, we are forced to the conclusion that Mr. Gately preceded him."

"Down the stairs?" asked Mr. Talcott.

"Yes, for the flight, at least, or Jenny would have seen him. Also, I should have seen him, had he remained in this hall."

"And the woman?" asked Norah, "what became of her?"

"I don't think there was any woman present at that time," I returned. "The hatpin was, doubtless, left by a woman caller, but we've no reason to suppose she was there at the same time the shooting occurred."

"I can't think of any reason why anyone should shoot Mr. Gately," said Talcott, musingly. "He is a most estimable gentleman, the soul of honor and uprightness."

"Of course," I assented; "but has he no personal enemies?"

“None that I know of, and it is highly improbable, anyway. He is not a politician, or, indeed, a public man of any sort. He is exceedingly charitable, but he rarely makes known his good deeds. He has let it be known that he wishes his benefactions kept quiet.”

“What are his tastes?” I asked, casually.

“Simple in the extreme. He rarely takes a vacation, and though his home is on a magnificent scale, he doesn’t entertain very much. I have heard that Miss Raynor pleads in vain for him to be more of a society man.”

“She is his ward?”

“Yes; no relation, although she calls him uncle. I believe he was a college chum of Miss Raynor’s father, and when the girl was left alone in the world, he took her to live with him, and took charge of her fortune.”

“A large one?”

“Fairly so, I believe. Enough to tempt the fortune-hunters, anyway, and Mr. Gately frowns on any young man who approaches him with a request for Olive Raynor’s hand.”

“Perhaps the caller today was a suitor.”

“Oh, I hardly think a man would come armed on such an errand. No; to me, the most mysterious thing about it all, is why anyone should desire to harm Mr. Gately. It must have been a homicidal maniac, – if there is really such a being.”

“The most mysterious part to me,” I rejoined, “is how they both got away so quickly. You see, I stood in my doorway opposite, looking at them, and then as soon as I heard the shot I ran to the middle door as fast as I could, then to the third room door, and then back to the first. Of course, had I known which room was which, I should have gone to door number one first. But, as you see, I was in the hall, going from one door to another, and I must have seen the men if they came out into the hall from any door.”

“They left room number three, as you entered number one,” said Norah, carefully thinking it out.

“That must be so, but where did they go? Why, if Mr. Gately went downstairs, has he not been visible since? I can’t help feeling that Amos Gately is unable to move, for some reason or other. May he have been kidnaped? Or is he bound and gagged in some unused room, say on the floor below this?”

“No,” said Talcott, briefly. “Without saying anything about it I put one of the bank clerks on the hunt and I told him to look into every room in the building. As he has not reported, he hasn’t yet found Mr. Gately.”

And then, Olive Raynor arrived.

I shall never forget that first sight of her. Heralded by a fragrant whiff of fresh violets, she came into the first room, and paused at the doorway of the middle room, where we still sat.

Framed in the mahogany door-casing, the lovely bit of femininity seemed a laughing bundle of furs, velvets, and laces.

“What’s the matter?” said a soft, sweet voice. “Has Uncle Amos run away? I hope he is in a sheltered place for there’s a ferocious storm coming up and the wind is blowing a gale.”

The nodding plumes on her hat tossed as she raised her head inquiringly and looked about.

“What do I smell?” she exclaimed; “it’s like – like pistol-smoke!”

“It is,” Mr. Talcott said. “But there’s no pistol here now – ”

“How exciting! What’s it all about? Do tell me.”

Clearly the girl apprehended no serious matter. Her wide-open eyes showed curiosity and interest, but no thought of trouble had as yet come to her.

She stepped further into the room, and throwing back her furs revealed a slender graceful figure, quick of movement and of exquisite poise. Neither dark nor very fair, her wavy brown hair framed a face whose chief characteristic seemed to be its quickly changing expressions. Now

smiling, then grave, now wondering, then merry, she looked from one to another of us, her big brown eyes coming to rest at last on Norah.

“Who are you?” she asked, with a lovely smile that robbed the words of all curtness.

“I am Norah MacCormack, Miss Raynor,” my stenographer replied. “I am in Mr. Brice’s office, across the hall. This is Mr. Brice.”

There was no reason why Norah should be the one to introduce me, but we were all a little rattled, and Mr. Talcott, who, of course, was the one to handle the situation, seemed utterly at a loss as to how to begin.

“How do you do, Mr. Brice?” and Miss Raynor flashed me a special smile. “And now, Mr. Talcott, tell me what’s the matter? I see something has happened. What is it?”

