

CHAPTER VIII

THE UNEXPECTED

The blow fell, a thunderbolt from the clear sky. It dazed certain people at first; it was difficult to realize what had happened, or if anything had really happened. For might not what seemed a deep and dire mystery turn out to be nothing so very mysterious after all? A message would soon come; everything would then be "cleared up" and those most concerned would laugh at their apprehensions. But the hours went by, and the affair remained inexplicable; no word was heard concerning Miss Dalrymple's whereabouts; she seemed to have disappeared as completely as if she had vanished on the Persian magic carpet. What could it mean? The circumstances briefly were:

Miss Dalrymple, four or five days before Mr. Heatherbloom's term of service came to an end, had expressed a desire to revisit her old home and friends in the West. One of a party made up mostly of other Californians--now residents of New York city--the girl had failed to appear on the private car at the appointed time, and the train had pulled out, leaving her behind. At the first important stop a telegram had been handed to a gentleman of the party from Miss Dalrymple; it expressed her regret at having reached the station too late owing to circumstances she would explain later, and announced her intention of coming on, with her maid, in a few days. They were not to wait anywhere

for her but to go right along.

The party did; it was sorry to have lost one of its most popular members but no one thought anything more of the matter until at Denver, after a telegram had been forwarded to the Van Rolsen house, in New York, asking just when Miss Dalrymple would arrive, as camping preparations for a joyous pilgrimage in the mountains were in progress.

Miss Van Rolsen gasped when this message reached her. Miss Dalrymple and her maid--a young woman newly engaged by Miss Van Rolsen--had left the house for the train to which the private car was attached; neither had been heard from since. The aunt had, of course, presumed her niece had gone as planned; she had received no word from her, but supposing she was of a light-hearted, heedless company thought nothing of that. It was possible Miss Dalrymple had actually missed her train; but if so, why had she not returned to her aunt's house?

Where had she gone? What had become of her? No trace of her could be found. Certain forces in the central railroad office at New York could not discover any evidence that the young girl had taken a subsequent train. There was no record of her name at any ticket office; no state-room had been reserved by, or for her; in fact, telegrams to officials in Chicago and other points west failed to elicit satisfactory information of any kind.

Miss Van Rolsen found herself with something real to worry about; she

rose to the occasion; her niece, after all, was everything to her. The Van Rolsen millions were ultimately for her, and the old lady's every ambition was centered in the girl. She had been proud of her beauty, her social triumphs.

With great determination she set herself to solve the puzzling problem. Could people thus completely disappear nowadays? It seemed impossible, she asserted, sitting behind closed doors in her library, to the private agent of the secret-service bureau whom she had just "called in."

He begged to differ from her and pointed to a number of cases which had seemed just as strange and mysterious in the beginning. Ransom--the "Black Hand"--Who could say what secret influences had been at work in this case? It was a very important one; Miss Dalrymple had money of her own; she was known to be her aunt's heiress. The conclusion?--But this was not Morocco, or Turkey, Miss Van Rolsen somewhat vehemently returned.

True; we have had, however, our "civilized" Ransuilis, answered the agent and mentioned a number of names in support of his theory. No doubt, after an interval, Miss Van Rolsen would have news of her niece--through those who had perpetrated the outrage; or she might even receive a few written words from the girl herself. After that it was a question of negotiating, or, while professing to deal with the perpetrators, to ferret them out if one could. The latter course was dangerous, for those who stoop to this particular crime are usually of a

desperate type; he and Miss Van Rolsen could consider that question later. Meanwhile she must avoid worry as much as possible. The young girl would, no doubt, be well treated.

Had the speaker looked around at this moment, he might have observed that the heavy curtains, drawn before the door leading into the hall and closed by Miss Van Rolsen, moved suddenly, but neither the agent nor Miss Van Rolsen, engrossed at the far end of the room, noticed. The drapery wavered a moment; then settled once more into its folds.

The telegram purporting to be from Miss Dalrymple to one of the party on the train, could--the agent went on--very easily have been sent by some one else; no doubt, had been. The miscreants had seized upon a lucky combination of circumstances; for two or three days, while Miss Dalrymple was supposed to be speeding across the continent, they, unsuspected and unmolested, would be afforded every opportunity to convey her to some remote and, for them, safe refuge. It was a cleverly planned coup, and could not have been conceived and consummated without--here he spoke slowly--inside assistance.

The curtain at the doorway again stirred.

"And now, Madam, we come to your servants," said the police agent. "I should like to know something about them."

"My servants, sir, are, for the most part, old and trusted."

"For the most part!" He caught at the phrase. "We will deal first with those who do not come in that category."

"There's a young man recently employed that I have not been at all pleased with. He leaves to-morrow."

"Ah!" said the visitor. "Not the person I met going out of the area way, with the dogs as I came in?"

She answered affirmatively.

"H--mn!" He paused. "But tell me why you have not been pleased with him, and, in brief, all the circumstances of his coming here."

