

CHAPTER II

THE ADVENTURE OF THE MUSEUM

I

THAT morning the Curator of the Division of Inscriptions arrived at the Museum about ten o'clock as usual.

In the ante-room his secretary rose from her typewriter and handed him a visiting-card. And at the same moment he became aware of a slender girl in mourning seated on a sofa in the corner.

He read the visiting-card: *Miss Maddaleen Dirck*; turned towards the motionless figure in black:

"Miss Dirck?" he inquired.

The girl stood up: "Yes; could I speak to you for a moment in private?"

He opened the door to his private office. "Come in," he said.

Except for a cast of the Rosetta Stone, a model of some Argive ruins, and one or two photographs on glass, showing Egyptian excavations, and hung against the window-panes, the private office of the Curator of Inscriptions resembled that of any ordinary business man.

Dr. Walton took off his hat and coat, adjusted his spectacles, regarded his visitor absently, and suggested that she be seated. But the girl remained standing, her dark blue eyes fixed on him with intensity almost disturbing.

"Well," inquired the Curator of Inscriptions, "what can I do for you?"

After a moment's silence: "Dr. Walton, please help me," she said.

The curator looked surprised. "My dear young lady, what is it you wish?"

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"Please give me permission to come here every day and sit in your office. I beg you will not refuse."

"Come every day and sit in *my* office?" he repeated in mild astonishment. "Why?"

"Please let me," she pleaded. "I promise to remain very silent and still. I shall not disturb you——"

"But, my dear child——"

"I know shorthand and typewriting——"

"But I already have what assistance I require——"

"It isn't for money; I don't care to be paid for helping you. . . . I know how to clean your desk, sweep and dust, wash the woodwork and floors—I'll do anything, *anything*, for you if only you will let me come here every day and stay in your office."

He was frowning a trifle; his large, mild eyes seemed larger, rounder, and more owlsh through his spectacles.

"Miss Dirck," he said, "your request is most extraordinary."

"I know it is——"

"*Why* do you desire to come here?"

The girl stood silent, twisting a black-edged handkerchief between black-gloved fingers, her distressed gaze fixed on the curator.

"Come," he said kindly, "there must be some reason for your rather unusual request. Are you interested in ancient inscriptions?"

"Yes." Her gaze fell to the carpet.

"Do you know anything about the subject?"

She shook her head.

"Did you suppose that merely by coming here you might pick up information?"

She lifted her dark eyes from the handkerchief which she had been twisting. The transparent honesty in them, and the tragedy, too, were plain enough.

"Please do not refuse," she said. "I promise I won't disturb you. I will work for you without pay. Just let me come here—for a while. "

"For how long, Miss Dirck?"

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"I don't know. . . . A day—a month."

"You seem to be in trouble," he said solemnly.

"No—yes, I am in—in some distress of mind."

"Could I aid you?"

"Only by letting me come here."

"Why do you select this place? Can you not tell me that much?"

"Because I am informed that ancient inscriptions are studied and deciphered here."

The curator, thoroughly perplexed, gazed at her through his glasses, owlishly but not unkindly.

"Is there any particular kind of ancient inscription that interests you?" he asked. "You'll have to tell me *something*, you know."

She hesitated; moistened her lips: "Inscriptions—which come from Central and South America interest me."

"Maya, or Aztec?"

"Both, I think."

"But, my dear young lady, how are you ever going to learn anything about Aztec and Maya hieroglyphics—ideographs, phonetics—by coming into my private office every day and remaining in a corner as still as a mouse?"

He smiled owlishly in his kindly way; but on the girl's pale features there was no smile in response.

"Do not people come here sometimes to have inscriptions deciphered?" she asked tremulously.

"Sometimes. Have you any ancient inscriptions which you desire us to solve for you?"

"We—I had one——"

"Your family had one?"

"My brother. . . . He is dead. . . . I have nobody now."

Dr. Walton looked at her intently for a moment; then he walked up to her, took both her black-gloved hands between his own.

"Some time," he said, "you may care to tell me a little more about yourself. I don't mean that I'm vulgarly inquisitive."

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"You are good and kind," she murmured.

He smiled and patted her hands :

"Now what do you wish me to do for you, Miss Dirck?"

"Let me sit quietly in your office while you are here. And if people—come in—and talk about Central American inscriptions—I'd like to listen, if I may."

He smiled. "You may; unless others object. I shan't. But, my child, there is no deciphering work of that description done in my private office."

"Oh," she said blankly, "where is it done?"

"Let me arrange matters for you," he said, still smiling. He went to his desk and asked through the telephone for the division of Maya and Aztec inscriptions.