She was grave enough now. She had suddenly realized that there was something to tell, and she meant to have it told.

“I don’t know, Miss Raynor,” Talcott began, “whether anything has happened, or not. I mean, anything serious. We – that is, – we don’t know where Mr. Gately is.”

“Go on. That of itself doesn’t explain your anxious faces.”

So Talcott told her, – told her just what we knew ourselves, which was so little and yet so mysterious.

Olive listened, her great, dark eyes widening with wonder. She had thrown off her fur coat and was seated in Amos Gately’s desk-chair, her dainty foot turning the chair on its swivel now and then.

Her muff fell to the floor, and, unconsciously, she drew off her gloves and dropped them upon it. She said no word during the recital, but her vivid face showed all the surprise and fear she felt as the tale was told.

Then, “I don’t understand,” she said, simply. “Do you think somebody shot Uncle Amos? Then where is he?”

“We don’t understand, either,” returned Talcott. “We don’t know that anybody shot him. We only know a shot was fired and Mr. Gately is missing.”

Just then a man entered Jenny’s room, from the hall. He, too, paused in the doorway to the middle room.

“Oh, Amory, come in!” cried Miss Raynor. “I’m so glad you’re here. This is Mr. Brice, – and Miss MacCormack, – Mr. Manning. Mr. Talcott, of course you know.”

I had never met Amory Manning before, but one glance was enough to show how matters stood between him and Olive Raynor. They were more than friends, – that much was certain.

“I saw Mr. Manning downstairs,” Miss Raynor said to Talcott, with a lovely flush, “and – as Uncle Amos doesn’t – well, he isn’t just crazy over him, I asked him not to come up here with me, but to wait for me downstairs.”

“And as you were so long about coming down, I came up,” said Mr. Manning, with a little smile. “What’s this, – what about a shot? Where’s Mr. Gately?”

Talcott hesitated, but Olive Raynor poured out the whole story at once.

Manning listened gravely, and at the end, said simply: “He *must* be found. How shall we set about it?”

“That’s what I don’t know,” replied Talcott.

“I’ll help,” said Olive, briskly. “I refuse to believe any harm has come to him. Let’s call up his clubs.”

“I’ve done that,” said Talcott. “I can’t think he went away anywhere – willingly.”

“How, then?” cried Olive. “Oh, wait a minute, – I know something!”

“What?” asked Talcott and I together, for the girl’s face glowed with her sudden happy thought.

“Why, Uncle Amos has a private elevator of his own. He went down in that!”

“Where is it?” asked Manning.

“I don’t know,” and Olive looked about the room. “And Uncle forbade me ever to mention it, – but this is an emergency, isn’t it? and I’m justified, – don’t you think?”

“Yes,” said Manning; “tell all you know.”

“But that’s all I do know. There is a secret elevator that nobody knows about. Surely you can find it.”

“Surely we can!” said I, and jumping up, I began the search.

Nor did it take long. There were not very many places where a private entrance could be concealed, and I found it behind the big war map, in the third room.

The door was flush with the wall, and painted the same as the panel itself. The map simply hung on the door, but overlapped sufficiently to hide it. Thus the door was concealed, though not really difficult of discovery.

“It won’t open,” I announced after a futile trial.

“Automatic,” said Talcott. “You can’t open that kind, when the car is down.”

“How do you know the car is down?” I asked.

“Because the door won’t open. Well, it does seem probable that Mr. Gately went away by this exit, then.”

“And the woman, too,” remarked Norah.

As before Mr. Talcott didn’t object to Norah’s participation in our discussion, in fact, he seemed rather to welcome it, and in a way, deferred to her opinions.

“Perhaps so,” he assented. “Now, Miss Raynor, where does this elevator descend to? I mean, where does it open on the ground floor?”

“I don’t know, I’m sure,” and the girl looked perplexed. “I’ve never been up or down in it. I shouldn’t have known of it, but once Uncle let slip a chance reference to it, and when I asked him about it, he told me, but told me not to tell. You see, he uses it to get away from bores or people he doesn’t want to see.”

“It ought to be easy to trace its shaft down through the floors,” said Amory Manning. “Though I suppose there’s no opening on any floor until the street floor is reached.”

Manning was a thoughtful-looking chap. Though we had never met before, I knew of him and I had an impression that he was a civil engineer or something like that. I felt drawn to him at once, for he had a pleasant, responsive manner and a nice, kindly way with him.

