

Bartlett Frederick Orin

The Web of the Golden Spider



Frederick Bartlett

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CHAPTER I

The Closed Door Opens

In his aimless wanderings around Boston that night Wilson passed the girl twice, and each time, though he caught only a glimpse of her lithe form bent against the whipping rain, the merest sketch of her somber features, he was distinctly conscious of the impress of her personality. As she was absorbed by the voracious horde which shuffled interminably and inexplicably up and down the street, he felt a sense of loss. The path before him seemed a bit less bright, the night a bit more barren. And although in the excitement of the eager life about him he quickly reacted, he did not turn a corner but he found himself peering beneath the lowered umbrellas with a piquant sense of hope.

Wilson's position was an unusual one for a theological student. He was wandering at large in a strange city, homeless and penniless, and yet he was not unhappy in this vagabondage. Every prowler in the dark is, consciously or unconsciously, a mystic. He is in touch with the unknown; he is a member of a universal cabal. The unexpected, the impossible lurk at every corner. He brushes shoulders with strange things, though often he feels only the lightest breath of their passing, and hears only a rustle like that of an overturned leaf. But he knows, either with a little shudder and a startled glance about or with quickened pulse and eager waiting.

This he felt, and something, too, of that fellowship which exists between those who have no doors to close behind them. For such stand shoulder to shoulder facing the barrier Law, which bars them from the food and warmth behind the doors. To those in a house the Law is scarcely more than an abstraction; to those without it is a tyrannical reality. The Law will not even allow a man outside to walk up and down in the gray mist enjoying his own dreams without looking upon him with suspicion. The Law is a shatterer of dreams. The Law is as eager as a gossip to misinterpret; and this puts one, however innocent, in an aggressive mood.

Looking up at the sodden sky from beneath a dripping slouch hat, Wilson was keenly alive to this. Each rubber-coated officer he passed affected him like an insolent intrusion. He brought home all the mediocrity of the night, all the shrilling gray, all the hunger, all the ache. These fellows took the color out of the picture, leaving only the cold details of a photograph. They were the men who swung open the street doors at the close of a matinee, admitting the stale sounds of the road, the sober light of the late afternoon.

This was distinctly a novel viewpoint for Wilson. As a student he had most sincerely approved of the Law; as a citizen of the world behind the closed doors he had forgotten it. Now with a trace of uneasiness he found himself resenting it.

A month ago Wilson had thought his life mapped out beyond the possibility of change, except in its details; he would finish his course at the school, receive a church, and pursue with moderate success his task of holding a parish up to certain ideals. The death of the uncle who was paying his way, following his bankruptcy, brought Wilson to a halt from even this slow pace. At first he had been stunned by this sudden order of Fate. His house-bleached fellows had gathered around in the small, whitewashed room where he had had so many tough struggles with Greek roots and his Hebrew grammar. They offered him sympathy and such slight aid as was theirs. Minor scholarships and certain drudging jobs had been open to him,—the opportunity to shoulder his way to the goal of what he had thought his manifest destiny. But that night after they had gone he locked the door,

threw wide his window, and wandered among the stars. There was something in the unpathed purple between the spear points which called to him. He breathed a fresher air and thrilled to keener dreams. Strange faces came to him, smiling at him, speaking dumbly to him, stirring unknown depths within him. He was left breathless, straining towards them.

The day after the school term closed he had packed his extension valise, bade good-bye to his pitying classmates, and taken the train to Boston. He had only an indefinite object in his mind: he had once met a friend of his uncle's who was in the publishing business; and he determined to seek him on the chance of securing through him work of some sort. He learned that the man had sold out and moved to the West. Then followed a week of hopeless search for work until his small hoard had dwindled away to nothing. To-day he found himself without a cent.

He had answered the last advertisement just as the thousand windows sprang to renewed life. It was a position as shipping clerk in a large department store. After waiting an hour to see the manager, a double-chinned ghoul with the eyes of a pig, he had been dismissed with a glance.

"Thank you," said Wilson.

"For what?" growled the man.

"For closing this door," answered Wilson, with a smile.

The fellow shifted the cigar stub which he gripped with yellow teeth between loose lips.

"What you mean?"

"Oh, you wouldn't understand—not in a thousand years. Good-day."

The store was dry and warm. He had wandered about it gazing at the pretty colored garments, entranced by the life and movement about him, until the big iron gates were closed. Then he went out upon the thoroughfare, glad to brush shoulders with the home-goers, glad to feel one with them in the brilliant pageant of the living. And always he searched for the face he had met twice that day.

The lights glowed mellow in the mist and struck out shimmering golden bars on the asphalt. The song of shuffling feet and the accompaniment of the clattering hansoms rang excitedly in his ears. He felt that he was touching the points of a thousand quick romances. The flash of a smile, a quick step, were enough to make him press on eagerly in the possibility that it was here, perhaps, the loose end of his own life was to be taken up.

As the crowd thinned away and he became more conspicuous to the prowling eyes which seemed to challenge him, he took a path across the Public Gardens, and so reached the broader sweep of the avenue where the comfortable stone houses snuggle shoulder to shoulder. The lower windows were lighted behind drawn shades. Against the stubborn stone angles the light shone out with appealing warmth. Every window was like an invitation. Occasionally a door opened, emitting a path of yellow light to the dripping walk, framing for a second a man or a woman; sometimes a man and a woman. When they vanished the dark always seemed to settle down upon him more stubbornly.

Then as the clock boomed ten he saw her again. Through the mist he saw her making her uncertain way along the walk across the street, stopping every now and then to glance hesitatingly at the lighted windows, pause, and move on again. Suddenly, from the shadow of the area way, Wilson saw an officer swoop down upon her like a hawk. The woman started back with a little cry as the officer placed his hand upon her arm. Wilson saw this through the mist like a shadow picture and then he crossed the road. As he approached them both looked up, the girl wistfully, the officer with an air of bravado. Wilson faced the vigorous form in the helmet and rubber overcoat.

"Well," growled the officer, "what you doin' round here?"

"Am I doing anything wrong?"

"That's wot I'm goneter find out. Yer've both been loafin' here fer an hour."

"No," answered Wilson, "I haven't been loafing."

"Wot yer doin' then?"

"Living."

Wilson caught an eager look from the shadowed face of the girl. He met the other eyes which peered viciously into his with frank aggressiveness. He never in his life had felt toward any fellow-creature as he felt towards this man. He could have reached for his throat. He drew his coat collar more closely about his neck and unbuttoned the lower buttons to give his legs freer play. The officer moved back a little, still retaining his grip on the girl's arm.

"Well," he said, "yer better get outern here now, or I'll run you in, too."

"No," answered Wilson, "you'll not run in either of us."

"I won't, eh? Move on lively—"

"You go to the devil," said Wilson, with quiet deliberation.

He saw the night stick swing for him, and, throwing his full weight against the officer, he lifted his arm and swung up under the chin. Then he seized the girl's hand.

"Run," he gasped, "run for all you're worth!"

They ran side by side and darted down the first turn. They heard the sharp oath, the command, and then the heavy beat of the steps behind them. Wilson kept the girl slightly ahead of him, pushing and steadying her, although he soon found that she was quite as fleet as he himself was. She ran easily, from the hips, like one who has been much out of doors.

Their breath came in gasps, but they still heard the heavy steps behind them and pushed on. As they turned another corner to the left they caught the sharp bark of a pistol and saw the spat of a bullet on the walk to the right of them. But this street was much darker, and so, while there was the added danger from stumbling, they felt safer.

"He's getting winded," shouted Wilson to her. "Keep on."

Soon they came to a blank wall, but to the left they discovered an alley. A whiff of salt air beat against their faces, and Wilson knew they were in the market road which led along the water front in the rear of the stone houses. He had come here from the park on hot days. There were but few lights, and these could not carry ten yards through the mist. Pressing on, he kept at her back until she began to totter, and then he paused.

"A little further," he said. "We'll go on tiptoe."

They stole on, pressing close to the wall which bounded the small back yards, making no more noise than shadows. Finally the girl fell back against him.

"You—you go on!" she begged.

Wilson drew her to his side and pressed back against one of the wooden doors, holding his breath to listen. He could barely make out the sodden steps and—they were receding.

The mist beat in damply upon their faces, but they could not feel it in the joy of their new-found freedom. Before them all was black, the road indistinguishable save just below the pale lights which were scarcely more than pin pricks in black velvet. But the barrier behind seemed to thrust them out aggressively.

Struggling to regain his breath, Wilson found his blood running freer and his senses more alert than for years. The night surrounding him had suddenly become his friend. It became pregnant with new meaning,—levelling walls, obliterating beaten man paths, cancelling rusty duties. In the dark nothing existed save souls, and souls were equal. And the world was an uncharted sea.

Then in the distance he detected the piercing light from a dark lantern moving in a circle, searching every nook and cranny. He knew what that meant; this road was like a blind alley, with no outlet. They had been trapped. He glanced at the girl huddling at his feet and then straightened himself.

"They sha'n't!" he cried. "They sha'n't!"

He ran his hand along the door to the latch. It was locked; but he drew back a few steps and threw his full weight against it and felt it give a trifle.

"They'll hear us," warned the girl.

Though the impact jarred him till he felt dizzy, he stumbled forward again; and yet again. The lock gave and, thrusting the girl in, he swung the door to behind them.

They found themselves in a small, paved yard. Fumbling about this, Wilson discovered in the corner several pieces of joist, and these he propped against the door. Then he sank to the ground exhausted.

In spite of his bruised body, his tired legs, and aching head, he felt a flush of joy; he was no longer at bay. A stout barrier stood between him and his pursuers. And when he felt a warm, damp hand seeking his he closed over it with a new sense of victory. He was now not only a fighter, but a protector. He had not yet been able to see enough of the girl's features to form more than the vaguest conception of what she was. Yet she was not impersonal; he felt that he could have found her again in a crowd of ten thousand. She was a frailer creature who had come to him for aid.

He gripped her fingers firmly as the muffled sound of voices came to their ears. The officers had evidently passed and were now returning, balked in their search. Pausing before the little door, they discussed the situation with the interest of hunters baffled of their game.

"Faith, Murphy, they *must* have got over this wall somewhere."

"Naw, they couldn't. There's glass atop the length of ut, an' there isn't a door wot isn't locked."

"I dunno. I dunno. This wan here—"

He seized the latch and shook the door, kicking it stoutly with his heavy boots.

Inside, Wilson had risen to his feet, armed with a short piece of the joist, his lips drawn back so tight as to reveal his teeth. Wilson had never struck a man in his life before to-night, but he knew that if that door gave he should batter until he couldn't stand. He would hit hard—mercilessly. He gripped the length of wood as though it were a two-handled scimitar, and waited.

"D' ye mind now that it's a bit loose?" said Murphy.

He put his knee against it and shoved, but the joist held firm. The man didn't know that he was playing with the certainty of a crushed skull.

"Aw, come on!" broke in the other, impatiently. "They'll git tired and crawl out. We can wait for thim at th' ind. Faith, ut's bitter cowl'd here."

The man and the girl heard their steps shuffle off, and even caught the swash of their knees against the stiff rubber coats, so near they passed. The girl, who had been staring with strained neck and motionless eyes at the tall figure of the waiting man at her side, drew a long breath and laid her hand upon his knee.

"They've gone," she said.

Still he did not move, but stood alert, suspicious, his long fingers twined around his weapon, fearing with half-savage passion some new ruse.