"Mr. Whelan, please. Is this you, Scott? Would you mind coming over to my office for a moment? Thanks."

He hung up the instrument and nodded to the girl in black :

"Scott Whelan, one of our assistant curators, will be here presently. The Aztec and Maya division is his department."

The door opened and a lively young man entered.

"Miss Dirck," said Dr. Walton, "this is Mr. Whelan." And, to the latter: "Scott, Miss Dirck desires to have the privileges of your division. She wishes to see how it's all done. In return she offers her services gratis. Anything of a clerical and useful nature that you may desire of her she volunteers to do—copying, stenography, typing, cleaning, scrubbing——"

Under Mr. Whelan's astonished gaze Miss Dirck reddened brightly. Dr. Walton laughed; and then Whelan laughed too; and, for the first time, a pale trace of a smile touched the girl's lips.

When they all had laughed a little over the situation, Dr. Walton pleasantly explained it. Whelan, still perplexed but courteous, conducted Miss Dirck to his own private office.

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Through an open door the girl saw another office, where, at long tables, two or three men and as many women were seated poring over plaster models of inscriptions engraved on stone, studying, comparing, taking notes, making sketches, using magnifying-glasses and even microscopes. All around the room were ranged great plaster casts of massive, vermiculated blocks of stone covered with elaborate carvings and with hieroglyphics. Charts set thickly with symbols hung on the wall above rows of shelves filled with massive books.

"In there," said Whelan, "my assistants are helping me to decipher the hieroglyphic inscriptions of a very ancient and extraordinarily wonderful civilization—the Maya. A thousand years before Christ a civilized people lived in Central America, Miss Dirck. They had priests, they had astronomers, mathematicians, politicians, architects, sculptors, painters; they had a system of writing such as was developed in China and in Egypt—"

He checked himself with a smile. "Doubtless you already know all this, Miss Dirck?"

She shook her head.

"You are interested?" he asked.

"Yes. May I stay here in your office?"

"Certainly."

She removed her hat. He took it and her coat from her and hung them beside his own.

When the girl had seated herself, Whelan sat down behind his desk. She slowly stripped off her gloves.

"If," he said, "it is Maya hieroglyphs that interest you, I must warn you that as yet we know very little about them. But about Aztec hieroglyphic writing we know pretty nearly all there is to know."

"What is the difference between the two?" asked the girl, plainly very interested.

"The Maya writing is a combination of the ideographic and phonetic, symbols representing ideas, and symbols representing sounds. The Aztec is largely phonetic. It is simpler than the Maya, which is the older. Generally

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"By chance," he said with a smile, "I have a letter this morning from a man who says he has a parchment covered with Central American hieroglyphics, and who desires us to decipher it. If this is literally true it is important. Probably it is not true."

"Is he coming here?" asked the girl quickly.

Whelan glanced at the clock. "Yes, and he is due now."

"May I remain?"

"Certainly."

"May I listen?"

"Yes, unless he objects."

She drew a swift, nervous breath, sat up rigidly on her chair with a tense expression on her white face, and her ungloved hands tightly clasped in her lap.

Minutes passed; the office clock ticked loudly. Whelan re-read his letters, made marginal notes on some of them, called his secretary from the ante-room, and dictated one or two replies, talked to several people on the telephone, conferred with two or three assistants who came to him for aid.

As the last of these retired, a museum guard opened the door and announced: "Mr. Barney Welper, sirs. He says you expect him."

"Show him in, Mike."

2

Mr. Welper came in.

He was a man of sixty, perhaps, under middle height, rather fat, smoothly shaven, very carefully but very simply dressed. His grey hair was closely clipped; his features pasty but regular, and almost expressionless except the eyes. These were a hazel hue, shaded by remarkable lashes which, on a woman, would have been beautiful—long, curling black lashes, partly veiling the slickest pair of eyes that Whelan ever had encountered. Ubbane, softly moving, soft of voice, and with small, soft, pallid

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hands. These and the long lashes shadowing two sly eyes were the salient features which checked up the surface personality of Mr. Welper.

He bowed cautiously to Miss Dirck; then he bowed very cautiously to Mr. Whelan.

The latter said: "I received your letter, Mr. Welper. Have you brought the inscription?"

Mr. Welper bowed again, and Whelan indicated a chair beside his desk and asked his visitor to be seated.

Out of his breast pocket Mr. Welper produced a folded paper, opened it, and laid it politely upon Whelan's desk.

"Oh," remarked Whelan, "a photograph?"

"There were reasons why I could not bring the original document."

Whelan gave him rather a sharp glance.

