

CHAPTER XVI

A CLEW AT LAST

The servants at Elmhurst all ate in a pleasant dining room with windows facing a garden of geraniums. Tom Gates had been at the house two days before he encountered Eliza Parsons at the table, for the servants were not all able to take their meals at the same time.

It was at luncheon, the day of the joint debate at Fairview, that the young man first met Eliza, who sat opposite him. The only other person present was old Donald, the coachman, who was rather deaf and never paid any attention to the chatter around him.

As he took his seat Tom gave a half-frightened glance into Eliza's face and then turned red as she smiled coquettishly and said:

"Dear me! It's the young man who called me his dear Lucy."

"You--you're very like her," stammered Tom, unable to take his eyes from her face. "Even now I--I can't believe I'm mistaken."

She laughed merrily in a sweet, musical voice, and then suddenly stopped with her hand on her heart and cast at him a startled look that was in such sharp contrast to her former demeanor that he rose from his chair.

"Sit down, please," she said, slowly. And then she studied his face with sober earnestness--with almost wistful longing. But she shook her head presently, and sighed; and a moment later had regained her lightness of manner.

"It's a relief to have a quiet house for a day, isn't it?" she asked, eating her soup calmly. "I'll be glad when the election's over."

"Have you been here long?" he asked, although Beth had told him of Eliza's coming to Elmhurst.

"Only a short time. And you?"

"Two days," said he. "But where did you live before you came here?"

She shook her head.

"I wish you would answer me," he begged. "I have a reason for asking."

"What reason?" she demanded, suddenly serious again.

"Two people have never lived that were so near alike as you and Lucy Rogers."

"Indeed?"

"Will you show me your left arm?"

"No."

She was again studying his face.

"If you are Lucy Rogers you have a scar there--a scar where you burned yourself years ago."

She seemed frightened for a moment. Then she said:

"I have no scar on my left arm."

"Will you prove it?"

"No. You are annoying me. What did you say your name is?"

"Tom Gates."

She was thoughtful for a moment and then shook her head.

"I have never heard of you," she declared, positively, and resumed her eating.

Tom was nonplussed. One moment he believed she was Lucy, and the next

told himself that it was impossible. This girl possessed mannerisms that Lucy had never exhibited in all the years he had known her. She was bold and unabashed where Lucy was shy and unassuming. This girl's eyes laughed, while Lucy's were grave and serious; yet they were the same eyes.

"Let me tell you about my lost Lucy," he said, with a glance at the unconscious Donald.

"Go ahead, if it will relieve you," she answered, demurely.

"She lived on a farm five miles from here, and she was my sweetheart. Her mother is blind and her father old and feeble. She worked for a dentist in the town and was accused of stealing a ring, and it nearly broke her heart to be so unjustly suspected. In order to make good the loss of the ring, a valuable diamond--I--I got into trouble, and Lucy was so shocked and distressed that she--she lost her head--became mad, you know--and left home during the night without a word to any one. We haven't been able to find her since."

"That's too bad," remarked Eliza Parsons, buttering her bread.

"About the time that Lucy went away, you appeared at Elmhurst," continued Tom. "And in face and form you're the image of my Lucy. That is why I asked you to tell me where you came from and how you came here."

"Ah, you think I'm mad, do you?" asked the girl, with a quizzical smile.
"Well, I'm not going to satisfy your curiosity, even to prove my sanity;
and I'm not anxious to pose as your lost Lucy. So please pass the sugar
and try to be sociable, instead of staring at me as if I scared you."

Tom passed the sugar, but he could not eat, nor could he tear himself
away from this strange girl's presence. He tried again to draw her into
conversation, but she showed annoyance and resented his persistence.
Presently she went away, giving him an amused smile as she left the
room--a smile that made him feel that this was indeed a case of mistaken
identity.

In fact, Tom Gates, on sober reflection, knew that the girl could not be
Lucy, yet he could not still the yearning in his heart whenever he saw
her. His heart declared that she was Lucy, and his head realized that
she could not be.

While he waited in the library for Mr. Forbes to return from Fairview a
man was shown into the room and sat down quietly in a corner.

He was a small, lean man, of unassuming appearance, with a thin face and
gray eyes set close together. When he looked at Tom Gates he scarcely
seemed to see him, and his manner conveyed the impression that he
disliked to attract notice.

"Waiting for Mr. Forbes, sir?" asked Tom.

"Yes," was the quiet reply.

Suddenly it struck the young man that this might be the detective who called every evening to give his report, and if so Tom was anxious to talk with him. So he ventured to say:

"It's Mr. Burke, isn't it?"

The man nodded, and looked out of the window.

"I'm Tom Gates, sir."

"Yes; I know."

"You've seen me before?" asked the youth, astonished.

"No; I've heard of you. That's all."

Tom flushed, remembering his recent crime. But he was eager to question the detective.