"Don't stand so," she pleaded. "They've gone."

The stick dropped from his hand, and he took off his hat to let the rain beat upon his hot head.

She crowded closer to his side, shivering with the cold, and yet more at peace than she had been that weary, long day. The world, which had stretched to fearsome distances, shrank again to the compass of this small yard, and a man stood between her and the gate to fight off the forces which had surged in upon her. She was mindful of nothing else. It was enough that she could stand for even a moment in the shelter of his strength; relax senses which discovered danger only to shrink back, powerless to ward it off. A woman without her man was as helpless as a soldier without his arms.

The rain soaked through to her skin, and she was faint with hunger; yet she was content to wait by his side in silence, in the full confidence that he with his man strength would stride over the seemingly impossible and provide. She was stripped to the naked woman heart of her, forced back to the sheer clinging instinct. She was simplified to the merely feminine as he was to the merely masculine. No other laws governed them but the crude necessity to live—in freedom.

Before them loomed the dripping wall, beyond that the road which led to the waiting fists, beyond that the wind-swept, gray waves; behind them rose the blank house with its darkened windows.

“Well,” he said, “we must go inside.”

He crossed the yard to one of the ground-floor windows and tried to raise it. As he expected, it was locked. He thrust his elbow through a pane just above the catch and raised it. He climbed in and told her to wait until he opened the door. It seemed an hour before he reappeared, framed in the dark entrance. He held out his hand to her.

“Come in,” he bade her.

She obeyed, moving on tiptoe.

CHAPTER II

Chance Provides

For a moment after he had closed the door they stood side by side, she pressing close to him. She shivered the length of her slight frame. The hesitancy which had come to him with the first impress of the lightless silence about them vanished.

“Come,” he said, taking her hand, “we must find a light and build a fire.”

He groped his way back to the window and closed it, drawing the curtain tight down over it. Then he struck a match and held it above his head.

At the flash of light the girl dropped his hand and shrank back in sudden trepidation. So long as he remained in the shadows he had been to her only a power without any more definite personality than that of sex. Now that she was thrown into closer contact with him, by the mere curtailing of the distances around and above her, she was conscious of the need of further knowledge of the man. The very power which had defended her, unless in the control of a still higher power, might turn against her. The match flickered feebly in the damp air, revealing scantily a small room which looked like a laundry. It was enough, however, to disclose a shelf upon which rested a bit of candle. He lighted this.

She watched him closely, and as the wick sputtered into life she grasped eagerly at every detail it revealed. She stood alert as a fencer before an unknown antagonist. Then he turned and, with this steadier light above his head, stepped towards her.

She saw eyes of light blue meeting her own of brown quite fearlessly. His lean face and the shock of sandy hair above it made an instant appeal to her. She knew he was a man she could trust within doors as fully as she had trusted him without. His frame was spare but suggestive of the long muscles of the New Englander which do not show but which work on and on with seemingly indestructible energy. He looked to her to be strong and tender.

She realized that he in his turn was studying her, and held up her head and faced him sturdily. In spite of her drenched condition she did not look so very bedraggled, thanks to the simple linen suit she had worn. Her jet black hair, loose and damp, framed an oval face which lacked color without appearing unhealthy. The skin was dark—the gypsy dark of one who has lived much out of doors. Both the nose and the chin was of fine and rather delicate modeling without losing anything of vigor. It was a responsive face, hinting of large emotions rather easily excited but as yet latent, for the girlishness was still in it.

Wilson found his mouth losing its tenseness as he looked into those brown eyes; found the strain of the situation weakening. The room appeared less chill, the vista beyond the doorway less formidable. Here was a good comrade for a long road—a girl to meet life with some spirit as it came along.

She looked up at him with a smile as she heard the drip of their clothes upon the floor.

“We ought to be hung up to dry,” she laughed.

Lowering the candle, he stepped forward.

“We’ll be dry soon,” he answered confidently. “What am I to call you, comrade?”

“My name is Jo Manning,” she answered with a bit of confusion.

“And I am David Wilson,” he said simply. “Now that we’ve been introduced we’ll hunt for a place to get dry and warm.”

He shivered.

“I am sure the house is empty. It *feels* empty. But even if it isn’t, whoever is here will have to warm us or—fight!”

He held out his hand again and she took it as he led the way along the hall towards the front of the house. He moved cautiously, creeping along on tiptoe, the light held high above his head, pausing every now and then to listen. They reached the stairs leading to the upper hallway and mounted these. He pushed open the door, stopping to listen at every rusty creak, and stepped out upon the heavy carpet. The light roused shadows which flitted silently about the corners as in batlike fear. The air smelled heavy, and even the moist rustling of the girl's garments sounded muffled. Wilson glanced at the wall, and at sight of the draped pictures pressed the girl's hand.

"Our first bit of luck," he whispered. "They *have* gone for the summer!"

They moved less cautiously now, but not until they reached the dining room and saw the covered chairs and drawn curtains did they feel fully assured. He thrust aside the portières and noted that the blinds were closed and the windows boarded. They could move quite safely now.

The mere sense of being under cover—of no longer feeling the beat of the rain upon them—was in itself a soul-satisfying relief. But there was still the dank cold of their soggy clothes against the body. They must have heat; and he moved on to the living rooms above. He pushed open a door and found himself in a large room of heavy oak, not draped like the others. He might have hesitated had it not been for the sight of a large fireplace directly facing him. When he saw that it was piled high with wood and coal ready to be lighted, he would have braved an army to reach it. Crossing the room, he thrust his candle into the kindling. The flames, as though surprised at being summoned, hesitated a second and then leaped hungrily to their meal. Wilson thrust his cold hands almost into the fire itself as he crouched over it.

"Come here," he called over his shoulder. "Get some of this quickly."

She huddled close to him and together they let their cold bodies drink in the warm air. It tingled at their fingers, smarted into their faces, and stung their chests.

"Nearer! Nearer!" he urged her. "Let it burn into you."

Their garments sent out clouds of steam and sweated pools to the tiles at their feet; but still they bathed in the heat insatiably. He piled on wood until the flames crackled out of sight in the chimney and flared into the room. He took her by the shoulders and turned her round and round before it as one roasts a goose. He took her two hands and rubbed them briskly till they smarted; she laughed deliciously the while, and the color on her cheeks deepened. But in spite of all this they couldn't get very far below the surface. He noticed the dripping fringe of her skirts and her water-logged shoes.

"This will never do," he said. "You've got to get dry—clear to your bones. Somehow a woman doesn't look right—wet. She gets so very wet—like a kitten. I'm going foraging now. You keep turning round and round."

"Till I'm brown on the outside?"

"Till I come back and see if you're done."

She followed him with her eyes as he went out, and in less than five minutes she heard him calling for her. She hurried to the next room and found him bending over a tumbled heap of fluffy things which he had gingerly picked from the bureau drawers.

"Help yourself," he commanded, with a wave of his hand.

"But—I oughtn't to take these things!"

"My girl," he answered in an even voice that seemed to steady her, "when it's either these or pneumonia—it's these. I'll leave you the candle."

"But you—"

"I'll find something."

He went out. She stood bewildered in the midst of the dimly revealed luxury about her. The candle threw feeble rays into the dark corners of the big room, over the four-posted oak bed covered with its daintily monogrammed spread, over the heavy hangings at the windows, and the bright

pictures on the walls. She caught a glimpse of closets, of a graceful dressing table, and finally saw her reflection in the long mirror which reached to the floor.

She held the candle over her head and stared at herself. She cut but a sorry figure in her own eyes in the midst of such spotless richness as now surrounded her. She shivered a little as her own damp clothes pressed clammy against her skin. Then with a flush she turned again to the garments rifled from their perfumed hiding places. They looked very white and crisp. She hesitated but a second.

“She’ll forgive,” she whispered, and threw off her dripping waist. The clothes, almost without exception, fitted her remarkably well. She found herself dressing leisurely, enjoying to the fullest the feel of the rich goods. She shook her hair free, dried it as best she could, and took some pains to put it up nicely. It was long and glossy black, but not inclined to curl. It coiled about her head in silken strands of dark richness.

She demurred at first at the silk dress which he had tossed upon the bed, but she could find no other. It was of a golden yellow, dainty and foreign in its design. It fitted snugly to her slim figure as though it had been made for her. She stood off at a little distance and studied herself in the mirror. She was a girl who had an instinct for dress which had never been satisfied; a girl who could give, as well as take, an air from her garments. She admired herself quite as frankly as though it had been some other person who, with head upturned and teeth flashing in a contented smile, challenged her from the clear surface of the mirror, looking as though she had just stepped through the wall into the room. The cold, the wet, and for a moment even the hunger vanished, so that as she glanced back at her comfortable reflection it seemed as if it were all just a dream of cold and wet and hunger. With silk soothing her skin, with the crisp purity of spotless linen rustling about her, with the faultless gown falling in rich splendor about her feet, she felt so much a part of these new surroundings that it was as though she melted into them—blended her own personality with the unstinted luxury about her.

But her foot scuffed against a wet stocking lying as limp as water grass, which recalled her to herself and the man who had led the way to this. A wave of pity swept over her as she wondered if he had found dry things for himself. She must hurry back and see that he was comfortable. She felt a certain pride that the beaded slippers she had found in the closet fitted her a bit loosely. With the candle held far out from her in one hand and the other lifting her dress from the floor, she rustled along the hall to the study, pausing there to speak his name.

“All ready?” he shouted.

He strode from a door to the left, but stopped in the middle of the room to study her as she stood framed in the doorway—a picture for Whistler. With pretty art and a woman’s instinctive desire to please, she had placed the candle on a chair and assumed something of a pose. The mellow candle-light deepened the raven black of her hair, softened the tint of her gown until it appeared of almost transparent fineness. It melted the folds of the heavy crimson draperies by her side into one with the dark behind her. She had shyly dropped her eyes, but in the excitement of the moment she quickly raised them again. They sparkled with merriment at sight of his lean frame draped in a lounging robe of Oriental ornateness. It was of silk and embellished with gold-spun figures.

“It was either this,” he apologized, “or a dress suit. If I had seen you first, I should have chosen the latter. I ought to dress for dinner, I suppose, even if there isn’t any.”

“You look as though you ought to make a dinner come out of those sleeves, just as the magicians make rabbits and gold-fish.”

“And you,” he returned, “look as though you ought to be able to get a dinner by merely summoning the butler.”

He offered her his arm with exaggerated gallantry and escorted her to a chair by the fire. She seated herself and, thrusting out her toes towards the flames, gave herself up for a moment to the

drowsy warmth. He shoved a large leather chair into place to the left and, facing her, enjoyed to himself the sensation of playing host to her hostess in this beautiful house. She looked up at him.

"I suppose you wonder what brought me out there?"

"In a general way—yes," he answered frankly. "But I don't wish you to feel under any obligation to tell me. I see you as you sit there,—that is enough."

"There is so little else," she replied. She hesitated, then added, "That is, that anyone seems to understand."

"You really had no place to which you could go for the night?"

"No. I am an utter stranger here. I came up this morning from Newburyport—that's about forty miles. I lost my purse and my ticket, so you see I was quite helpless. I was afraid to ask anyone for help, and then—I hoped every minute that I might find my father."

"But I thought you knew no one here?"

"I don't. If Dad is here, it is quite by chance."