"On what substance were these symbols written?" he asked bluntly. "It makes some difference, you see."

"The original is written on parchment," said Mr. Welper softly.

"Skin, fibre, wood, stone—genuine Maya records are written on these. Unless I can examine the parchment I cannot tell you whether or not your records are genuine."

He continued to study the photograph before him for a moment.

"However," he added, "genuine or not, these Maya and Aztec characters are not difficult to decipher. I think I can translate this into English for you without much difficulty."

He spoke into the transmitter of his desk telephone: "Please bring me the Maya and Aztec keys immediately, Mr. Francis."

In a few moments a thin young man with bulging forehead and scant hair came in, laid the two working documents on the desk and retired.

Whelan spread out the photograph; Mr. Welper looked over his shoulder; Miss Dirck, deadly pale, rose and came towards the other side of the desk.

Mr. Welper rose noiselessly as though to intercept her.

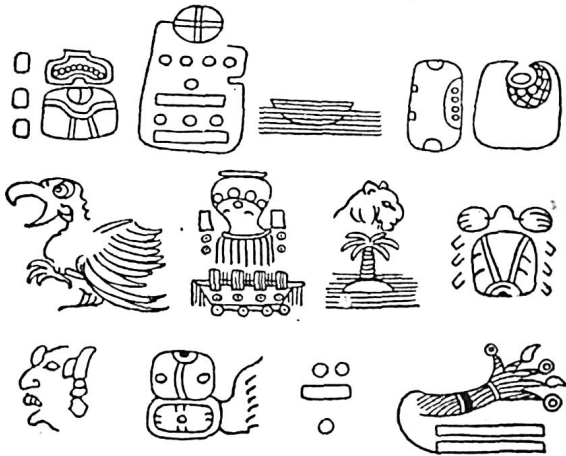
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"Pardon," he said politely, and impolitely covered the photograph with one pasty little hand.

"The matter is extremely confidential, and I am not at liberty to show this document to anybody except Mr. Whelan."

The girl flushed as though she had been struck. She had halted half-way across the room and stood looking round her, as if she did not know what to do next. Whelan looked at Mr. Welper in surprise, then with a smile he nodded towards the office where his assistants were at work. As she passed the desk where Whelan sat he noticed that she had lost all her colour.

When she had gone, and the door was closed behind her, Whelan and his visitor bent once more over the sheet of hieroglyphics. And this is what they saw :



For a few minutes the two men neither spoke nor moved. Finally Whelan half-reached out for the working list of Maya hieroglyphics, hesitated, reconsidered, pushed away the volume.

"This document of yours isn't genuine," he said bluntly.

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"I beg your pardon?" said Mr. Welper very gently.

"I say it isn't genuine. No Maya ever wrote this jargon."

"Jargon?"

"Certainly. It's arrant nonsense. It has been unquestionably written by some European."

"Doesn't this inscription mean anything, Mr. Whelan?" demanded his visitor, visibly worried.

"It's not an ancient Maya inscription."

"Are these not Maya symbols?"

"Yes—some of them."

"Have these symbols no meaning?" insisted Welper.

"Yes; but this is not the way the Mayas wrote their chronicles. They didn't do it this way. They didn't employ their ideographs in this manner. And there are symbols here with which I am not familiar. I don't believe they are Maya ideographs or Aztec phonetics. I don't know what they are—what they stand for. The whole thing looks to me as though some European, with a smattering of Maya and Aztec, and a vague general idea of hieroglyphics, had attempted to write something, using symbols."

"It," suggested Welper softly, "some European did this, how long ago did he do it?"

"I don't know. Yesterday, perhaps; perhaps three hundred years ago. Maybe I can tell you if you show me the original manuscript."

"It is on parchment and seems very old," breathed Welper. By this time he was growing anxious.

"It may *seem* old and be no older than forgery furnished yesterday," remarked Whelan, examining the photograph through a lens.

Presently he shrugged his shoulders. "This," he said, "is not a Maya inscription; it is a fraud."

"Yet you say that the symbols have a meaning," urged Welper. "Can you read these symbols, Mr. Whelan? Here is your key."

"I don't need it, thank you. I can decipher these

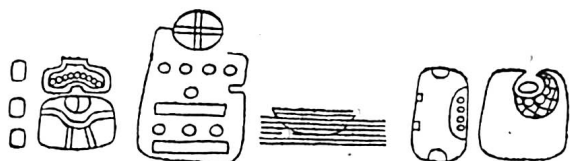
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symbols without any key—I mean the Maya ideographs and numerals.”