In appearance, he was scholarly, rather than business-like. This effect was probably due in part to the huge shell-rimmed glasses he wore. I can’t bear those things myself, but some men seem to take to them naturally. For the rest, Manning had thick, dark hair, and he was a bit inclined to stoutness, but his goodly height saved him from looking stocky.

“Well, I think we ought to investigate this elevator,” said Talcott. “Suppose you and I, Mr. Brice, go downstairs to see about it, leaving Miss Raynor and Mr. Manning here, – in case, – in case Mr. Gately returns.”

I knew that Talcott meant, in case we should find anything wrong in the elevator, but he put it the more casual way, and Miss Raynor seemed satisfied.

“Yes, do,” she said, “and we’ll wait here till you come back. Of course, you can find where it lands, and – oh, wait a minute! Maybe it opens in the next door building. I remember, sometimes when I’ve been waiting in the car for Uncle, he has come out of the building next door instead of this one, and when I asked him why, he always turned the subject without telling me.”

“It may be,” and Talcott considered the position of the shaft. “Well, we’ll see.”

Norah discreetly returned to my offices, but I felt pretty sure she wouldn’t go home, until something was found out concerning the mysterious disappearance.

On the street floor we could find no possible outlet for the elevator in question, and had it not been for Olive’s hint as to where to look, I don’t know how we should have found it at all.

But on leaving the Trust Company Building, we found the place at last. At least, we found a door which was in the position where we supposed the elevator shaft would require it, and we tried to open it.

This we failed to do.

“Looks bad,” said Talcott, shaking his head. “If Amos Gately is in there, it’s because he’s unable to get out – or – unconscious.”

He couldn’t bring himself to speak the crueler word that was in both our minds, and he turned abruptly aside, as he went in search of the janitor or the superintendent of the building.

Left by myself I stared at the silent door. It was an ordinary-looking door, at the end of a small side passage which communicated with the main hall or lobby of the building. It was inconspicuous, and as the passage had an angle in it, Amos Gately could easily have gone in and out of that door without exciting comment.

Of course, the janitor would know all about it; and he did.

He returned with Mr. Talcott, muttering as he came.

“I always said Mr. Gately’d get caught in that thing yet! I don’t hold with them automaticky things, so I don’t. They may go all right for years and then cut up some trick on you. If that man’s caught in there, he must be pretty sick by this time!”

“Does Mr. Gately use the thing much?” I asked.

“Not so very often, sir. Irregular like. Now, quite frequent, and then, again, sort of seldom. Well, we can’t open it, Mr. Talcott. These things won’t work, only just so. After anybody gets in, and shuts the door, it can’t be opened except by pressing a button on the inside. Can’t you get in upstairs?”

“No,” said Talcott, shortly. “Get help, then, and break the door down.”

This was done, the splintered door fell away, and there, in a crumpled heap on the floor of the car, was Amos Gately, – dead.

CHAPTER IV

The Black Squall

If I had thought Mr. Talcott somewhat indifferent before, I changed my opinion suddenly. His face turned a ghastly white and his eyes stared with horror. There was more than his grief for a friend, though that was evident enough, but his thoughts ran ahead to the larger issues involved by this murder of a bank president and otherwise influential financier.

For murder it was, beyond all doubt. The briefest examination showed Mr. Gately had been shot through the heart, and the absence of any weapon precluded the idea of suicide.

The janitor, overcome at the sight, was in a state bordering on collapse, and Mr. Talcott was not much more composed.

“Mr. Brice,” he said, his face working convulsively, “this is a fearful calamity! What can it mean? Who could have done it? What shall we do?”

Answering his last question first, I endeavored to take hold of the situation.

“First of all, Mr. Talcott, we must keep this thing quiet for the moment. I mean, we must not let a crowd gather here, before the necessary matters are attended to. This passage must be guarded from intrusion, and the bank people must be notified at once. Suppose you and the janitor stay here, while I go back next door and tell – tell whom?”

“Let me think,” groaned Mr. Talcott, passing his hand across his forehead. “Yes, please, Mr. Brice, do that – go to the bank and tell Mr. Mason, the vice-president – ask him to come here to me, – then, there is Miss Raynor – oh, how horrible it all is!”

“Also, we must call a doctor,” I suggested, “and, eventually, the police.”

“Must they be brought in? Yes, I suppose so. Well, Mr. Brice, if you will attend to those errands, I will stay here. But we must shut up that janitor!”

The man, on the verge of collapse, was groaning and mumbling prayers, or something, as he rocked his big body back and forth.