She looked again into his blue eyes and then back to the fire.

"It is wonderful how you came to me," she said.

"I saw you twice before."

"Once," she said, "was just beyond the Gardens."

"You noticed me?"

"Yes."

She leaned forward.

"Yes," she repeated, "I noticed you because of all the faces I had looked into since morning yours was the first I felt I could trust."

"Thank you."

"And now," she continued, "I feel as though you might even understand better than the others what my errand here to Boston was." She paused again, adding, "I should hate to have you think me silly."

She studied his face eagerly. His eyes showed interest; his mouth assured her of sympathy.

"Go on," he bade her.

To him she was like someone he had known before—like one of those vague women he used to see between the stars. Within even these last few minutes he had gotten over the strangeness of her being here. He did not think of this building as a house, of this room as part of a home; it was just a cave opening from the roadside into which they had fled to escape the rain.

It seemed difficult for her to begin. Now that she had determined to tell him she was anxious for him to see clearly.

"I ought to go back," she faltered; "back a long way into my life, and I'm afraid that won't be interesting to you."

"You can't go very far back," he laughed. Then he added seriously, "I am really interested. Please to tell it in your own way."

"Well, to begin with, Dad was a sea captain and he married the very best woman in the world. But she died when I was very young. It was after this that Dad took me on his long voyages with him,—to South America, to India, and Africa. I don't remember much about it, except as a series of pictures. I know I had the best of times for somehow I can remember better how I felt than what I saw. I used to play on the deck in the sun and listen to the sailors who told me strange stories. Then when we reached a port Dad used to take me by the hand and lead me through queer, crooked little streets and show me the shops and buy whole armfuls of things for me. I remember it all just as you remember brightly colored pictures of cities—pointed spires in the sunlight, streets full of bright colors, and dozens of odd men and women whose faces come at night and are forgotten in the morning. Dad was big and handsome and very proud of me. He used to like to show me off and take me with him everywhere. Those years were very wonderful and beautiful.

“Then one day he brought me back to shore again, and for a while we lived together in a large white house within sight of the ocean. We used to take long walks and sometimes went to town, but he didn’t seem very happy. One day he brought home with him a strange woman and told me that she was to be housekeeper, and that I must obey her and grow up to be a fine woman. Then he went away. That was fifteen years ago. Then came the report he was dead; that was ten years ago. After a while I didn’t mind so much, for I used to lie on my back and recall all the places we had been together. When these pictures began to fade a little, I learned another way,—a way taught me by a sailor. I took a round crystal I found in the parlor and I looked into it hard,—oh, very, very hard. Then it happened. First all I saw was a blur of colors, but in a little while these separated and I saw as clearly as at first all the streets and places I had ever visited, and sometimes others too. Oh, it was such a comfort! Was that wrong?”

“No,” he answered slowly, “I can’t see anything wrong in that.”

“She—the housekeeper—called it wicked—devilish. She took away the crystal. But after a while I found I could see with other things—even with just a glass of clear water. All you have to do is to hold your eyes very still and stare and stare. Do you understand?”

He nodded.

“I’ve heard of that.”

She dropped her voice, evidently struggling with growing excitement, colored with something of fear.

“Don’t you see how close this kept me to Dad? I’ve been living with him almost as though I were really with him. We’ve taken over again the old walks and many new ones. This seemed to go on just the same after we received word that he had died—stricken with a fever in South America somewhere.”

She paused, taking a quick breath.

“All that is not so strange,” she ran on; “but yesterday—yesterday in the crystal I saw him—here in Boston.”

“What!”

“As clearly as I see you. He was walking down a street near the Gardens.”

“It might have been someone who resembled him.”

“No, it was Dad. He was thinner and looked strange, but I knew him as though it were only yesterday that he had gone away.”

“But if he is dead—”

“He isn’t dead,” she answered with conviction.

“On the strength of that vision you came here to look for him?”

“Yes.”

“When you believe, you believe hard, don’t you?”

“I believe the crystal,” she answered soberly.

“Yet you didn’t find your father?”

“No,” she admitted.

“You are still sure he is here?”

“I am still sure he is living. I may have made a mistake in the place, but I know he is alive and well somewhere. I shall look again in the crystal to-morrow.”

“Yes, to-morrow,” answered Wilson, vaguely.

He rose to his feet.

“But there is still the hunger of to-day.”

She seemed disappointed in the lightness with which apparently he took her search.

“You don’t believe?”

“I believe you. And I believe that you believe. But I have seen little of such things myself. In the meanwhile it would be good to eat—if only a few crackers. Are you afraid to stay here alone while I explore a bit?”

She shook her head.

He was gone some ten minutes, and when he came back his loose robe bulged suspiciously in many places.

“Madame,” he exclaimed, “I beg you to observe me closely. I snap my fingers twice,—so! Then I motion,—so! Behold!”

He deftly extricated from one of the large sleeves a can of soup, and held it triumphantly aloft.

“Once more,—so!”

He produced a package of crackers; next a can of coffee, next some sugar. And she, watching him with face alight, applauded vigorously and with more genuine emotion than usually greets the acts of a prestidigitator.

“But, oh!” she exclaimed, with her hands clasped beneath her chin, “don’t you dare to make them disappear again!”

“Madame,” answered Wilson, with a bow, “that shall be your privilege.”

He hurried below once more, and this time returned with a chafing-dish, two bowls, and a couple of iron spoons which he had found in the kitchen. In ten minutes the girl had prepared a lunch which to them was the culmination of their happiness. Warmed, clothed, and fed, there seemed nothing left for them.

When they had finished and had made everything tidy in the room, and he had gone to the cellar and replenished the coal-hod, he told her something of his own life. For a little while she listened, but soon the room became blurred to her and she sank farther and farther among the heavy shadows and the old paintings on the wall. The rain beat against the muffled windows drowsily. The fire warmed her brow like some hypnotic hand. Then his voice ceased and she drew her feet beneath her and slept in the chair, looking like a soft Persian kitten.

CHAPTER III

A Stranger Arrives

It was almost two in the morning when Wilson heard the sound of wheels in the street without, and conceived the fear that they had stopped before the house. He found himself sitting rigidly upright in the room which had grown chill, staring at the dark doorway. The fire had burned low and the girl still slept in the shadows, her cheeks pressed against her hands. He listened with suspended breath. For a moment there was no other sound and so he regained his composure, concluding it had been only an evil dream. Crossing to the next room, he drew a blanket from the little bed and wrapped the sleeping girl about with it so carefully that she did not awake. Then he gently poked up the fire and put on more coal, taking each lump in his fingers so as to make no noise.

Her face, even while she slept, seemed to lose but little of its animation. The long lashes swept her flushed cheeks. The eyes, though closed, still remained expressive. A smile fluttered about her mouth as though her dreams were very pleasant. To Wilson, who neither had a sister nor as a boy or man had been much among women, the sight of this sleeping girl so near to him was particularly impressive. Her utter trust and confidence in his protection stirred within him another side of the man who had stood by the gate clutching his club like a savage. She looked so warm and tender a thing that he felt his heart growing big with a certain feeling of paternity. He knew at that moment how the father must have felt when, with the warm little hand within his own, he had strode down those foreign streets conscious that every right-hearted man would turn to look at the pretty girl; with what joy he had stopped at strange bazaars to watch her eyes brighten as the shopkeepers did their best to please. Those must have been days which the father, if alive, was glad to remember.

A muffled beat as upon the steps without again brought him to attention, but again the silence closed in upon it until he doubted whether he had truly heard. But the dark had become alive now, and he seemed to see strange, moving shadows in the corners and hear creakings and rustlings all about him. He turned sharply at a soft tread behind him only to start at the snapping of a coal in the fire from the other side. Finally, in order to ease his mind, he crossed the room and looked beyond the curtains into the darkness of the hall. There was neither movement nor sound. He ventured out and peered down the staircase into the dark chasm marking the lower hall. He heard distinctly the sound of a key being fitted rather clumsily into the lock, then an inrush of air as the door was thrown open and someone entered, clutching at the wall as though unable to stand.

It never occurred to Wilson to do the natural and obviously simple thing: awake the girl at once and steal down the stairs in the rear until he at least should have a chance to reconnoitre. It seemed necessary for him to meet the situation face to face, to stand his ground as though this were an intrusion upon his own domain. The girl in the next room was sleeping soundly in perfect faith that he would meet every danger that should approach her. And so, by the Lord, he would. Neither she nor he were thieves or cowards, and he refused to allow her to be placed for a minute in such a position.

Someone followed close behind the first man who had entered and lighted a match. As the light flashed, Wilson caught a glimpse of two men; one tall and angular, the other short and broad-shouldered.

"The—the lights aren't on, cabby," said one of them; "but I—I can find my way all right."

"The divil ye can, beggin' yer pardon," answered the other. "I'll jist go ahead of ye now an'—"

"No, cabby, I don't need help."

"Jist to th' top of the shtairs, sor. I know ye're thot weak with sickness—"

The answer came like a military command, though in a voice heavy with weariness.

"Light a candle, if you can find one, and—go."

The cabby struck another match and applied it to a bit of candle he found on a hall table. As the light dissolved the dark, Wilson saw the taller man straighten before the anxious gaze of the driver.

“Sacré, are you going?” exclaimed the stranger, impatiently.

“Good night, sor.”

“Good night.” The words were uttered like a command.

The man went out slowly and reluctantly closed the door behind him. The echo pounded suddenly in the distance.

No sooner was the door closed than the man remaining slumped like an empty grain-sack and only prevented himself from falling by a wild clutch at the bannister. He raised himself with an effort, the candle drooping sidewise in his hand. His broad shoulders sagged until his chin almost rested upon his breast and his big slouch hat slopped down over his eyes. His breathing was slow and labored, each breath being delayed as long as possible as though it were accompanied by severe pain. It was clear that only the domination of an extraordinary will enabled the man to keep his feet at all.

The stranger began a struggle for the mastery of the stairs that held Wilson spellbound. Each advance marked a victory worthy of a battlefield. But at each step he was forced to pause and rally all his forces before he went on to the next. First he would twine his long fingers about the rail reaching up as far as he was able; then he would lift one limp leg and swing it to the stair above; he would then heave himself forward almost upon his face and drag the other leg to a level with the first, rouse himself as from a tendency to faint, and stand there blinking at the next stair with an agonized plea as for mercy written in the deep furrows of his face. The drunken candle sputtered close to his side, flaring against the skin of his hand and smouldering into his coat, but he neither felt nor saw anything. Every sense was forced to a focus on the exertion of the next step.

Wilson had plenty of time to study him. His lean face was shaven save for an iron-gray moustache which was cropped in a straight line from one corner of his mouth to another. His eyes were half hidden beneath shaggy brows. Across one cheek showed the red welt of an old sabre wound. There was a military air about him from his head to his feet; from the rakish angle to which his hat tumbled, to his square shoulders, braced far back even when the rest of his body fell limp, and to his feet which he moved as though avoiding the swing of a scabbard. A military cape slipped askew from his shoulders. All these details were indelibly traced in Wilson’s mind as he watched this struggle.