“Would it be too much trouble for you to write in pencil under each symbol what it stands for?” purred Mr. Welper softly.

“Not at all,” said Whelan, picking up a pencil.

For some minutes there was silence in the room while he occupied himself with writing a pencilled translation under each hieroglyphic. This is what Whelan wrote :



1
2
3
4
5

July 14th

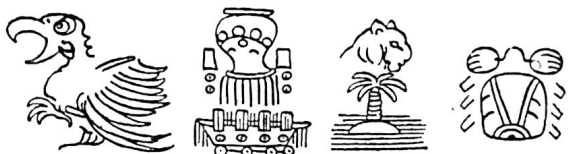
 In the year

 1565

 Ship

 Red

 Moon



6
7
8
9

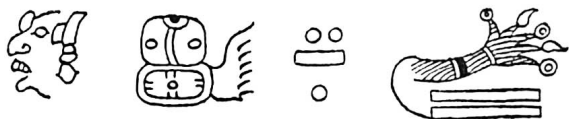
(had) Bad Luck

 Sunk

 at Midnight

 (near) Tiger Island

 South



10
11
12
13

Twelve

 East

 One Hundred and

 Forty 0 2

 Water Ten (fathoms)

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When he finished he said: "You see? That's not Maya work. Some white man has composed this jargon, using these hieroglyphs—or rather *misusing* them." He handed the paper to Mr. Welper. "Probably I could tell you how old your original parchment is if you care to bring it round. Did you buy it in some antique shop?"

Mr. Welper did not seem to hear the question.

"Mr. Whelan, I thank you," he said. "I shall not further encroach upon your valuable time."

He offered his remarkably small, soft hand.

"Once more, thank you, and good-bye."

"Good-bye," said Whelan, looking after him with the slightest scowl as he disappeared through the door.

Something about the touch of that small, podgy hand annoyed him, too. Scarcely conscious of what he did, he went to the wash-basin, rinsed his hand, dried it, came back and picked up the desk telephone. Then he continued sorting his morning's mail.

"Please say to Miss Dirck that she may return," he said.

Mrs Dirck, with pencil and tablets, had been noting the titles of certain translated volumes on the shelves: The Letters of Cortes to Charles the Fifth, printed in Seville in 1522; Castillo's Conquest of New Spain, printed in Madrid in 1632; volumes by Alonzo de Mata, Ojeda, Herrera, Juan Torquemada, Lopez de Gomara, Toribio de Benavente (the Franciscan), the Jesuit, Juan de Tobar, Padillo (a Dominican), Arrias Villalobos, Abbé Raynal, and the Abbé D. Francesco Saverio Clavigero, who wrote in Italian, and whose works were translated by Charles Cullen.

This is as far as she had written on her tablets when Whelan's telephone message came.

Instantly and swiftly she moved towards Whelan's office. He rose to receive her.

"Where is that man?" she asked excitedly.

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"He has just left," replied Whelan, surprised by her tone and manner.

"May I see that paper he brought?"

"He took it away with him."

The girl ran for her hat and coat.

"Please," she said breathlessly, "forgive my rudeness. I'll come back."

She had her hat and coat on and was out of the door before Whelan could stir or utter a word.

He was sufficiently astonished to remain immobile in his chair for several minutes. Presently, however, being a busy man, he turned to the papers on his desk again. Then, too late, he noticed her reticule of black leather and black silver lying beside her black-edged handkerchief. The handkerchief was faintly fragrant.

As he picked it up, with the idea of tucking it into the handbag, an automatic pistol fell from the reticule to the carpet.

Whelan picked it up, replaced the weapon in the little handbag, went swiftly into the outer office.

"Which way did that young lady go?" he asked his secretary.

The secretary, naturally, didn't know, and Whelan hurried to the corridor and called to the museum guard on duty: "Did you notice which way that girl went, Mike?"

"Th' wan in black, sorr?"

"Yes. Did she take the lift?"

"Faith, I seen her go skippin' an' bucketin' down the stair, sorr. Sure, she's the light-footed wan, Mither Whelan; she is that, sorr!"

Whelan hastened through the corridor into the gallery. It was too early for many visitors in the museum. He scanned the few people there with a single glance. The girl in black was not among them.

However, he took the lift and descended to the ground floor. No sign of her in any gallery, or in the lobby, where a few early school-children, personally conducted,

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lingered around the big metallic mass which had fallen to the earth from interstellar space.

No guard on duty had happened to notice her; but a small, freckled cloak-room boy remembered a very pretty lady in black who sped out into the sunshine of Central Park West as though the devil were at her heels.

"How long ago was it?" demanded Whelan.