“See here, my man,” I said, “this is a great emergency and you must meet it and do your duty. That, at present, is to stay here with Mr. Talcott, and make sure that no one else comes into this small hall until some of Mr. Gately’s bank officers arrive. Also, cease that noise you’re making, and see what you can do in the way of being a real help to us.”

This appeal to his sense of duty was not without effect, and he straightened up and seemed equal to the occasion.

I ran off, then, and out of one big building back into the other. The storm, still brewing, had not yet broken, but the sky was black, and a feeling of more snow was in the atmosphere. I shivered as I felt the bitterly cold outside air, and hurried into the bank building.

I had no trouble in reaching Mr. Mason, for the bank itself was closed and many of the employees had gone home. My manner of grave importance sufficed to let me pass any inquisitive attendants and I found Mr. Mason in his office.

I told him the bare facts in a few words, for this was no time to tarry, – I wanted to get up and tell Miss Raynor before any less considerate messenger might reach her.

Mr. Mason was aghast at the terrible tidings, and closing his desk at once, he quickly reached for his hat and coat and started on his fearsome errand.

“I will call Mr. Gately’s physician,” he said, his mind working quickly, as he paused a moment, “and you will break the news to Miss Raynor, you say? I can’t seem to comprehend it all! But my place is by Mr. Gately and I will go there at once.”

So I hastened up to the twelfth floor again, trying, on the way, to think how I should best tell the awful story.

The elevator ride had never seemed so short, – the floors fairly flew past me, and in a few moments I was in the beautiful third room of Mr. Gately's, and found Miss Raynor and Mr. Manning eagerly awaiting my news.

"Have you found Mr. Gately?" Amory Manning asked, but at the same instant, Olive Raynor cried out, "You have something dreadful to tell us, Mr. Brice! I know you have!"

This seemed to help me, and I answered, "Yes, Miss Raynor, – the worst."

For I felt that this imperious, self-possessed girl would rather be told abruptly, like that, than to have me mince matters.

And I was right, for she said, quickly, "Tell it all, – any knowledge is better than suspense."

So I told her, as gently as I could, of our discovery of the body of Amos Gately in his private elevator, at the bottom of the shaft.

"But I don't understand," said Manning. "Shot through the heart and alone in the elevator?"

"That's the way it is. I've no idea of the details of the matter. We didn't move the body, or examine it thoroughly, but the first glance showed the truth. However, a doctor has been sent for, and the vice-president and secretary of the Trust Company have things in charge, so I came right up here to tell you people about it."

"And I thank you, Mr. Brice," Olive's lovely dark eyes gave me a grateful glance. "What shall I do, Amory? Shall we go down there?"

Manning hesitated. "I will," he said, looking at her tenderly, "but – do you want to? It will be hard for you –"

"I know, – but I must go. If Uncle Amos has been killed – surely I ought to be there to – to – oh, I don't know what!"

Olive Raynor turned a piteous face to Manning, and he took her hand in his as he responded: "Come, if you think best, dear. Shall we go together?"

"Yes," she said; "I dread it, but I must go. And if you are with me I can stand it. What are you going to do, Mr. Brice?"

"I was about to go home," I replied, "but I think I will go back to the Matteawan Building, for I may be able to give assistance in some way."

I went across to my office and found that Norah had gone home. Snapping on some lights, I sat down for a few minutes to straighten out my bewildered, galloping thoughts.

Here was I, Tom Brice, a quiet, inconspicuous lawyer, thrown suddenly into the very thick of a most mysterious murder case. I well knew that my evidence concerning the shadows I had seen would be eagerly listened to by the police, when the time came, and I wondered how soon that would be. I wanted to go home. I wanted to avoid the coming storm and get into my cozy rooms, and think the thing over. For, I had always felt that I had detective ability, and now I had been given a wonderful chance to prove it. I did not intend to usurp anybody's prerogative nor did I desire to intrude. If I were not asked to assist, I should not offer; but I had a vague hope that my early acquaintance with the vital facts would make me of value as a witness and my mental acumen would bring forth some original ideas in the way of investigation.

And I wanted some time to myself, to cogitate, and to formulate some theories already budding in my brain. Now if the police were already on the scene next door, they would not let me get away, if I appeared.

And yet, I longed for further news of the proceedings. So, I concluded to look in at the Matteawan, and if that led me into the clutches of the police inquisitors, I must submit. But, if I could get away before their arrival, I should do so. I was quite willing to be called upon by them, and to tell all I knew, but I wanted to postpone that until the next day, if possible.