"Have you heard anything of Lucy Rogers, Mr. Burke?"

"Not yet."

"Is there no trace of her at all?"

"A slight trace--nothing worth mentioning," said Mr. Burke.

For a few moments Tom sat in silence. Then he said:

"I thought I'd found her, day before yesterday."

"Yes?" There was little interest in the tone.

"There's a girl in the house, sir, one of the maids, who is the living image of Lucy Rogers."

"You ought to be able to identify her," suggested the detective, his gaze still out of the window.

"But they are not alike except in looks. Her form and face are identical with Lucy's. I was so sure that I begged her to let me see if there was a scar on her left arm; but she refused."

"Was there a scar on Lucy Rogers's left arm?"

"Yes, sir. Several years ago, when we were children, we were making candy in the kitchen and Lucy burned herself badly. It left a broad scar on her left forearm, which she will bear as long as she lives."

"It is well to know that," said Mr. Burke.

"This girl," continued Tom, musingly, "says her name is Eliza Parsons, and she says it in Lucy's voice. But her manner is not the same at all. Eliza laughs at me and quizzes me; she is forward and scornful, and--and perfectly self-possessed, which Lucy could not be, under the circumstances."

"Have you seen her closely?" asked the detective.

"Yes, sir."

"And are still unable to decide who she is?"

"That's it, sir; I'm unable to decide. It's Lucy: and yet it isn't Lucy."

"Who is Eliza Parsons?"

"She refuses to say where she came from. But it seems she arrived at Elmhurst only a day or two after Lucy disappeared from home. It's that coincidence that makes me doubt the evidence of my own senses."

"Who hires the servants here?"

"I don't know, sir."

Mr. Burke abandoned the conversation, then, and confined his gaze to the landscape as it showed through the window. Tom busied himself addressing circulars of instruction to the Republicans who were to work at the polling places. This was Saturday, and the election was to be on the following Tuesday. The meeting at Fairview was therefore the last important rally of the campaign.

At dusk the party arrived from Fairview in the automobiles, the girls greatly delighted with the success of the meeting. They all followed Kenneth into the library, where the butler had just lighted the lamps. The evenings were getting cool, now, and a grate fire was burning.

Kenneth greeted Mr. Burke and introduced him to the young ladies, who begged to remain during the interview.

"We are all alike interested in Lucy Rogers, Mr. Burke," said the boy; "so you may speak freely. Is there any news?"

"Nothing of importance, sir, unless a clew has been found in your own house," replied the detective.

"Here at Elmhurst?" asked the astonished Kenneth.

"Yes. Tom Gates has seen a girl--one of your maids--who so strongly

resembles Lucy Rogers that he at first believed she was the missing girl."

"I know," said Beth, quickly. "It's Eliza Parsons. But Tom was mistaken. He saw her in the dim light of a corridor, and the resemblance confused him."

"I've seen her since," remarked Tom, "and the likeness is really bewildering. It's only her manner that is different."

"When I first saw her, before Tom came, I was astonished at her resemblance to Mrs. Rogers," announced Beth. "I have never seen Lucy, but I know Mrs. Rogers, and it seemed to me that Eliza was exactly like her in features. Mr. Forbes and I first saw her riding in a buggy with Mr. Hopkins. That was before either of us knew she was employed at Elmhurst. You see she isn't one of the servants who come much in contact with the family; she does the mending and takes charge of the linen room."

Beth then related the manner in which they first noticed Eliza, and how they had discovered her to be a spy in the service of Mr. Hopkins.

The detective was much interested in the recital and seemed surprised that he had not been informed of this before.

"Of course," said Kenneth, "the girl is not Lucy Rogers. It is not

possible they could be the same."

"Why not?" asked Mr. Burke.

"Well, Lucy was a gentle, sweet country girl, of little experience in life. Her nature was so susceptible, so very sensitive, that when she discovered Tom Gates, whom she loved, to be guilty of a forgery, she worried herself into an attack of brain-fever; or at least she became insane, reproaching herself for having driven the boy to this dreadful deed. Under the influence of her mania she wandered away from her home, and has not been seen since. That's the story of Lucy Rogers. Now look at Eliza Parsons. She appeared the very day after Lucy's disappearance, to be sure; but that proves they are not the same person. For Eliza is not demented. She is a cold, hard woman of the world, in spite of her tender years. She is doing the work of an experienced spy, while any deceit was foreign to Lucy's nature. Instead of being plunged in grief Eliza is happy and gay, reckless of consequences and fully self-possessed. She is also well and healthy, to all appearances. Taking all these things into consideration, it is impossible to connect the two girls in any way--save the coincidence of personal resemblance."

Mr. Burke listened to this quietly, and then shook his head.

"Your arguments all tend to make me suspect that she is Lucy Rogers," he said, quietly.

For a moment there was an impressive silence, while everyone eagerly, inquiringly or doubtfully looked at the detective, according to their diverse acceptance of his statement.