"I dunno. About half 'n hour, I guess."

Whelan surveyed the lad in silent disgust, forgetting, perhaps, that time drags very slowly with a small, freckled boy who has to work for a living.

"She'll miss her reticule and come back for it," he reflected as he returned to the lift and was hoisted towards his own domain.

Seated at his desk once more, he gazed curiously at the reticule.

"Probably," he thought, "she'll be back within half an hour. It was rather a queer proceeding. I didn't care for that man Welper. But she was—unusually—ornamental."

He shrugged his well-set shoulders and opened a volume on the archæology of Guatemala. But he was aware of faint perfume in the air. It came from her handkerchief in the satchel, and he found it difficult to concentrate his thoughts upon Guatemala.

3

The girl who disturbed the archæological reflections of Scott Whelan had caught sight of the object of her impulsive pursuit as she emerged from the entrance to the museum. Mr. Welper was in the act of entering a taxi-cab in front of the *porte cochère*, and the next moment the taxi and Mr. Welper had started for parts unknown to her.

Outside the museum grounds on the street kerb stood several taxi-cabs. Miss Dirck ran along the paved way,

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past beds of winter-blighted flowers, hailed the chauffeur of the foremost vehicle, and pointed at the distant taxi containing Mr. Welper.

"It's absolutely necessary that I keep that taxi in sight!" she said breathlessly. "Please follow it wherever it goes."

"I getcha, lady!" said the chauffeur briskly. And the chase began.

Central Park West is a south-bound avenue. Welper's taxi swung south and the taxi containing Maddaleen Dirck did the same.

"Don't get too near, but don't lose that taxi!" she called anxiously to her driver.

"Getcha, miss," he nodded.

Half-way to Columbus Circle the girl missed her reticule. In a panic she rummaged her coat and the seat and floor of the cab, then seemed to recollect that she had left it in Mr. Whelan's office. A desperate expression came into her pallid face; she leaned close to the window and gazed at the taxi ahead. Her purse was in her reticule, and she hadn't a penny.

At Columbus Circle the traffic police stopped both vehicles; beyond, Mr. Welper's cab swung into Broadway, and hers followed.

Now her driver drew closer to the pursued taxi, because there were chances that some traffic policeman might arbitrarily separate goat from sheep.

However, Mr. Welper never turned round to peer back through the oval window behind his head. Probably he would not have remembered her or recognized her if he did. It was quite evident also that he had no fear of pursuit by anybody. She could see the sleek grey back of his head under a grey felt hat, and his plump shoulders,

Down town they drove close together, swerved into Seventh Avenue, continuing south, were halted at Forty-second Street, again at Thirty-fourth Street; turned east on that thoroughfare.

Welper's cab stopped at the Waldorf; Miss Dirck's

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halted behind. She said quietly to her driver: "Wait here, please."

No suspicions concerning her insolvency occurred to her driver. Her appearance, manner, voice placed her beyond any doubt.

Mr. Welper was just entering the Waldorf. Miss Dirck followed, without a cent in her possession.

On the Thirty-third Street side, near the news stand, a maid gave Welper a check for hat and coat. He dropped the check into the side pocket of his coat and turned to enter the breakfast-room. As he passed close to Miss Dirck in the crowd she slipped her left hand into his side pocket and drew out the coat check.

It was done in a flash. She never before had done such a thing—wouldn't have known how, had she hesitated. Scarcely realizing what she had done, she passed on through the little throng gathered before the maid, who was rapidly exchanging checks for hats and coats.

Had anybody seen her? She halted near the news stand, suddenly terrified. Not even daring to look round, she stood motionless, enduring all the agony of reaction, listening, trembling lest a hand fall upon her shoulder from behind.

With an effort she mastered her fright, strove to reflect, to consider.

Calm again. Somehow or other she must present that check to the maid, invent an excuse for claiming a man's overcoat, face the crisis coolly, plausibly. Because she had to have that paper if it were in his overcoat. And if he carried it on his person, then she must continue to follow him and somehow rob him. Heaven only knew how she was to accomplish this, how the affair might end.

And suddenly the end came, like a stroke of lightning, as a man stepped to her side, looked into her eyes, stood so in utter silence, looking at her.

She seemed paralysed with fear; she could not stir,

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could not command her quivering mouth or the scarlet flush that scorched her dreadful pallor.

"I saw what you did," he said in a low tone.

She stared at the man until his features blurred a little and she felt faint. Her evident distress under the sudden shock seemed to disconcert the man beside her.

"You seem to be a novice in this work," he said. "I don't wish to frighten you, but I have a word or two to say to you. Perhaps we had better find a seat."