Not wishing to obtrude my presence further on Miss Raynor, I went down in an elevator without returning to the Gately rooms. Indeed, I didn't know whether she had gone down yet or not.

But she had, and when I reached the scene, both she and Manning were there and were consulting with the men from the bank as to what should be done.

The doctor came, too, and began to examine the body.

The rest of us stood huddled in the narrow hall, now grown hot and close, but we dared not open the door to the main lobby, lest outsiders should make their way in.

I asked the janitor if there were not some room that could be used as a waiting place, but even as he answered me, the doctor made his report.

It was to the effect that Amos Gately had been shot before he entered the elevator or immediately upon his entrance. That he had died instantly, and, therefore it would seem that the body must have been placed in the car and sent down by the assailant. But this was only conjecture; all the doctor could assert was that Mr. Gately had been dead for perhaps an hour, and that the position of the body on the floor indicated an instantaneous death from a shot through the heart.

And then the janitor bestirred himself, and said he could give us the use of a vacant office on the ground floor, and we went in there, – all except the doctor, who remained by the elevator.

Mr. Mason and Mr. Talcott agreed that the police must be notified and they declared their willingness to stay for their arrival. But the vice-president told Miss Raynor she could go home if she preferred to.

“I’ll wait a while,” she said, with the quick decision that I found was habitual with her, “the car is still here, – oh, ought we not to tell Connor? He’s our chauffeur.”

“I’ll tell him,” volunteered Manning. “I have to go now, I’ve an important matter to attend to before six o’clock. Olive, may I come up to the house this evening?”

“Oh, do,” she answered, “I’ll be so glad to have you. Come early, won’t you?”

“Yes,” said Manning, and after pausing for some further talk with the doctor he went away.

I tarried, wondering if I might go also, or if I were needed there.

But as Mason and Talcott were deeply engrossed in a low-toned conversation and as Miss Raynor was waiting an opportunity to confer with the doctor, who was their family physician, I concluded I might as well go home while I was free to do so.

So without definite adieux, but with a word to Miss Raynor that she might command my services at any time, I started for home.

The long expected storm had begun, and enormous snowflakes were falling thickly.

As I left the Matteawan, I discerned Amory Manning talking to the chauffeur of a big limousine and knew that he was telling Amos Gately’s man what had happened to his master.

I slowed up, hoping Manning would get through the interview and walk along, and I would join him.

When he left the chauffeur, however, he darted across the street, and though I followed quickly, I almost lost sight of him in the blinding snowfall.

I called out to him, but he didn’t hear, and small wonder, for the wind roared and the traffic noises were deafening.

So I hurried after him, still hoping to overtake him.

And I did, or, at least, when he finally boarded a Southbound car on Third Avenue, I hopped on the same car.

I had intended taking a Madison Avenue car, but there was none in sight, and I felt pretty sure there was a blockade on the line. The streets showed snowpiles, black and crusted, and the street cleaners were few and far apart.

The car Manning and I managed to get onto was crowded to the doors. We both stood, and there were just too many people between us to make conversation possible, but I nodded across and between the bobbing heads and faces, and Manning returned my greeting.

Stopping occasionally to let off some struggling, weary standees and to take on some new snow-besprinkled stampededers, we at last reached Twenty-second Street, and here Manning nodded a farewell to me, as he prepared to leave by the front end of the car.

This was only three blocks from my own destination, and I determined to get off, too, still anxious to speak to him regarding the scene of tragedy we had just left.

So I swung off the rear end of the car, and it moved on through the storm.

I looked about for Manning, but as I stepped to the ground a gust of wind gave me all I could do to preserve my footing. Moreover, it sent a flurry of snowflakes against my glasses, which rendered them almost opaque.

I dashed them clear with my gloved hand, and looked for my man, but he was nowhere to be seen from where I stood in the center of the four street corners.

Where could Manning have disappeared to? He must have flown like the wind, if he had already darted either up or down Third Avenue or along Twenty-second Street in either direction.

However, those were the only directions he could have taken, and I concluded that as I struggled to raise my umbrella and was at the same time partially blinded by my snowed-under glasses, he had hurried away out of sight. Of course, he had no reason to think I was trying to catch up with him, indeed, he probably did not know that I also left the car, so he had no need for apology.

And yet, I couldn't see how he had disappeared with such magical celerity. I asked a street cleaner if he had seen him.

"Naw," he said, blowing on his cold fingers, "naw, didn't see nobody. Can't see nothin' in this here black squall!"

And that's just what it was. A sudden fierce whirlwind, a maelstrom of tossing flakes, and a black lowering darkness that seemed to envelop everything.