The last ten steps marked a strain difficult to watch. Wilson, at the top, found his brow growing moist in sheer agony of sympathy, and he found himself lifting with each forward heave as though his arms were about the drooping figure. A half dozen times he was upon the point of springing to his aid, but each time some instinct bade him wait. A man with such a will as this was a man to watch even when he was as near dead as he now appeared to be. So, backing into the shadows, Wilson watched him as he grasped the post and slouched up the last stair, seeming here to gain new strength for he held his head higher and grasped the candle more firmly. It was then that Wilson stepped into the radius of shallow light. But before he had time to speak, he saw the eyes raised swiftly to his, saw a quick movement of the hand, and then, as the candle dropped and was smothered out in the carpet, he was blinded and deafened by the report of a pistol almost in his face.

He fell back against the wall. He was unhurt, but he was for the moment stunned into inactivity by the unexpectedness of the assault. He stood motionless, smothering his breathing, alert to spring at the first sound. And he knew that the other was waiting for the first indication of his position to shoot again. So two, three seconds passed, Wilson feeling with the increasing tension as though an iron band were being tightened about his head. The house seemed to settle into deeper and deeper silence as though it were being enfolded in layer upon layer of felt. The dark about him quivered. Then he heard her voice,—the startled cry of an awakened child.

He sprang across the hall and through the curtains to her side. She was standing facing the door, her eyes frightened with the sudden awakening.

“Oh,” she trembled, “what is it?”

He placed his fingers to her lips and drew her to one side, out of range of the door.

She snuggled closer to him and placed her hand upon his arm.

“You’re not hurt?” she asked in a whisper.

He shook his head and strained his ears to the hall without.

He led her to the wall through which the door opened and, pressing her close against it, took his position in front of her. Then the silence closed in upon them once again. A bit of coal kindled in the grate, throwing out blue and yellow flames with tiny crackling. The shadows danced upon the wall. The curtains over the oblong entrance hung limp and motionless and mute. For aught they showed there might have been a dozen eyes behind them leering in; the points of a dozen weapons pricking through; the muzzles of a dozen revolvers ready to bark death. Each second he expected them to open—to unmask. The suspense grew nerve-racking. And behind him the girl kept whispering, “What is it? Tell me.” He felt her hands upon his shoulders.

“Hush! Listen!”

From beyond the curtains came the sound of a muffled groan.

“Someone’s hurt,” whispered the girl.

“Don’t move. It’s only a ruse.”

They listened once more, and this time the sound came more distinct; it was the moaning breathing of a man unconscious.

“Stay where you are,” commanded Wilson. “I’ll see what the matter is.”

He neared the curtains and called out,

“Are you in trouble? Do you need help?”

There was no other reply but that spasmodic intake of breath, the jerky outlet through loose lips.

He crossed the room and lighted the bit of remaining candle. With this held above his head, he parted the curtains and peered out. The stranger was sitting upright against the wall, his head fallen sideways and the revolver held loosely in his limp fingers. As Wilson crossed to his side, he heard the girl at his heels.

“He’s hurt,” she exclaimed.

Stooping quickly, Wilson snatched the weapon from the nerveless fingers. It was quite unnecessary. The man showed not the slightest trace of consciousness. His face was ashen gray. Wilson threw back the man’s coat and found the under linen to be stained with blood. He tore aside the shirt and discovered its source—a narrow slit just over the heart. There was but one thing to do—get the man into the next room to the fire and, if possible, staunch the wound. He placed his hands beneath the stranger’s shoulders and half dragged him to the rug before the flames. The girl, cheeks flushed with excitement, followed as though fearing to let him out of her sight.

Under the influence of the heat the man seemed to revive a bit—enough to ask for brandy and direct Wilson to a recess in the wall which served as a wine closet. After swallowing a stiff drink, he regained his voice.

“Who the devil—” he began. But he was checked by a twitch in his side. He was evidently uncertain whether he was in the hands of enemies or not. Wilson bent over him.

“Are you badly hurt? Do you wish me to send for a surgeon?”

“Go into the next room and bring me the leather chest you’ll find there.”

Wilson obeyed. The man opened it and took out a vial of catgut, a roll of antiseptic gauze, several rolls of bandages, and—a small, pearl-handled revolver. He levelled this at Wilson.

“Now,” he commanded, “tell me who the Devil you are.”

Wilson did not flinch.

“Put it down,” he suggested. “There is time enough for questions later. Your wound ought to be attended to. Tell me what to do.”

The man’s eyes narrowed, but his hand dropped to his side. He realized that he was quite helpless and that to shoot the intruder would serve him but little. By far the more sensible thing to do was to use him. Wilson, watching him, ready to spring, saw the question decided in the prostrate man’s mind. The latter spoke sharply.

“Take one of those surgical needles and put it in the candle flame.”

Wilson obeyed and, as soon as it was sterilized, further followed his instructions and sewed up the wound and dressed it. During this process the stranger showed neither by exclamation nor facial expression that he felt in the slightest what must have been excruciating pain. At the conclusion of the operation the man sprinkled a few pellets into the palm of his hand and swallowed them. For a few minutes after this he remained very quiet.

Wilson glanced up at the girl. She had turned her back upon the two men and was staring into the flames. She was not crying, but her two tightly clenched fists held closely jammed against her cheeks showed that she was keeping control of herself by an effort. It seemed to Wilson that it was clearly his duty to get her out of this at once. But where could he take her?

The stranger suddenly made an effort to struggle to his feet. He had grasped his weapon once again and now held it aggressively pointed at Wilson.

“What’s the matter with you?” demanded Wilson, quietly stepping forward.

“Matter?” stammered the stranger. “To come into your house and—and—” he pressed his hand to his side and was forced to put out an arm to Wilson for support.

“I tell you we mean you no harm. We aren’t thieves or thugs. We were driven in here by the rain.”

“But how—”

“By a window in the rear. Let us stay here until morning—it is too late for the girl to go out—and you’ll be none the worse.”

Wilson saw the same hard, determined look that he had noted upon the stairs return to the gray eyes. It was clear that the man’s whole nature bade him resent this intrusion. It was evident that he regarded the two with suspicion, although at sight of the girl, who had turned, this was abated somewhat.

“How long have you been here?” he demanded.

“Some three or four hours.”

“Are—are there any more of you?”

“No.”

“Has—has there been any call for me while you have been in the house?”

“No.”

He staggered a little and Wilson suggested that he lie down once more. But he refused and, still retaining his grip on the revolver, he bade Wilson lead him to the door of the next room and leave him. He was gone some fifteen minutes. Once Wilson thought he caught the clicking as of a safe being opened. The girl, who had remained in the background all this while, now crossed to Wilson’s side as he stood waiting in the doorway. He glanced up at her. In her light silk gown she looked almost ethereal and added to the ghostliness of the scene. She was to him the one thing which lifted the situation out of the realm of sheer grim tragedy to piquant adventure from which a hundred lanes led into the unknown.

She pressed close to his side as though shrinking from the silence behind her. He reached out and took her hand. She smiled up at him and together they turned their eyes once again into the dark of the room beyond. Save for the intermittent clicking, there was silence. In this silence they seemed to grow into much closer comradeship, each minute knitting them together as, ordinarily, only months could do.

Suddenly there was a cessation of the clicking and quickly following this the sound of a falling body. Wilson had half expected some such climax. Seizing a candle from the table before the fire, he rushed in. The stranger had fallen to the floor and lay unconscious in front of his safe.

A quick glance about convinced Wilson that the man had not been assaulted, but had only fainted, probably from weakness. His pulse was beating feebly and his face was ashen. Wilson stooped to place his hands upon his shoulders, when he caught sight of that which had doubtless led the stranger to undertake the strain of opening the safe—a black ebony box, from which protruded through the opened cover the golden head of a small, quaint image peering out like some fat spider from its web. In falling the head had snapped open so that from the interior of the thing a tiny roll of parchment had slipped out. Wilson, picking this up, put it in his pocket with scarcely other thought than that it might get lost if left on the floor. Then he took the still unconscious man in his arms and dragged him back to the fire.

CHAPTER IV

The Golden God Speaks

For a while the man on the floor in his weakness rambled on as in a delirium.

“Ah, Dios!” he muttered. “There’s a knife in every hand.” Then followed an incoherent succession of phrases, but out of them the two distinguished this, “Millions upon millions in jewels and gold.” Then, “But the God is silent. His lips are sealed by the blood of the twenty.”

After this the thick tongue stumbled over some word like “Guadiva,” and a little later he seemed in his troubled dreams to be struggling up a rugged height, for he complained of the stones which fretted his feet. Wilson managed to pour a spoonful of brandy down his throat and to rebandage the wound which had begun to bleed again. It was clear the man was suffering from great weakness due to loss of blood, but as yet his condition was not such as to warrant Wilson in summoning a surgeon on his own responsibility. Besides, to do so would be seriously to compromise himself and the girl. It might be difficult for them to explain their presence there to an outsider. Should the man by any chance die, their situation would be such that their only safety would lie in flight. To the law they were already fugitives and consequently to be suspected of anything from petty larceny to murder.

To have forced himself to the safe with all the pain which walking caused him, the wounded man must have been impelled by some strong and unusual motive. It couldn’t be that he had suspected Wilson and Jo of theft, because, in the first place, he must have seen at a glance that the safe was undisturbed; and in the second, that they had not taken advantage of their opportunity for flight. It must have been something in connection with this odd-looking image, then, at which he had been so eager to look. Wilson returned to the next room. He picked the idol from the floor. As he did so the head snapped back into place. He brought it out into the firelight.

It looked like one of a hundred pictures he had seen of just such curiosities—like the junk which clutters the windows of curio dealers. The figure sat cross-legged with its heavy hands folded in its lap. The face was flat and coarse, the lips thick, the nose squat and ugly. Its carved headdress was of an Aztec pattern. The cheek-bones were high, and the chin thick and receding. The girl pressed close to his side as he held the thing in his lap with an odd mixture of interest and fear.

“Aren’t its eyes odd?” she exclaimed instantly.

They consisted of two polished stones as clear as diamonds, as brightly eager as spiders’ eyes. The light striking them caused them to shine and glisten as though alive.

The girl glanced from the image to the man on the floor who looked now more like a figure recumbent upon a mausoleum than a living man. It was as though she was trying to guess the relationship between these two. She had seen many such carved things as this upon her foreign journeys with her father. It called him back strongly to her. She turned again to the image and, attracted by the glitter in the eyes, took it into her own lap.

Wilson watched her closely. He had an odd premonition of danger—a feeling that somehow it would be better if the girl had not seen the image. He even put out his hand to take it away from her, but was arrested by the look of eagerness which had quickened her face. Her cheeks had taken on color, her breathing came faster, and her whole frame quivered with excitement.

“Better give the thing back to me,” he said at length. He placed one hand upon it but she resisted him.

“Come,” he insisted, “I’ll take it back to where I found it.”

She raised her head with a nervous toss.

“No. Let it alone. Let me have it.”

She drew it away from his hand. He stepped to her side, impelled by something he could not analyze, and snatched it from her grasp. Her lips quivered as though she were about to cry. She had never looked more beautiful to him than she did at that moment. He felt a wave of tenderness for her sweep over him. She was such a young-looking girl to be here alone at the mercy of two men. At this moment she looked so ridiculously like a little girl deprived of her doll that he was inclined to give it back to her again with a laugh. But he paused. She did not seem to be wholly herself. It was clear enough that the image had produced some very distinct impression upon her—whether of a nature akin to her crystal gazing he could not tell, although he suspected something of the sort. The wounded man still lay prone upon the rug before the fire. His muttering had ceased and his breathing seemed more regular.

“Please,” trembled the girl. “Please to let me take it again.”