He turned, waited; she found strength to move forward beside him. Down the corridor they moved until he found two gilded chairs together at some distance from any group. She sank down on one of them; he seated himself beside her.

"Why did you pick that man's pocket?" he asked pleasantly.

The girl remained mute.

"What did you take?"

Her black-gloved hand lay in her lap. She opened it, showing him the coat-check.

"That," remarked the man beside her, "is a new one on me. Do you think you can get away with it?"

"I——" She could not utter another sound.

"I suppose you meant to pass as his wife—say he'd gone to his room and wanted you to bring his coat?"

It was what Miss Dirck had thought of attempting, and her terrified eyes filled with tears.

"What is it you want out of that man's overcoat?" demanded her inquisitor.

"A—a paper."

"Oh! You're not a dip?"

"A—a what?"

There was a silence, during which the man beside her studied her intently.

"You're no crook," he said slowly.

"N-no."

"What is the paper you wish to find? Don't be afraid of me. Maybe I might help you."

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"Are you the—the hotel detective?"

"Come," he said, "don't ask questions. Answer me—and give me that coat check."

She handed it to him.

"What paper do you want out of that coat? Or shall I bring you everything in it?"

"D-do you mean——"

"Yes, I do. I can get away with it; you couldn't. Now describe the paper you are after."

"It—has figures—not numbers—but strange signs on it, I think."

"You don't mean hieroglyphics, do you?"

"Yes—Central American hieroglyphs."

"Oh! All right. Wait here for me."

He rose, sauntered down the corridor to the distant cloak-room, presented his check.

"I want to get something out of my overcoat," he said to the maid.

She glanced at his number, brought the coat, and the young man ransacked it thoroughly, but found only a pair of grey suede gloves and a neatly folded handkerchief.

"Thank you," he said, returning the coat, and he walked back to where Miss Dirck was seated.

"Nothing in the coat," he said. "Now what are you going to do?"

The girl made no reply, but her eyes now met his with less fear than perplexity in their dark blue depths.

He smiled at her in friendly fashion. "You're in trouble of some kind."

"Yes."

"Do you know who that man is whose pocket you picked so neatly?"

"No," she said, flushing painfully. "That is, I know his name only."

"So do I," smiled the man, seating himself beside her. "What do you suppose his name to be?"

"Mr. Welper."

"That's it. And what do you want of Mr. Welper?"

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"That—paper."

"Oh, the Central American hieroglyphs! Well, how do you mean to get that paper?"

The girl's mouth quivered. "If you will—will let me go—if you don't mind—I must try to follow him."

"Why?"

"I have got to know where he lives."

"I can tell you where he lives."

"Where?"

"He lives at his club."

"What club, please?"

The young man beside her laughed.

"It's called 'The Forty Thieves.'"

Miss Dirck stared.

"If you were a crook," said the young man, "you'd know the name of that club."

"What—what kind of club is it?"

"I'll tell you. It's a very quiet club. There are forty members—never more. Only when a member gets bumped can another be elected."

"B-bumped?" she repeated in perplexity.

"Well, when a member—dies. That man We'per is president. A Mr. Potter is secretary. There are no other officers. The dues are five thousand dollars a year and five thousand dollars initiation fee. When any member becomes worth a million dollars he must resign. It's an odd sort of club, isn't it?"

"Y-yes."

"Unique. Only forty members—and every member a crook. How do you expect to follow Mr. Welper into the Forty Club and pick his pockets?"

"I—don't know——"

"You don't mean you contemplate trying such a thing?"

"I—I must."

"But it can't be done."

"Somehow——"

"Utterly impossible."

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"I must have that paper."

The man beside her looked at her intently, then spoke to a passing page.

"Here, boy, take this check to the coat-room. Somebody has lost it." And he handed the check to the boy, who went smartly on his way.

To Miss Dirck the man said: "Welper might as well have his coat. No use to us, that check."

He had said "to us" with a smile, and he saw that the girl noticed it.

"I don't know why you want that paper," he said, "but I suppose Barney Welper has done you some crooked trick. Why don't you call in the police?"

"I *can't!*"

"Oh!" The young man's brown eyes fairly bored into hers.

"You don't care to ask for a warrant?"

"No."

"Couldn't you prove your charge?"

"Even if I could——"

"All right. I'm not inquisitive. Every family has its skeleton."

The girl turned crimson and gazed at him out of distressed eyes.

"You're not a good actress," he said bluntly.

She was silent.

"If you were," he said, "I'd take you to the Forty Club. I'm a member," he added blandly.

He saw pain turn to incredulity in her eyes.