"In pursuance of the task set me," began Mr. Burke, "I had met with such absolute failure to trace the missing girl that I began to suspect no ordinary conditions were attached to this case. In my experience, which covers many years, I have had occasion to study sudden dementia, caused by shocks of grief or horror, and I have come to comprehend the fact that the human mind, once unbalanced, is liable to accomplish many surprising feats. Usually the victim is absolutely transformed, and becomes the very opposite, in many ways, of the normal personality. I imagine this is what happened to Lucy Rogers."

"Do you imagine that Lucy would try to deceive me, sir?" asked Tom, reproachfully.

"I am sure she doesn't know who you are," answered the detective, positively. "She doesn't even know herself. I have known instances where every recollection of the past was wiped out of the patient's mind."

There was another thoughtful pause, for the detective's assertions were so astonishing that they fairly overwhelmed his hearers.

Then Louise asked:

"Is such a case of dementia hopeless, Mr. Burke?"

"Not at all hopeless. Often, I admit, it develops into permanent insanity, but there are many examples of complete recovery. Our first business must be to assure ourselves that we are right in this conjecture. I may be entirely wrong, for the unexpected is what I have been taught to look for in every case of mystery that has come under my observation. But I believe I have the material at hand to prove the personality of this Eliza Parsons, and after that I shall know what to do. Who employs your servants, Mr. Forbes?"

"Martha, my housekeeper, usually employs the maids."

"Will you send for her, please?"

Kenneth at once obeyed the request, and presently Martha entered the library.

She was a little, withered old woman, but with a pleasant face and shrewd but kindly eyes.

"Martha," said Kenneth, "did you employ the new linen maid, Eliza Parsons?"

"Yes, sir," she replied, apparently surprised at the question.

"This is Mr. Burke, Martha. Please answer any questions he may ask you."

"Yes, Master Kenneth."

"Did the girl bring any recommendations?" asked the detective.

Martha reflected.

"I do not think she did, sir."

"Are you accustomed to hiring maids without recommendations?" asked Mr. Burke.

"Oh, Eliza had a letter from my cousin, Mrs. Hopkins, who lives in Elmwood."

"Is Mrs. Hopkins your cousin?" asked Kenneth.

"Yes, sir. She were a Phibbs before she married Erastus, and my name is Phibbs."

"What did the letter from Mrs. Hopkins say?"

"It said she knew Eliza to be a clever and worthy girl, and if I had a place for her I couldn't do better than take her on. So I needed a linen maid and Eliza went right to work. Isn't she satisfactory, sir? Has she

been doing anything wrong?"

"No. Please do not mention this interview to her at present, Miss Phibbs," said the detective. "That is all, I believe."

"Would you like to see Eliza?" asked Kenneth, when the housekeeper had retired.

"Not at present. I want to interview Mrs. Hopkins first."

"Tonight?" asked Tom, eagerly.

"I will go at once, with Mr. Forbes's permission."

"Certainly, sir," said Kenneth. "Shall we see you tomorrow?"

"Just as soon as I have accomplished anything."

"Would you like a horse or an automobile?"

"Your man may drive me to the town, sir, if it is convenient."

Kenneth gave the required order, and then Mr. Burke asked:

"How far are you prepared to go in this matter, sir?"

"In what way?"

"In expending money."

"Will any large expenditure be required?"

"I cannot say. But we may require the services and advice of an expert physician--a specialist in brain diseases."

"Do you know of one?" asked Kenneth.

"Yes; but he must be brought from Buffalo. It will be expensive, sir. That is why I ask if your interest in the girl warrants our going to the limit to save her."

Kenneth was thoughtful, while the girls looked at him expectantly and Tom Gates with visible anxiety.

"My original idea was merely to find the missing girl in order to relieve the anxiety of her blind mother," said young Forbes. "To accomplish that I was willing to employ your services. But, as a matter of fact, I have never seen the girl Lucy Rogers, nor am I particularly interested in her."

"I am," declared Beth.

"And I!"

"And I!" repeated Patsy and Louise.

"I think," said Uncle John, who had been a quiet listener until now, "that Kenneth has assumed enough expense in this matter."

"Oh, Uncle!" The remonstrance was from all three of the girls.

"Therefore," continued Mr. Merrick, "I propose that I undertake any further expense that may be incurred, so as to divide the burden."

"That's better!" declared Patsy. "But I might have known Uncle John would do that."

"You have my authority to wire the physician, if necessary, or to go to any expense you deem advisable," continued Mr. Merrick, turning to the detective. "We seem to have undertaken to unravel an interesting mystery, and we'll see it through to the end."

"Very good, sir," said Mr. Burke, and left them with a brief nod of farewell.

"Somehow," said Beth, "I've a lot of confidence in that little man."

"Why, he's a detective," replied Uncle John, with a smile, "and the

chief business of detectives is to make mistakes."