Miss Van Rolsen did so in a voice she strove to make patient although she could not disguise its tremulousness, or the feverish anxiety that consumed her. She related the most trivial details, seeming irrelevances, but the visitor did not interrupt her. Instead, he studied carefully her face, pinched and worn; the angular figure, slightly bent; the fingers, nervously clasping and unclasping as she spoke. He watched her through habit; and still forbore speaking, even when she referred to the escape of her canine favorite from his caretaker and how the dog had later been returned, though the listener's eyes had, at this point, dilated slightly.

"After his carelessness in this matter, he seemed to want to get away from the house at once," observed Miss Van Rolsen, "without availing himself of the two-weeks' notice I had agreed to give him."

The visitor relapsed into his chair; an ironical light appeared in his eyes.

"Perhaps," added Miss Van Rolsen, "you attach no significance to the fact?"

"On the contrary, I attach every importance to it. Has it not occurred to you there was a little collusion in this matter of the lost dog?"

"Collusion?" Miss Van Rolsen's accents expressed incredulity. "You must be wrong. Why, the young woman wouldn't even accept the reward. And it was not a small one!"

"Two hundred or so dollars, ma'am! Not her stake!" he murmured satirically. "I am afraid two hundred thousand dollars would be nearer the mark these people have set for themselves!"

"But she didn't ask for a place here; only for me to look over her references--one was from a lady I knew in Paris--and to recommend her to my friends--"

"She knew your other maid had left; this confederate had, of course,

told her. It was all arranged that she should come here. Rest assured of that. And having accomplished her purpose--clever that she is!--she at once started to ingratiate herself with your niece, to make herself useful. As a mistress of languages she was useful, in fact more so than any ordinary maid. Where did she come from? Find out whom she represents, and--we'll have the key to the mystery. But she, too, has disappeared; after turning the game over to the others, perhaps. I would suggest cabling those foreign references this young woman gave you. They will, of course, including your Paris friend, know nothing of her; the name she gave you was not her own."

"But by what unfortunate combination of circumstances"--Miss Van Rolsen spoke somewhat incoherently--"should these people have been led to settle on my niece as the victim of their cowardly designs? There are so many others--"

"You forget the publicity concerning this prince your niece is to marry." The old lady stiffened. "Pardon my mentioning it, but Miss Dalrymple has in this connection been very much before the public gaze."

"Against her wish, sir, and mine!" snapped Miss Van Rolsen.

"She--I--have both lamented the fact. But what can one do? The journalists settled on the prince as a fruitful source for speculation. He is of noble family, very wealthy, no fortune-hunter; which has made it all the more distressing for him and us." She seemed about to say something further; then her lips suddenly tightened. "As I say, it has

been very distressing," she ended, after a pause. "I expect it was one of the reasons my niece wanted to get away from New York for a time."

"No doubt!" The caller's voice was courtesy itself although he probably but half-credited Miss Van Rolsen's protestations in the matter. People liked to complain of the press and newspaper notoriety, when in their hearts, perhaps, they were not so displeased to be in that terrible lime-light; especially when the person associated with them happened to be a count, or a duke, or a prince. "Unfortunately, one has to put up with these things," he now added. "But you are positive you have told me everything?"

An instant she seemed to hesitate. "I am positive you know everything relative to the subject."

He arose. "In that event"--his manner indicated a sudden resolution--"there is one little preliminary to be attended to."

"Which is--"

"To arrest this fellow, Heatherbloom!"

"Arrest? When?"

"At once! There is no time to be lost. Already--" He gave a sudden exclamation.

"What is it?" she asked.

He stepped toward the curtain; it moved perceptibly.

"Some one has been listening," exclaimed Miss Van Rolsen excitedly.

"Yes, some one." Significantly. As he spoke he threw back the curtain and revealed the door partly ajar.

"It must have been--Not one of my old servants--- They would not have--"

He stopped her. "There's the front way out of this house and the area way below," he said rapidly. "Is there any other way of escaping to the street?"

"No."

He darted out of the room to the front door. She followed.

"Quite in time!" he said, casting a quick look both ways along the avenue and then letting his glance fall to the servants' entrance below.

"You think he will try to--"

He regarded her swiftly. "While I stand guard here, would you mind getting some one to 'phone my office and ask two or three of my men to step over at once? Not that I doubt my own ability to cope with the case"--fingering the handle of a weapon on his pocket--"only it is always well to take no chances. Especially now!"

"Now?"

"Since he has practically convicted himself and confirmed my theory. We shall get at the truth through him. We're nearer the solution of the matter than I dared hope for."

"I'll telephone myself!" she cried. And started back to do so when an excited face confronted her.

"If ye plase, ma'am!" It was the cook.

"What is it?" Miss Van Rolsen spoke sharply.

"If ye plase, I think, ma'am, this Mr. Heatherbloom has taken lave av his senses."

"Why, what has he been doing?"

"He has, faith, just jumped over the fence into our neighbor's yard on the corner, and--"

The man on the steps did not wait to hear more; with something that sounded like an imprecation he sprang quickly down to the sidewalk and ran toward the corner.