“Why do you wish it?”

“Oh, I—I can’t tell you, but—”

She closed her lips tightly as though to check herself.

“I don’t believe it is good for you,” he said tenderly. “It seems to cast a sort of spell over you.”

“I know what it is! I know if I look deep into those eyes I shall see my father. I feel that he is very near, somehow. I must look! I must!”

She took it from his hands once more and he let it go. He was curious to see how much truth there was in her impression and he felt that he could take the idol from her at any time it seemed advisable to do so. In the face of this new situation both of them lost interest in the wounded man. He lay as though asleep.

The girl seated herself Turk fashion upon the rug before the grate and, holding the golden figure in her lap, gazed down into the sparkling stones which served for eyes. The light played upon the dull, raw gold, throwing flickering shadows over its face. The thing seemed to absorb the light growing warmer through it.

Wilson leaned forward to watch her with renewed interest. The contrast between the tiny, ugly features of the image and the fresh, palpitating face of the girl made an odd picture. As she sat so, the lifeless eyes staring back at her with piercing insistence, it looked for a moment like a silent contest between the two. She commanded and the image challenged. A quickening glow suffused her neck and the color crept to her cheeks. To Wilson it was as though she radiated drowsy waves of warmth. With his eyes closed he would have said that he had come to within a few inches of her, was looking at the thing almost cheek to cheek with her. The room grew tense and silent. Her eyes continued to brighten until it seemed as though they reflected every dancing flame in the fire before her. Still the color deepened in her cheeks until they grew to a rich carmine.

Wilson found himself leaning forward with quickening breath. She seemed drifting further and further away from him and he sat fixed as though in some trance. He noted the rhythmic heave of her bosom and the full pulsation at the throat. The velvet sheen of the hair at her temples caught new lights from the flames before her and held his eyes like the dazzling spaces between the coals. Her lips moved, but she spoke no word. Then it was that, seized with a nameless fear for the girl, Wilson rose half way to his feet. He was checked by a command from the man upon the floor.

“For the love of God, do not rouse her. She sees! She sees!”

The stranger struggled to his elbow and then to his knees, where he remained staring intently at the girl, with eyes aglow. Then the girl herself spoke.

“The lake! The lake!” she cried.

Wilson stepped to her side. He placed a hand firmly upon her shoulder.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

She lifted eyes as inscrutable as those of the image. They were slow moving and stared as blankly at him as at the pictures on the wall. He bent closer.

“Comrade—comrade—are you all right?”

Her lips moved to faint, incoherent mutterings. She did not seem to be in pain, and yet in travail of some sort.

The stranger, pale, his forehead beaded with the excitement of the moment, had tottered to his feet. He seized Wilson's arm almost roughly.

"Let her alone!" he commanded. "Can't you see? Dios! the image speaks!"

"The image? have you gone mad?"

"No! No!" he ran on excitedly. "Listen!"

The girl's brow was knitted. Her arms and limbs moved restlessly. She looked like one upon the point of crying at being baffled.

"There is a mist, but I can see—I—I can see—"

She gave a little sob. This was too much for Wilson. He reached for the image, but he had not taken a step before he heard the voice of the stranger.

"Touch that and I shoot."

The voice was cold and steady. He half turned and saw that the man had regained his weapon. The hand that held it was steady, the eyes back of it merciless. For one moment Wilson considered the advisability of springing for him. But he regained his senses sufficiently to realize that he would only fall in his tracks. Even a wounded man is not to be trifled with when holding a thirty-two caliber revolver.

"Step back!"

Wilson obeyed.

"Farther!"

He retreated almost to the door into the next room. From that moment his eyes never left the hand which held the weapon. He watched it for the first sign of unsteadiness, for the first evidence of weakness or abstraction. He measured the distance between them, weighed to a nicety every possibility, and bided his time. He wanted just the merest ghost of a chance of reaching that lean frame before the steel devil could spit death. What it all meant he did not know, but it was clear that this stranger was willing to sacrifice the girl to further any project of his into which she had so strangely fallen. It was also clear to him that it did the girl no good to lose herself in such a trance as this. The troubled expression of her face, the piteous cry in her voice, her restlessness convinced him of this. When she had spoken to him of crystal gazing, he had thought of it only as a harmless amusement such as the Ouija board. This seemed different, more serious, either owing to the surroundings or to some really baneful influence from this thing of gold. And the responsibility of it was his; it was he who had led the girl in here, it was even he who had placed the image in her hands. At the fret of being forced to stand there powerless, the moisture gathered on his brow.

The stranger knelt on one knee by the girl's side, facing the door and Wilson. He placed one hand upon her brow and spoke to her in an even tone that seemed to steady her thoughts. Her words became more distinct.

"Look deep," he commanded. "Look deep and the mists will clear. Look deep. Look deep."

His voice was the rhythmic monotone used to lull a patient into a hypnotic trance. The girl responded quickly. The troubled expression left her face, her breathing became deeper, and she spoke more distinctly. Her eyes were still upon those of the image as though the latter had caught and held them. She looked more herself, save for the fact that she appeared to be even farther away in her thoughts than when in normal sleep.

"Let the image speak through you," ran on the stranger. "Tell me what you see or hear."

"The lake—it is very blue."

"Look again."

"I see mountains about the lake—very high mountains."

"Yes."

"One is very much higher than the others."

“Yes! Yes!”

“The trees reach from the lake halfway up its sides.”

“Go on!” he cried excitedly.

“There they stop and the mountain rises to a point.”

“Go on!”

“To the right there is a large crevice.”

The stranger moistened his lips. He gave a swift glance at Wilson and then turned his gaze to the girl.

“See, we will take a raft and go upon the lake. Now look—look hard below the waters.”

The girl appeared troubled at this. Her feet twitched and she threw back her head as though for more air. Once more Wilson calculated the distance between himself and that which stood for death. He found it still levelled steadily. To jump would be only to fall halfway, and yet his throat was beginning to ache with the strain. He felt within him some new-born instinct impelling him to her side. She stood somehow for something more than merely a fellow-creature in danger. He took a quicker interest in her—an interest expressing itself now in a sense of infinite tenderness. He resented the fact that she was being led away from him into paths he could not follow—that she was at the beck of this lean, cold-eyed stranger and his heathenish idol.

“Below the waters. Look! Look!”

“No! No!” she cried.

“The shrine is there. Seek it! Seek it!”

He forced the words through his teeth in his concentrated effort to drive them into the girl’s brain in the form of a command. But for some reason she rebelled at doing this. It was as though to go below the waters even in this condition choked her until she must gasp for breath. It was evidently some secret which lay there—the location of some shrine or hiding place which he most desired to locate through her while in this psychic state, for he insisted upon this while she struggled against it. Her head was lifted now as though, before finally driven to take the plunge, she sought aid—not from anyone here in the room, but from someone upon the borders of the lake where, in her trance, she now stood. And it came. Her face brightened—her whole body throbbed with renewed life. She threw out her hand with a cry which startled both men.

“Father! Father!”

The wounded man, puzzled, drew back leaving for a moment the other unguarded. Wilson sprang, and in three bounds was across the room. He struck up the arm just as a finger pressed the trigger. The wounded man fell back in a heap—far too exhausted to struggle further. Wilson turned to the girl and swept the image out of her lap to the floor where it lay blinking at the ceiling. The girl, blind and deaf to this struggle, remained sitting upright with the happy smile of recognition still about her mouth. She repeated over and over again the glad cry of “Father! Father!”

Wilson stooped and repeated her name, but received no response. He rubbed her forehead and her listless hands. Still she sat there scarcely more than a clay image. Wilson turned upon the stranger with his fists doubled up.

“Rouse her!” he cried. “Rouse her, or I’ll throttle you!”

The man made his feet and staggered to the girl’s side.

“Awake!” he commanded intensely.

The eyes instantly responded. It was as though a mist slowly faded from before them, layer after layer, as fog rises from a lake in the morning. Her mouth relaxed and expression returned to each feature. When at length she became aware of her surroundings, she looked like an awakened child. Pressing her fingers to her heavy eyes, she glanced wonderingly about her. She could not understand the tragical attitude of the two men who studied her so fixedly. She struggled to her feet and regarded both men with fear. With her fingers on her chin, she cowered back from them gazing to right and left as though looking for someone she had expected.

“Father!” she exclaimed timidly. “Are you here, father?”

Wilson took her arm gently but firmly.

“Your father is not here, comrade. He has not been here. You—you drowsed a bit, I guess.”

She caught sight of the image on the floor and instantly understood. She passed her hands over her eyes in an effort to recall what she had seen.

“I remember—I remember,” she faltered. “I was in some foreign land—some strange place—and I saw—I saw my father.”

She looked puzzled.

“That is odd, because it was *here* that I saw him yesterday.”

Her lips were dry and she asked Wilson for a glass of water. A pitcher stood upon the table, which he had brought up with the other things. When she had moistened her lips, she sat down again still a bit stupid. The wounded man spoke.

“My dear,” he said, “what you have just seen through the medium of that image interests me more than I can tell you. It may be that I can be of some help to you. My name is Sorez—and I know well that country which you have just seen. It is many thousand miles from here.”

“As far as the land of dreams,” interrupted Wilson. “I think the girl has been worried enough by such nonsense.”

“You spoke of your father,” continued Sorez, ignoring the outburst. “Has he ever visited South America?”

“Many times. He was a sea captain, but he has not been home for years now.”

“Ah, Dios!” exclaimed Sorez, “I understand now why you saw so clearly.”

“You know my father—you have seen him?”

He waived her question aside impatiently. His strength was failing him again and he seemed anxious to say what he had to say before he was unable.

“Listen!” he began, fighting hard to preserve his consciousness. “You have a power that will lead you to much. This image here has spoken through you. He has a secret worth millions and—”

“But my father,” pleaded the girl, with a tremor in her voice. “Can it help me to him?”

“Yes! Yes! But do not leave me. Be patient. The priest—the priest is close by. He—he did this,” placing his hand over the wound, “and I fear he—he may come again.”

He staggered back a pace and stared in terror about him.

“I am not afraid of most things,” he apologized, “but that devil he is everywhere. He might be—”

There was a sound in the hall below. Sorez placed his hand to his heart again and staggered back with a piteous appeal to Wilson.

“The image! The image!” he gasped. “For the love of God, do not let him get it.”

Then he sank in a faint to the floor.

Wilson looked at the girl. He saw her stoop for the revolver. She thrust it in his hand.

CHAPTER V

In the Dark

Wilson made his way into the hall and peered down the dark stairs. He listened; all was silent. A dozen perfectly simple accidents might have caused the sound the three had heard; and yet, although he had not made up his mind that the stranger's whole story was not the fabric of delirium, he had an uncomfortable feeling that someone really was below. Neither seeing nor hearing, he knew by some sixth sense that another human being stood within a few yards of him waiting. Who that human being was, what he wished, what he was willing to venture was a mystery. Sorez had spoken of the priest—the man who had stabbed him—but it seemed scarcely probable that after such an act as that a man would break into his victim's house, where the chances were that he was guarded, and make a second attempt. Then he recalled that Sorez was apparently living alone here and that doubtless this was known to the mysterious priest. If the golden image were the object of his attack, truly it must have some extraordinary value outside its own intrinsic worth. If of solid gold it could be worth but a few hundred dollars. It must, then, be of value because of such power as it had exercised over the girl.