"Mad Mary," the great clock nearby, boomed out five solemn notes that somehow added to the weirdness of the moment, and I grasped my umbrella handle, pushed my glasses more firmly into place, and strode toward my home.

With some, home is where the heart is, but, as I was still heart-whole and fancy-free, I had no romantic interest to build a home around, and my home was merely two cozy, comfy rooms in the vicinity of Gramercy Park.

And at last I reached them, storm-tossed, weary, cold, and hungry, all of which unpleasant conditions were changed for the better as rapidly as I could accomplish it.

And when, finally, I found myself seated, with a lighted cigar, at my own cheery reading table, I congratulated myself that I had come home instead of remaining at the Matteawan Building.

For, I ruminated, if the police had corralled me as witness, and held me for one of their protracted queryings, I might have stayed there until late into the night or even all night. And the storm, still howling outside my windows, made me glad of warmth and shelter.

Then, too, I was eager to get my thoughts in order. I am of a methodical mentality, and I wanted to set down in order the events I had experienced and draw logical and pertinent deductions therefrom.

I greatly wished I had had a few moments' chat with Amory Manning. I wanted to ask him some questions concerning Amos Gately that I didn't like to ask of the bank men. Although I knew Gately's name stood for all that was honorable and impeccable in the business world, I had not forgotten the hatpin on his desk, nor the queer smile on Jenny's face as she spoke of his personal callers.

I am not one to harbor premature or unfounded suspicions of my fellow creatures, but

"A little nonsense, now and then,
Is relished by the best of men,"

And Amos Gately may not have been above enjoying some relaxations that he felt no reason to parade.

But this was speculation, pure and simple, and until I could ask somebody concerning Mr. Gately's private life, I had no right to surmise anything about it.

Carefully, I went over all I knew about the tragedy from the moment when I had opened my outer office door ready to start for home. Had I left a few moments sooner, I should probably never have known anything much of the matter except what I might learn from the newspapers or from the reports current among the tenants of the Puritan Building.

As it was, and from the facts as I marshaled them in order before my mind, I believed I had seen shadowed forth the actual murder of Amos Gately. A strange thing, to be an eye-witness, and yet to witness only the shadows of the actors in the scene!

I strove to remember definitely the type of man who did the shooting. That is, I supposed he did the shooting. As I ruminated, I realized I had no real knowledge of this. I saw the shadowed men rise, clinch, struggle, and disappear. Yes, I was positive they disappeared from my vision before I heard the shot. This argued, then, that they wrestled, – though I couldn't say which was attacker and which attacked, – then they rushed to the next room, where the elevator was concealed by the big map; and then, in that room, the shot was fired that ended Amos Gately's life.

This must be the truth, for I heard only one shot, and it must have been the fatal one.

Then, I could only think that the murderer had deliberately, – no, not deliberately, but with exceeding haste, – had put his victim in the elevator and sent the inert body downstairs alone.

This proved the full knowledge of the secret elevator on the part of the assassin, so he must have been a frequenter of Mr. Gately's rooms, or, at least had been there before, and was sufficiently intimate to know of the private exit.

To learn the man's identity then, one must look among Mr. Gately's personal friends, – or, rather, enemies.

I began to feel I was greatly handicapped by my utter ignorance of the bank president's social or home life. But it might be that in the near future I should again see Miss Raynor, and perhaps in her home, where I could learn something of her late uncle's habits.

But, returning to matters I did know about, I tried hard to think what course of procedure the murderer probably adopted after his crime.

And the conclusion I reached was all too clear. He had, of course, gone down the stairs, as Jenny had said, for at least a few flights.

Then, I visualized him, regaining his composure, assuming a nonchalant, business-like air, and stopping an elevator on a lower floor, where he stepped in, without notice from the elevator girl or the other passengers.

Just as Rodman had entered from a middle floor, when I was descending with Minny.

Perhaps Rodman was the murderer! I knew him slightly and liked him not at all. I had no earthly reason to suspect him, – only, – he had got on, I remembered, at the seventh floor, and his office was on the tenth. This didn't seem terribly incriminating, I had to admit, but I made a note of it, and determined to look Mr. Rodman up.

My telephone bell rang, and with a passing wonder at being called up in such a storm, I responded.

To my delight, it proved to be Miss Raynor speaking.

"Forgive me for intruding, Mr. Brice," she said, in that musical voice of hers, "but I – I am so lonesome, – and there isn't anyone I want to talk to."