"Yes," he said, "you mistook me for a dick, didn't you? Well, I'm a crook. You ain't. But if you're after Barney Welper, I wouldn't stop you. Not me."

From a cultivated vocabulary he was steadily slipping into vulgarisms, yet still spoke with the accent and manner of a man well born.

"Do you understand?" he went on, with his pleasant smile. "I could get you into the Forty Club if you were a crooked little girl, with that face and shape—

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and if you had the jack to stake yourself. But—you're good."

He sat very still, watching her; and she was stiller yet, listening, her eyes bent on the floor at her feet; and in her brain lightning—flash after flash of wild and desperate intuition. Only she must control the crisis, dominate it, take swift, instant command of her fate.

"That's the trouble," he repeated. "You're good. You *look* it. And"—he shrugged—"you're no actress." She looked up, laughing.

"That's where you get off, old dear," she said, with the devil glimmering in her blue eyes.

His astonishment was so genuine that the girl laughed again.

"Did it get over?" she inquired merrily.

"It—did," he said. She could scarcely sustain his intent gaze.

"See here," he said, "you're good, aren't you?"

"Not *too* good."

"Oh! What's your line?"

"Oh, I—don't know."

"All right. You made a monk of me, didn't you? Is that straight—your being a professional?"

"Professional?"

He was completely taken aback and puzzled.

"I admit you're an actress," he said. "You've done two turns. Which is really *you*!"

She looked at him for a little while, her cheeks flushed with the terrific excitement of it all, her eyes lovely and brilliant.

"Are you really a crook?" she asked gaily.

"I told you."

"All right," she said. "I've come a thousand miles to get that paper. I want to know what's written on it. An hour ago I thought I was going to find out. I didn't." She turned and looked towards the breakfast-room. "The man's in there," she said. "That paper is in his pocket. I want it. Will you help me get it?"

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He smiled. "How?"

"You've just told me. Take me to that club."

"I told you only forty people could belong."

"But you said you'd take me if I were an actress."

"Yes, I said so. I *can*, because the bulls bumped a member last night. There are only thirty-nine. Have you ten thousand dollars, little lady?"

"Yes."

"What do you mean to do? Stick up your man? Vamp and creep? Dope and frisk? What are you staging?"

She regarded him with contemplative eyes, almost absently. Under her dress her heart was racing, almost suffocating her.

"I don't know how it's to be done," she said. "But it's got to be done."

He remained silent.

"You'll want to be paid, of course?" she added.

He nodded.

"How much?" she asked.

"Do we work together, little lady?"

"Yes, I'd be very glad."

"Dals?"

"Yes. You mean like sister and brother?"

"All right, that way—if you don't fall for my map. I flop for yours."

"M-map?"

"Face," he said coolly, watching her vivid blush deepen from hair to throat.

After a moment: "I asked you," he said, "which is *you*—a troubled young girl in mourning, who seemed scared out of her wits, or the cleverest actress I've ever met?"

"Which do you think?"

"If you're an actress, you're new to the crooked game."

"Why?"

"You don't talk the patter. You don't seem to under-

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stand it. You've got me guessing, anyway. I admit it. What are you? Which? You can tell me. I'll work with you, anyway."

"Keep guessing," she said, with a little smile, tremulous from the strain of excitement.

His thoughtful eyes never left hers. He nodded after a moment.

"You promise to take me to the Forty Club?" she asked.

"Yes."

"When?"

"Whenever you are ready."

She reflected and decided not to leave him even for an instant.

"I've got to go up town. I left my money. You must come," she said.

He rose. They went out by the Thirty-fourth Street side.

Her taxi driver, who had become anxious, welcomed her. She directed him to drive to the museum.

And even there she insisted that the young man accompany her to the outer office of Mr. Whelan.

That young gentleman had just returned from luncheon, and she was admitted.

"I expected you'd return," he said. "And, by the way, when I put your handkerchief into your reticule, a rather large pistol fell out."

"Thanks so much," she said, reddening. "Please forgive my abrupt behaviour. I didn't mean to be rude. But something so very important happened so very suddenly."

Whelan looked at her. "Aren't you coming back?" he inquired naïvely.

"I hope so. Tell me, Mr. Whelan, did you read those hieroglyphics for the gentleman who came in while I was here?"

"I did. It was utter nonsense."

"Would it be impertinent of me to ask you to tell me what was written on that paper?"

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"No; but, as the matter was confidential, it would be unethical of me to tell you, even if I could recollect."

"Please try to recollect the inscription!"

"The inscription was not Maya; it was a fraud perpetrated by somebody who——"

"That doesn't matter. Can't you remember it?"