There was not so much as a creak on the floor below, and still his conviction remained that someone stood there gazing up as he was staring down. If only the house were lighted! To go back and get the candle would be to make a target of himself for anyone determined in his mission, but he must solve this mystery. The girl expected it of him and he was ready to sacrifice his life rather than to stand poorly in her eyes. He paused at this thought. Until it came to him at that moment, in that form, he had not realized anything of the sort. He had not realized that she was any more to him now than she had ever been—yet she had impelled him to do an unusual thing from the first. Yes, he had done for her what he would have done for no other living woman. He had helped her out of the clutches of the law, he had been willing to strike down an officer if it had been necessary, he had broken into a house for her, and now he was willing to risk his life. The thought brought him joy. He smiled, standing there in the dark at the head of the stairs, that he had in life this new impulse—this new propelling force. Then he slid his foot forward and stepped down the first stair.

He still had strongly that sense of being watched, but there was no movement below to indicate that this was anything more than a fancy. Not a sound came from the room he had just left. Evidently the girl was waiting breathlessly for his return. He must delay no longer. He moved on, planning to try the front door and then to examine the window by which he himself had entered. These were the only two possible entrances to the house; the other windows were beyond the reach of anyone without a ladder and were tightly boarded in addition. He found the front door fast locked. It had a patent lock so that the chance of anyone having opened and closed it again was slight. He breathed more easily.

Groping along the hallway he was vividly reminded of the time a few hours past when the girl had placed her hand within his. It seemed to him that he now felt the warmth of it—thrilled to the velvet softness of it—more than he had at the time. He was full of illusions, excited by all the unusual happenings, and now, as he felt his way along the dark passage, he could have sworn that her fingers still rested upon his. It made him restless to get back to her. He should not have left her behind alone and unprotected. It was very possible that this swoon of Sorez' was but a ruse. He must hurry on about his investigation. He descended to the lower floor and groped to the laundry. It was still dark; the earth would not be lighted for another hour. He neither heard nor saw anything here. But when he reached the window by which he himself had entered but which he had closed behind him, he gave a start—it was wide open. It told him of another's presence in this house as plainly as if he had seen the person. There was of course one chance in a hundred that the intruder

had become frightened and taken to his heels. Wilson turned back with fresh fear for the girl whom he had been forced to leave behind unprotected. If it was true, as the terrified Sorez had feared, that the priest, whoever this mysterious and unscrupulous person might be, had returned to the assault, there certainly was good cause to fear for the safety of the girl. A man so fanatically inspired as to be willing to commit murder for the sake of an idol must be half mad. The danger was that the girl, in the belief which quite evidently now possessed her—that this golden thing held the key to her father's whereabouts—might attempt to protect or conceal it. He stumbled up the dark stairs and fell flat against the door. It was closed. He tried the knob; the door was locked. For a moment Wilson could not believe. It was as though in a second he had found himself thrust utterly out of the house. His first suspicion flew to Sorez, but he put this from his mind instantly. There was no acting possible in that man's condition; he was too weak to get down the stairs. But this was no common thief who had done this, for a thief, once realizing a household is awakened, thinks of nothing further but flight. It must then be no other than the priest returned to the quest of his idol.

Wilson threw his weight against the door, but this was no garden gate to give before such blows. At the end of a half dozen attempts, he paused, bruised and dizzy. It seemed impossible to force the bolt. Yet no sooner had he reached this conclusion than the necessity became compelling; the bolt *must* be forced. At such moments one's emotions are so intensified that, if there be any hidden passion, it is instantly brought to light. With the impelling need of reaching the girl's side—a frantic need out of proportion to any normal relationship between them—Wilson realized partly the instinct which had governed him from the moment he had first caught sight of her features in the rain. If at this stage it could not properly be called love, it was at least an obsessing passion with all love's attributes. As he paused there in blinding fury at being baffled by this senseless wooden door, he saw her as he had seen the faces between the stars, looking down at him tenderly and trustingly. A lump rose to his throat and his heart grew big within him. There was nothing now—no motive, no ambition, no influence—which could ever control him until after this new great need was satisfied. All this came over him in a flash—he saw as one sees an entire landscape by a single stroke of lightning. Then he faced the door once again.

The simple accident of the muzzle of his revolver striking against the door knob furnished Wilson the inspiration for his next attack. He examined the cylinder and found that four cartridges remained. These were all. Each one of them was precious and would be doubly so once he was beyond this barrier. He thrust the muzzle of the revolver into the lock and fired. The bullet ripped and tore and splintered. Again he placed his shoulder to the door and pushed. It gave a trifle, but still held. He must sacrifice another cartridge. He shot again and this time, as he threw his body full against the bolt, it gave. He fell in atop the débris, but instantly sprang to his feet and stumbled along the hall to the stairway. He mounted this three steps at a time. At the door to the study he was again checked—there was no light within and no voice to greet him. He called her name; the ensuing silence was ghastly in its suggestiveness. He started through the door, but a slight rustling or creak caused him to dart back, and a knife in the hand of some unknown assailant missed him by a margin so slight that his sleeve was ripped from elbow to wrist.

With cocked revolver Wilson waited for the rush which he expected to follow immediately. Save that the curtains before him swayed slightly, there was nothing to show that he was not the only human being in the house. Sorez might still be within unconscious, but what of the girl? He called her name. There was no reply. He dashed through the curtains—for the sixteenth of a second felt the sting of a heavy blow on his scalp, and then fell forward, the world swirling into a black pit at his feet.

When Wilson came to himself he realized that he was in some sort of vehicle. The morning light had come at last—a cold, luminous gray wash scarcely yet of sufficient intensity to do more than outline the world. He attempted to rise, but fell back weakly. He felt his neck and the collar of the luxurious bath robe he still wore to be wet. It was a sticky sort of dampness. He moved his

hand up farther and found his hair to be matted. His fingers came in contact with raw flesh, causing him to draw them back quickly. The carriage jounced over the roadbed as though the horses were moving at a gallop. For a few moments he was unable to associate himself with the past at all; it was as though he had come upon himself in this situation as upon a stranger. The driver without the closed carriage seemed bent upon some definite enough errand, turning corners, galloping up this street and across that. He tried to make the fellow hear him, but above the rattling noise this was impossible. There seemed to be nothing to do but to lie there until the end of the journey, wherever that might be.

He lay back and tried to delve into the past. The first connecting link seemed years ago,—he was running away from something, her hand within his. The girl—yes, he remembered now, but still very indistinctly. But soon with a great influx of joy he recalled that moment at the door when he had realized what she meant to him, then the blind pounding at the door, then the run upstairs and—this.

He struggled to his elbow. He must get back to her. How had he come here? Where was he being taken? He was not able to think very clearly and so found it difficult to devise any plan of action, but the necessity drove him on as it had in the face of the locked door. He must stop the carriage and—but even as he was exerting himself in a struggle to make himself heard, the horses slowed down, turned sharply and trotted up a driveway to the entrance of a large stone building. Some sort of an attendant came out, exchanged a few words with the driver, and then, opening the door, looked in. He reached out his hand and groped for Wilson's pulse.

"Where am I?" asked Wilson.

"That's all right, old man," replied the attendant in the paternal tone of those in lesser official positions. "Able to walk, or shall I get a stretcher?"

"Walk? Of course I can walk. What I want to know is—"

But already the strong arms were beneath his shoulders and half lifting him from the seat.

"Slowly. Slowly now."

Wilson found himself in a corridor strong with the fumes of ether and carbolic acid.

"See here," he expostulated, "I didn't want to come here. I—where's the driver?"

"He went off as soon as you got out."

"But where—"

"Come on. This is the City Hospital and you're hurt. The quicker you get that scalp of yours sewed up the better."

For a few steps Wilson walked along submissively, his brain still confused. The thought of her came once again, and he struggled free from the detaining arm and turned upon the attendant who was leading him to the accident room.

"I'm going back," he declared. "This is some conspiracy against the girl. I'll find out what it is—and I'll—"

"The sooner you get that scalp fixed," interrupted the attendant, "the sooner you'll find the girl."

The details of the next hour were blurred to him. He remembered the arrival of the brisk young surgeon, remembered his irritated greeting at sight of him—"Another drunken row, I suppose"—and the sharp fight he put up against taking ether. He had but one thought in mind—he must not lose consciousness, for he must get back to the girl. So he fought until two strong men came in and sat one on his chest and one on his knees. When he came out of this he was nicely tucked in bed. They told him that probably he must stay there three or four days—there was danger of the wound growing septic.

Wilson stared at the pretty nurse a moment and then asked, "I beg your pardon—how long did you say?"

"Three days anyway, and possibly longer."

“Not over three hours longer,” he replied.

She smiled, but shook her head and moved away.

It was broad daylight now. He felt of his head—it was done up in turban-like bandages. He looked around for his clothes; they were put away. The problem of getting out looked a difficult one. But he must. He tried again to think back as to what had happened to him. Who had placed him in the carriage and given orders to the driver? Had it been done to get rid of him or out of kindness? Had it been done by the priest or by Sorez? Above all, what in the meanwhile had become of his comrade?

When the visiting surgeon came in, Wilson told him quite simply that he must leave at once.

“Better stay, boy. A day here now may save you a month.”

“A day here now might spoil my life.”

“A day outside might cost it.”

“I’m willing.”

“Well, we can’t hold you against your will. But think again; you’ve received an ugly blow there and it has left you weak.”

Wilson shook his head.

“I must get out of here at once, whatever the cost.”

The surgeon indifferently signed the order for his release and moved on. The nurse brought his clothes. His only outside garment was the long, gold embroidered lounging robe he had thrown on while his own clothes were drying. He stared at it helplessly. Then he put it on. It did not matter—nothing mattered but getting back to her as soon as possible.

A few minutes later the citizens of Boston turned to smile at the sight of a young man with pale, drawn face hurrying through the streets wearing a white linen turban and an oriental robe. He saw nothing of them.

CHAPTER VI

Blind Man's Buff

Wilson undoubtedly would have been stopped by the police within three blocks had it not been for the seriousness of his lean face and the evident earnestness with which he was hurrying about his business. As it was, he gathered a goodly sized crowd of street gamins who hooted at his heels until he was forced to take to the side streets. Here for a few squares he was not annoyed. The thing that was most disturbing him was the realization that he knew neither the name of the street nor the number of the house into which he had so strangely come last night. He knew its general direction—it lay beyond the Public Gardens and backed upon the water front, but that was all. With only this vague description he could not ask for help without exciting all manner of suspicion. He must depend upon his instinct. The situation seemed to him like one of those grotesque predicaments of a dream. Had his brain been less intently occupied than it was with the urgency of his mission, he would have suffered acutely.

He could not have had a worse section of the city to traverse—his course led him through the business district, where he passed oddly enough as a fantastic advertisement for a tea house,—but he kept doggedly on until he reached Tremont Street. Here he was beset by a fresh crowd of urchins from the Common who surrounded him until they formed the nucleus of a crowd. For the first time, his progress was actually checked. This roused within him the same dormant, savage man who had grasped the joist—he turned upon the group. He didn't do much, his eyes had been upon the ground and he raised them, throwing back his head quickly.

"Let me through," he said.

A few, even at that, shifted to one side, but a half dozen larger boys pressed in more closely, baiting him on. They had not seen in his eyes what the others saw.

"I'm in a hurry," he said. "Let me through."