"Talk to me, then, Miss Raynor," I said, gladly. "Can I be of any service to you – in any way?"

"Oh, I think so. I want to see you tomorrow. Can you come to see me?"

"Yes, indeed. At what time?"

"Come up in the morning, – that is, if it's perfectly convenient for you."

“Certainly; in the morning, then. About ten?”

“Yes, please. They – they brought Uncle home.”

“Did they? I’m glad that was allowed. Are you alone?”

“Yes; and I’m frightfully lonely and desolate. It’s such a terrible night I wouldn’t ask any of my friends to come to stay with me.”

“You expected Mr. Manning to call, I thought.”

“I did; but he hasn’t come. Of course, the reason is that it isn’t a fit night for anyone to go out. I telephoned his rooms, but he wasn’t in. So I don’t know what to think. I’d suppose he’d telephone even if he couldn’t get here.”

“Traffic must be pretty nearly impossible,” I said, “it was awful going when I reached home soon after five, and now, there’s a young blizzard raging.”

“Yes, I couldn’t expect him; and perhaps the telephone wires are affected.”

“This one isn’t, at any rate, so chat with me as long as you will. You can get some friend to come to stay with you tomorrow, can’t you?”

“Oh, yes; I could have got somebody tonight, but I hadn’t the heart to ask it. I’m all right, Mr. Brice, I’m not a very nervous person, – only, it is sort of awful. Our housekeeper is a nice old thing, but she’s nearly in hysterics and I sent her to bed. I’ll say good-by now, and I’ll be glad to see you tomorrow.”

CHAPTER V

Olive Raynor

I did see Miss Olive Raynor the next day, but not in the surroundings of her own home as I had expected.

For I received a rather peremptory summons to present myself at police headquarters at a shockingly early hour, and not long after my arrival there, Miss Raynor appeared also.

The police had spent a busy night, and had unearthed more or less evidence and had collected quite a cloud of witnesses.

Chief of Police Martin conducted the inquiry, and I soon found that my story was considered of utmost importance, and that I was expected to relate it to the minutest details.

This I did, patiently answering repeated questions and asseverating facts.

But I could give no hint as to the identity, or even as to the appearance of the man who quarreled with Mr. Gately. I could, and did say that he seemed to be a burly figure, or, at least, the shadow showed a large frame and broad shoulders.

“Had he a hat on?” asked the Chief.

“No; and I should say he had either a large head or thick, bushy hair, for the shadow showed that much.”

“Did you not see his face in profile?”

“If so, it was only momentarily, and the clouded glass of the door, in irregular waves, entirely prevented a clear-cut profile view.”

“And after the two men rose, they disappeared at once?”

“They wrestled; – it seemed, I should say, that Mr. Gately was grabbed by the other man, and tried to make a getaway, whereupon the other man shot him.”

“Are you quite sure, Mr. Brice,” and the Chief fixed me with his sharp blue eye, “that you are not reconstructing this affair in the light of the later discovery of Mr. Gately’s fate?”

I thought this over carefully before replying, and then said: “It’s quite possible I may have unconsciously done so. But I distinctly saw the two figures come together in a desperate struggle, then disappear, doubtless into the third room, and then I heard the shot. That is all I can state positively.”

“You, then, went right across the hall and tried to enter?”

“Yes; tried to enter at the middle door, where I had seen the men.”

“And next?”

“Finding that door fastened, I tried the third, because the men had seemed to disappear in that direction.”

“The third room was also locked?”

“Yes; or at least the door would not open from the outside. Then I went back to the door number one.”

“And that opened at once?”

“Yes; had I tried that first, I should probably have seen the men, – or the girl, Jenny.”

“Perhaps. Could you recognize the head of the visitor if you should see it again shadowed on the door?”

“I am not sure, but I doubt if I could. I could tell if it were a very different type of head, but if merely similar, I could not swear it was the same man.”

“H’m. We must make the experiment. At least it may give us a hint in the right direction.”

He questioned me further as to my knowledge of Mr. Gately and his affairs, but when he found I knew almost nothing of those and had been a tenant of the Puritan Building but a very short time he suddenly lost interest in me and turned his attention to Miss Raynor.

Olive Raynor had come alone and unattended. This surprised me, for I had imagined the young ladies of the higher social circles never went anywhere alone. But in many ways Miss Raynor evinced her independence and self-reliance, and I had no doubt a trusted chauffeur waited in her car outside.