Some of the crowd laughed; some jeered. All of them waited expectantly. Wilson took a short, quick breath. His frame stiffened, and then without a word he hurled himself forward. He must have been half mad, for as he bored a passage through, striking to the right and left, he saw nothing, heard nothing, felt nothing. His teeth together, his mind once again centered with burning intensity upon the solitary fact that he must get back to the girl who had sent him out to protect her. He was at this moment no more the man who crammed Hebrew verbs in the confines of that small, whitewashed room at the theological school than as though born of a different mother. He was more like that Wilson who in the days of Miles Standish was thought to be possessed of devils for the fierceness with which he fought Indians. It would have taken a half dozen strong men to stop him, and no one ventured to do more than strike at him.

Once he was free of them, he started on, hoping to get across Park Street and into the Common. But the pack was instantly at his heels again after the manner of their kind. He glanced about him baffled, realizing that with the increasing excitement his chances of pulling clear of them lessened. He dreaded the arrival of the police—that would mean questioning, and he could give no satisfactory explanation of his condition. To tell the truth would be to incriminate himself, compromise the girl, and bring about no end of a complication. He turned sharply and made up the hill at a run. He was a grotesque enough figure with the long robe streaming at his heels, his head surmounted by the fantastic turban, and his face roughened with two days' beard, but he made something of a pathetic appeal, too. He was putting up a good fight. It took only half an eye to see that he was running on his nerve and that in his eagerness to get clear, there was nothing of cowardice. Even now there was not one of the rabble who dared come within fighting distance of him. It was the harrying they enjoyed—the sight of a man tormented. A policeman elbowed his way

through the crowd and instead of clubbing back the aggressors, pushed on to the young man who was tottering near his finish.

Wilson saw him. He gave one last hurried look about on the chance of finding some loophole of escape from that which was worse than the crowd. His eyes fell upon the face of a young man in an automobile which was moving slowly up the hill. It took the latter but a glance to see that Wilson was a gentleman hard pushed. The appeal in the eyes was enough. He ordered the machine stopped and threw open the door. As Wilson reached it, he leaned forward and grasped his shoulders, dragging him in. Then the driver threw back his lever and the machine leaped forward like an unleashed dog. The officer ordered them to stop, but they skimmed on up the hill and turning to the left found Beacon Street a straight path before them.

"Narrow squeak that time, old man," smiled the stranger. "What the devil was the trouble?"

"This, I suppose," answered Wilson, as soon as he had caught his breath, lifting a corner of the elaborate gown. "And this," touching the bandages on his head.

"But what in thunder did they chase you for?"

"I guess they thought I was crazy—or drunk."

"Well, it wasn't fair sport at a hundred to one. Where shall I land you?"

Wilson pondered a second. He would only lose time if he got out and attempted again to find the house in that rig.

"If—if I could only get some clothes."

"Where's your hotel or home? Take you anywhere you say."

"I haven't either a home or a hotel," answered Wilson, deliberately. "And these are all the clothes I have in the world."

"Is that a dream?"

"It is the truth."

"But how—" exclaimed the other.

"I can't tell you now how it came about, but it is the truth that I am without a cent, and that this is my entire wardrobe."

"Where did you come from this morning?" asked the other, still incredulous.

"From the hospital."

Wilson hesitated just a second; he knew that in asking anything further he ran the risk of being mistaken for a charlatan, but this seemed now his only chance of getting back to her. They were speeding out through the Fenway, but the driver had now slowed down to await further orders. The man would drop him anywhere he said, but even supposing he brought him back to the vicinity of the house, he could not possibly escape observation long enough to locate that little door in the rear—the only clue he had to identification of the house. If ever a man's exterior gave promise of generous help, the features of this fellow by his side did. He was of about his own age, smooth shaven, with a frank, open face that gave him a clean and wholesome appearance. He had the lithe frame and red cheeks of an athlete in training—his eyes clear as night air, his teeth white as a hound's. But it was a trick of the eyes which decided Wilson—a bright eagerness tinged with humor and something of dreams, which suggested that he himself was alert for just such adventures as this in which Wilson found himself. He glanced up and found the other studying him curiously as though trying to decide for himself just what sort of a fellow he had rescued.

"I don't blame you for being suspicious," began Wilson, "but I've told you only the truth. Furthermore, I've done nothing any decent fellow wouldn't do. The police have no right to me, although they might make a lot of trouble."

"That's all right, old man. You needn't feel obliged to 'fess up to me."

"I wanted to tell you that much," answered Wilson, "because I want to ask something of you; I want you to give me a suit of clothes and enough money to keep me alive for a week."

Wilson saw the other's brows contract for a second as though in keen annoyance or disappointment at this mediocre turn in a promising situation. He added quickly:

"I'm not asking this altogether for myself; there's a girl involved—a girl in great danger. If I get back to her soon, there is still hope that I can be of some use."

The other's face brightened instantly.

"What's that you say? A girl in danger?"

"In serious danger. This—" he pointed at the linen turban, "this ought to give you some idea of how serious; I was on my way to her when I received this."

"But good Lord, man, why didn't you say so before? Home, Mike, and let her out!"

The chauffeur leaned forward and once again the machine vibrated to the call. They skimmed along the park roads and into the smooth roads of Brookline. From here Wilson knew nothing of the direction or the locality.

"My name is Danbury," his rescuer introduced himself, "and I'm glad to be of help to you. We're about the same size and I guess you can get into some of my clothes. But can't I send a wire or something to the girl that you are coming?"

Wilson shook his head. "I don't know exactly where she is myself. You see I—I found her in the dark and I lost her in the dark."

"Sort of a game of blind man's buff," broke in Danbury. "But how the devil did you get that swipe in the head?"

"I don't know any more than you where that came from."

"You look as though you ought to be tucked away in bed on account of it. You are still groggy."

Wilson tried to smile, but, truth to tell, his head was getting dizzy again and he felt almost faint.

"Lie back and take it easy until we reach the house. I'll give you a dose of brandy when we get there."

The machine slid through a stone gateway and stopped before a fine, rambling white house set in the midst of green trees and with a wide sweep of green lawn behind it. A butler hurried out and at a nod took hold of one of Wilson's arms and helped him up the steps—though it was clear the old fellow did not like the appearance of his master's guest. Of late, however, the boy had brought home several of whom he did not approve. One of them—quite the worst one to his mind—was now waiting in the study. The butler had crossed himself after having escorted him in. If ever the devil assumed human shape, he would say that this was no other than his satanic majesty himself.

"A gentleman to see you, sir, in the study."

"The devil you say," snapped Danbury.

"I did not say it, sir."

"I wanted to take this gentleman in there. However, we will go to the den."

Danbury led the way through a series of rooms to a smaller room which opened upon the green lawn. It was furnished in mahogany with plenty of large, leather-bottomed chairs and a huge sofa. The walls were decorated with designs of yachts and pictures of dogs. This room evidently was shut off from the main study by the folding doors which were partly concealed by a large tapestry. Danbury poured out a stiff drink of brandy and insisted upon Wilson's swallowing it, which he did after considerable choking.

"Now," said Danbury, "you lie down while John is getting some clothes together, and I'll just slip into the next room and see what my queer friend wants."

Wilson stretched himself out and gave himself up to the warm influx of life which came with the stimulation from the drink. Pound after pound seemed to be lifting from his weary legs and cloud after cloud from his dulled brain. He would soon be able to go back now. He felt a new need for the sight of her, for the touch of her warm fingers, for the smile of good fellowship from her

dark eyes. In these last few hours he felt that he had grown wonderfully in his intimacy with her and this found expression in his need of her. Lying there, he felt a craving that bit like thirst or hunger. It was something new to him thus to yearn for another. The sentiment dormant within him had always found its satisfaction in the impersonal in his vague and distant dreams. Now it was as though all those fancies of the past had suddenly been gathered together and embodied in this new-found comrade.

The voices in the next room which had been subdued now rose to a point where some phrases were audible. The younger man seemed to be getting excited, for he kept exclaiming,

“Good. That’s bully!”

Their words were lost once more, but Wilson soon heard the sentence,

“I’m with you—with you to the end. But what are *you* going to get out of this?”

Then for the first time he heard the voice of the other. There was some quality in it that made him start. He could not analyze it, but it had a haunting note as though it went back somewhere in his own past. It made him—without any intention of overhearing the burden of the talk—sit up and listen. It was decidedly the voice of an older man—perhaps a foreigner. But if this were so, a foreigner who had lived long in this country, for the accent consisted of a scarcely perceptible blur. He spoke very slowly and with a cold deliberation that was unpleasant. It was so a judge might pronounce sentence of death. It was unemotional and forbidding. Yet there were little catches in it that reminded Wilson of some other voice which he could not place.

“My friend,” came the voice more distinctly, as though the owner had risen and now faced the closed doors between the two rooms, “my friend, the interests I serve are truly different from yours; you serve sentiment; I, justice and revenge. Yet we shall each receive our reward in the same battle.” He paused a moment. Then he added,

“A bit odd, isn’t it, that such interests as yours and mine should focus at a point ten thousand miles from here?”

“Odd? It’s weird! But I’m getting used to such things. I picked up a chap this morning whose story I wouldn’t have believed a year ago. Now I’ve learned that most anything is possible—even you.”

“I?”

“Yes, you and your heathen army, and your good English, and your golden idol.”

“I object to your use of the word ‘heathen,’” the other replied sharply.

Wilson started from his couch, now genuinely interested. But the two had apparently been moving out while this fag-end of the conversation was going on, for their voices died down until they became but a hum. He fell back again, and before he had time to ponder further Danbury hurried in with a suit of clothes over his arm.

“Here,” he cried excitedly, “try on these. I must be off again in a hurry. I didn’t mean to keep you waiting so long, but we’ll make up the time in the machine.”

He tossed out a soft felt hat and blue serge suit. Wilson struggled into the clothes. Save that the trousers were a bit short, the things fitted well enough. At any rate, he looked more respectable than in a lounging robe. The latter he cast aside, and as he did so something fell from it. It was a roll of parchment. Wilson had forgotten all about it, and now thrust it in an inside pocket. He would give it back to Sorez, for very possibly it was of some value. He had not thought of it since it had rolled out of the hollow image.

Danbury led the way out the door as soon as Wilson had finished dressing. The latter felt in one of the vest pockets and drew out a ten dollar bill. He stared from Danbury to the money.

“Tuck it away, man, tuck it away,” said Danbury.

“I can’t tell you—”

“Don’t. Don’t want to hear it. By the way, you’d better make a note of the location of this house in case you need to find me again. Three hundred and forty Bellevue,—remember it? Here, take my card and write it down.”

It took them twenty minutes to reach the foot of Beacon street, and here Wilson asked him to stop.

“I’ve got to begin my hunt from here. I wish I could make you understand how more than grateful I am.”

“Don’t waste the time. Here’s wishing you luck and let me know how you come out, will you?”

He reached forth his hand and Wilson grasped it.

“I will.”

“Well, s’long, old man. Good luck again.”

He spoke to the chauffeur. In less than a minute Wilson was alone again on the street where he had stood the night before.

CHAPTER VII

The Game Continues

It was almost noon, which made it eight hours since Wilson was carried out of the house. He had had less than four hours' sleep and only the slight nourishment he had received at the hospital since he and the girl dined at midnight, yet he was now fairly strong. His head felt sore and bruised, but he was free of the blinding ache which so weakened him in the morning. An austere life together with the rugged constitution he inherited from his Puritan ancestors was now standing him in good stead. He turned into the narrow street which ran along the water front in the rear of the Beacon Street houses and began his search for the gate which had admitted him to so many unforeseen complications. The river which had raged so turbulently in the dark was now as mild and blue as the sky above. A few clouds, all that were left of the threatening skies of the morning, scudded before a westerly breeze. It was a fair June day—every house flooded with sunshine until, however humble, it looked for the moment like a sultan's palace. The path before him was no longer a blind alley leading from danger into chaos.

He found that nearly a third of the houses were closed for the summer, and that of these at least one half had small doors leading into fenced courtyards in the rear. There was not a single mark by which he might identify that one which he had battered down. He had only forced the lock so that the door when held closed again would show no sign of having been touched. The priest, or whoever it was who had entered after him, must have taken the same precaution, for every gate was now fast shut. It seemed a hopeless search. Then he happened to remember that the policeman had said that there was glass atop this particular wall. He retraced his steps. The clue was a good one; he discovered with a bounding heart that one alone of all the entrances was so protected. He tried the door, and found to his further relief that it gave readily. He stepped within and closed the gate behind him. He saw then that it had been held by the same piece of joist he himself had used, but had been so hastily and lightly fixed as merely to hold the door shut. He ran across the yard and in another minute was through the window and once again in the lower hall. It was fairly light there now; he did not feel as though this was the same house. This was the third time that he had hurried along this passage on his way to unknown conditions above, and each time, though within a period of less than a full day, had marked a crisis in his life.

As he sprang up the stairs it did not occur to him that he was unarmed and yet running full ahead into what had proven a danger spot. It would have mattered nothing had he realized this. He had not been long enough in such games to value precaution. To reach her side as quickly as possible was the only idea he could grasp now. At the top of the second flight he called her name. He received no reply.

He crossed the hall and pushed aside the curtains which before had concealed his unknown assailant. The blinds were still closed, so that the room was in semi-darkness. The fire had gone out. There was no sign of a human being. Wilson shouted her name once again. The silence closed in upon him oppressively. He saw the dead hearth, saw the chair in which she had curled herself up and gone to sleep, saw the rug upon which Sorez had reclined, saw the very spot where she had sat with the image in her lap, saw where she had stood as she had thrust the revolver into his hand and sent him on his ill-omened errand. But all these things only emphasized her absence. It was as though he were looking upon the scene of events of a year past. She had gone.

He hurried into the next room—the room where Sorez, fainting, had fumbled at the safe until he opened it—the room where he had first seen the image which had really been the source of all his misfortunes. The safe door was closed, but about the floor lay a number of loose papers, as though the safe had been hastily ransacked. The ebony box which had contained the idol was gone. Some

of the papers were torn, which seemed to show that this had been done by the owner in preparing for hasty flight rather than by a thief, who would merely rummage through them. Wilson picked up an envelope bearing a foreign postmark. It was addressed to Dr. Carl Sorez, and bore the number of the street where this house was located. The stamp was of the small South American Republic of Carlina and the postmark "Bogova." Wilson thrust the empty envelope in his pocket.

Coming out of here, he next began a systematic examination of every room on that floor. In the boudoir where he had found clothes for the girl, he discovered her old garments still hanging where she had placed them to dry. Her dress was spread across the back of a chair, her stockings were below them, and her tiny mud-bespattered shoes on the floor. They made him start as though he had suddenly come upon the girl herself. He crossed the room and almost timidly placed his hands upon the folds of the gown. These things were so intimate a part of her that it was almost like touching her hand. It brought up to him very vividly the picture of her as she stood shivering with the cold, all dripping wet before the flames. His throat ached at the recollection. It had never occurred to him that she might vanish like this unless, as he had half feared, he might return to find Sorez dead. This new turn left him more bewildered than ever. He went into every room of the house from attic to cellar and returned again to the study with only this fact of her disappearance to reward him for his efforts of the last three hours.

Had this early morning intruder abducted them both, or had they successfully hidden themselves until after he left and then, in a panic, fled? Had the priest, fearing for Wilson's life, thrown him into the carriage rather than have on his hands a possible murder? Or after the priest had gone did Sorez find him and take this way to rid himself of an influence that might destroy his power over the girl? This last would have been impossible of accomplishment if the girl herself knew of it. The other theories seemed improbable. At any rate, there was little use in sitting here speculating, when the problem still remained of how to locate the girl.

He made his way back to the safe and examined some of the torn letters; they were all in Spanish. A large part of them bore the same postmark, "Bogova, Republic of Carlina." The sight of the safe again recalled to him the fact that he still had in his possession the parchment which had dropped from the interior of the idol. It was possible that this might contain some information which would at any rate explain the value which these two men evidently placed upon it. He took it out of his pocket and looked at it with some curiosity. It was very tightly rolled in a covering of what appeared to be oilskin. He cut the threads which held it together and found a second covering sewed with sinew of some sort. This smelled musty. Cutting this, he found still a third covering of a finely pounded metal looking like gold-foil. This removed revealed a roll of parchment some four inches long and of about an inch in thickness. When unrolled Wilson saw that there were two parchments; one a roughly drawn map, and the other a document covered with an exceedingly fine script which he could not in this light make out at all. Without a strong magnifying glass, not a word was decipherable. He thrust it back in his pocket with a sense of disappointment, when he recalled that he could take it to the Public Library which was not far from there and secure a reading glass which would make it all clear. He would complete his investigation in the house and then go to the reading room where he had spent so much of his time during the first week he was in Boston.

He picked up several fragments of the letters scattered about, in the hope of obtaining at least some knowledge of Sorez. The fact that the man had stopped to tear them up seemed to prove that he had made plans to depart for good, sweeping everything from the safe and hastily destroying what was not valuable. Wilson knew a little Spanish and saw that most of the letters were of recent date and related to the death of a niece. Others mentioned the unsettled condition of government affairs in Carlina. At one time Sorez must have been very close to the ruling party, for several of the letters were from a man who evidently stood high in the ministry, judged by the intimacy which he displayed with affairs of state. He spoke several times of the Expedition of the Hills, in which

Sorez had apparently played a part. But the most significant clause which Wilson found in his hasty examination of the remnants was this reference:

“There is still, I hear, a great bitterness felt among the Mountain tribes over the disappearance of the idol of their Sun God. They blame this on the government and more than half suspect that you were an important factor in its vanishing. Have a care and keep a sharp lookout. You know their priest is no ordinary man. They have implicit faith that he will charm it back to them.”

This was dated three months before. Wilson put the few remaining bits of this letter in his pocket. Was it possible that this grinning idol which already had played so important a part in his own life was the one mentioned here? And the priest of whom Sorez spoke—could it be he who ruled these tribes in the Andes? It was possible—Lord, yes, *anything* was possible. But none of these things hinted as to where the girl now was.

He came back into the study and took a look into the small room to the left. He saw his own clothes there. He had forgotten all about them. They were wrinkled and scarcely fit to wear—all but his old slouch hat. He smiled as he recalled that at school it was thought he showed undue levity for a theological student in wearing so weather-beaten and rakish a hat. He was glad of the opportunity to exchange for it the one he now wore. He picked it up from the chair where it lay. Beneath the rim, but protruding so as to be easily seen, was a note. He snatched it out, knowing it was from her as truly as though he had heard her voice. It read:

“Dear Comrade:

I don’t know what has become of you, but I know that if you’re alive you’ll come back for me. We are leaving here now. I haven’t time to tell you more. Go to the telephone and ring up Belmont 2748.

*Hastily, your comrade,
Jo Manning.”*

Wilson caught his breath. With the quick relief he felt almost light-headed. She was alive—she had thought of him—she had trusted him! It deepened the mystery of how he had come to be carried from the house—of where they succeeded in hiding themselves—but, Lord, he was thankful for it all now. He would have undergone double what he had been through for the reward of this note—for this assurance of her faith in him. It cemented their friendship as nothing else could. For him it went deeper. The words, “You’ll come back here for me,” tingled through his brain like some sweet song. She was alive—alive and waiting for him to come back. There is nothing finer to a man than this knowledge, that some one is waiting his return. It was an emotion that Wilson in his somewhat lonely life had never experienced save in so attenuated a form as not to be noticeable. He lingered a moment over the thought, and then, crushing the old hat—now doubly dear—over his bandaged head, hurried out of this house in which he had run almost the gamut of human emotions. He went out by the laundry window, closing it behind him, across the courtyard, and made the street without being seen. That was the last time, he thought, that he would ever set foot within that building. He didn’t find a public telephone until he reached Tremont Street. He entered the booth with his heart beating up in his throat. It didn’t seem possible that when a few minutes ago he didn’t know whether she was dead or alive, that he could now seat himself here and hope to hear her voice. His hand trembled as he took down the receiver. It seemed an eternity before he got central; another before she connected him with Belmont. He grew irritable with impatience over the length of time that elapsed before he heard,

“A dime, please.”

He was forced to drop the receiver and go out for change. Every clerk was busy, but he interrupted one of them with a peremptory demand for change. The clerk, taken by surprise, actually obeyed the command without a word. When Wilson finally succeeded in getting the number, he

heard a man's voice, evidently a servant. The latter did not know of a Miss Manning. Who did live there? The servant, grown suspicious and bold, replied,

"Never mind now, but if ye wishes to talk with any Miss Manning ye can try somewheres else. Good-bye."

"See here—wait a minute. I tell you the girl is there, and I must talk to her."

"An' I'm telling ye she isn't."

"Is there a Mr. Sorez there—"

"Oh, the man who is just after comin'? Wait a minute now," he put in more civilly, "an' I'll see, sor."

Wilson breathed once more. He started at every fairy clicking and jingle which came over the waiting line.

"Waiting?"

He almost shouted his reply in fear lest he be cut off.

"Yes! Yes! waiting. Don't cut me off. Don't—"

"Is this you?"

The voice came timidly, doubtingly—with a little tremor in it, but it was her voice.

He had not known it long, and yet it was as though he had always known it.

"Jo—comrade—are you safe?"

"Yes, and you? Oh, David!" she spoke his name hesitatingly, "David, where did you go?"

"I was hurt a little. I lost consciousness."

"Hurt, David?"

"Not seriously, but that is why I couldn't come back. I was carried to a hospital."

"David!"

Her voice was tender with sympathy.

"And you—I came back to the study for you. You were gone."

"We were hidden. There is a secret room where we stayed until daylight."

"Then it was—"

"The priest. Sorez was so weak and frightened."

"He came for the image?"

"Yes, but he did not get it. Was it he who—who hurt you, David?"

"It must have been. It was just as I came into the study."

"And he carried you out?"

"Because he thought the house empty, I guess, and feared I was hurt worse than I was."

"And you really are not badly hurt?"

"Not badly."

"But how much—in what way?"

"Just a blow on the head. Please not to think about it."

"I have thought so many horrible things."

"Where are you now?"

"Mr. Sorez did not dare to stay there. He really is much stronger, and so he came here to a friend's. I did not dare to let him come alone."

"But you aren't going to stay there. What are you going to do now?"

He thought she hesitated for a moment.

"I can't tell, David. My head is in such a whirl."

"You ought to go back home," he suggested.

"Home? My home is with my father, and nowhere else."

"I want to see you."

"And I want to see you, David, but—"

"I'm coming out there now."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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