She was garbed in black, but it was not the heavy crape material that I supposed all women wore as mourning. A long black velvet cape swathed the slender figure in its voluminous folds, and as this was thrown back, I saw her gown was of black satin, with thinner black material used in combination. Women's clothes, though a mystery to me, had a sort of fascination for my ignorant eyes, and I knew enough to appreciate that Miss Raynor's costume was correct and very smart.

Her hat was black, too, smaller than the one I saw her in the day before, and of a quieter type.

Altogether, she looked very lovely, and her sweet, flower-like face, with its big, pathetic brown eyes, was raised frankly to Chief Martin as she answered his questions in a low, clear voice. A slight pallor told of a night of wakefulness and sorrow, but this seemed to accentuate the scarlet of her fine, delicate lips, – a scarlet unacquainted with the assistance of the rouge stick.

"No," she said, positively, "Mr. Gately had no enemies, I am sure he hadn't! Of course, he may have kept parts of his life or his affairs secret from me, but I have lived with him too long and too familiarly not to know him thoroughly. He was of a simple, straightforward nature, and a wise and noble gentleman."

"Yet you were not entirely fond of your uncle," insinuated the Chief.

"He was not my uncle," returned Olive, calmly. "I called him that but he was no relation to me. He used to be a college chum of my father's and when both my parents died, he became not only my guardian but my kind friend and benefactor. He took me to live with him, and I have been his constant companion for twelve years. During that time, I have seen no act, have heard no word that could in the slightest way reflect on his honor or his character as a business man or as a gentleman."

The girl spoke proudly, as though glad to pay this tribute to her guardian, but still, there was no note of affection in her voice, – no quiver of sorrow at her loss.

"Yet you are not bowed with grief at his death," observed Martin.

The dainty chin tilted in indignation. "Mr. Martin," Olive said, "I cannot believe that my personal feelings are of interest to you. I understand I am here to be questioned as to my knowledge of facts bearing on this case."

The Chief nodded his head. "That's all right," he said, "but I must learn all I can of Mr. Gately's life outside his bank as well as in it. If you won't give me information I must get it elsewhere."

The implied threat worked.

"I do indeed sorrow at Mr. Gately's tragic fate," Olive said, gently. "To be sure, he was not my kin, but I admired and deeply respected him. If I did not deeply love him it was his own fault. He was most strict and tyrannical in his household, and his lightest word was law. I was willing enough to obey in many matters, but it annoyed and irritated me when he interfered with my simplest occupations or pleasures. He permitted me very little company or amusement; he forbade many of my friends the house; and he persistently refused to let me accept attentions from men, unless they were certain ones whom he preferred, and – whom I did not always favor."

"Did he favor Amory Manning?" was the next abrupt question.

Olive's cheeks turned a soft pink, but she replied calmly. "Not especially, though he had not forbidden Mr. Manning the house. Why do you ask that?"

“Had you noticed anything unusual lately about Mr. Gately? Any nervousness or apprehension of danger?”

“Not in the least. He was of a most equable temperament, and there has been no change of late.”

“When did you last see him – alive?”

“Yesterday afternoon. I went to his office to get some money.”

“He has charge of your fortune?”

“Yes.”

“He made no objection to your expenditures?”

“Not at all. He was most just and considerate in my financial affairs. He gave me then what I asked for, and after a very short stay I went on.”

“Where?”

“To the house of a friend on Park Avenue, where I spent most of the afternoon.”

“At what time were you in Mr. Gately’s office?”

“I don’t know exactly. About two o’clock, I think.”

“Can’t you tell me more positively? It may be important.”

But Olive couldn’t be sure whether she was there before or after two. She had lunched late, and had done some errands, and had finally reached her friend’s home by mid-afternoon.

This seemed to me most plausible, for society young ladies do not always keep strict note of time, but the Chief apparently thought it a matter of moment and made notes concerning it.

Olive looked indifferent, and though she was courteous enough, her whole manner betokened a desire to get the examination over and to be allowed to go home.

After a little further tedious questioning, which, so far as I could see, elicited nothing of real importance, the Chief sighed and terminated the interview.

Mr. Mason and Mr. Talcott had by this time arrived, and their presence was welcomed by Miss Raynor, who was apparently glad of the nearness of a personal friend.

Of course, their evidence was but a repetition of the scenes I had been through the day before, but I was deeply interested in the attitudes of the two men.

Talcott, the secretary of the Trust Company, was honestly affected by the death of his friend and president, and showed real sorrow, while Mr. Mason, the vice-president, was of a cold, precise demeanor, seemingly far more interested in discovering the murderer than appalled by the tragedy.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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