"No; it was sheer nonsense, and I told Mr. What's-his-name so. I can't remember nonsense. I never could!"

The girl came close to his desk, where he was standing.

"Try to recollect," she said in a low voice. "It may be a matter of life or death."

"Good heavens!" he said. "All I recollect of it was something about a ship—a shipwreck—and an island——" He stood staring at her, both hands pressing his temples:

"A shipwreck near some island. . . . And some measurements. . . . That's all I recall of that ridiculous trash——"

She gazed at him in tragic silence. Then her lips moved a silent "Thank you"; she turned and walked to the outer office, where the young man from the Waldorf awaited her.

They went together into the body of the great museum, down the iron stairs, slowly, from floor to floor.

"Will a cheque be all right to pay for my initiation, and dues, at the Forty Club?" she asked in a low voice.

He smiled incredulously: "You're too clever to do that, or to think Welper would cash it."

She saw then that she mustn't offer a cheque.

"Very well," she said, "we'll drive to my bank."

On the way down town every few moments he looked at her, partly in admiration, partly in perplexity, and in swift moments of suspicion, too.

What was this girl? He hadn't decided. All he understood was that, as an actress, she was matchless in his experience.

Never before had he seen any professional so exquisitely interpret unsullied youth—that delicate and vir-

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ginal allure which to him had seemed inimitable, and never to be mistaken.

But, that suddenly lifted head; that laughter, charming, defiant, subtly sophisticated; and, to his query if she were not "good," her demure, "not too good," well, that was art. . . . Yet, somehow, he seemed unable to divorce her art and herself.

They stopped at the Imperial Loan and Trust Company; he descended and offered his arm. She remained in the bank about ten minutes. He paced the side-walk by the taxi, smoking a cigarette. When she reappeared she came to him and drew him a little aside.

"I want to be honest with you," she said. "I don't know that there ever will be anything to divide between us when I secure that paper from Mr. Welper. Suppose I pay you now what you think you should have for helping me?"

"No; I'll take a chance."

"Don't you need some money?"

The young man reddened, and it seemed to annoy him.

"I'll look out for myself," he said bluntly. "Where do you want to go now?"

"I've had no lunch."

"You can lunch at the Forty Club with me."

The girl trembled slightly, then quickly mastered herself and nodded with composure.

"Very well," she said. "Please tell the driver where to go."

They returned to the taxi; he aided her in, spoke to the driver, and followed her.

"Will I be in any—danger?" she asked calmly.

"None—unless you ever squeal."

"I understand. . . . They'll take me for—for granted."

"The Forty Club is like any other club, except that wine and cards are forbidden. We don't risk a row. There's no betting, no drinking allowed. No quarrelling either. Any infraction of rules means expulsion. And

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if you're expelled you usually are found dead in a day or two."

"Dead?"

"Yes, somewhere or other—in the river, in the park, in a taxi——" he shrugged.

She sat silent, gazing out at the crowded traffic on Fifth Avenue.

He went on in his low, agreeable voice: "Only a genius in her or his own line ever cares, or dares, to join the Forty Club. The members are there for one purpose only—to make a million as quickly as possible, and resign."

"What is the use of the club to them?"

"Its uses are infinite. Every facility is there to help you. Through the secret influences of the Forty Club you can go anywhere, meet anybody whom you need in your—ah—operations.

"All your operations are covered, too. It's your own fault if you're caught with the goods on or if you're bumped. If you do get into trouble there's bail, counsel, money for defence, influence for judge, jury, and pressure in legislative circles. You get the best of opportunities; you ought to make your million and get away with it in five years. Many do it in three; some in two; some in a year."

She turned her pale face: "And you?"

"You are inquisitive," he said, smiling.

She coloured: "I'm sorry. You don't look like—like——"

"A crook?"

"No."

"You don't either. And that's the kind that does the business. It's our kind you'll find at the Forty Club. Not a mouth that would melt butter."

He was laughing.

"Take Welper. He's a sanctimonious guy to look at, but when you frisk him, for Heaven's sake, make your getaway. He's bad."

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"Yes, I thought so."

"You take it coolly."

"I have to."

He smiled: "You are a sport, Miss——"

"Miss Dirck—Maddaleen."

"That's a good name," he said gaily. "Dirck or Dagger—a perfectly good name for the Forty Club. Some wear their hearts on their sleeves; some carry their names in their garters. . . . Maddaleen Dirck—that's a first-rate name."

"And yours?"

"Oh, nothing suggestive or subtle. My name is John Lanier."

"John Lanier," she repeated aloud to herself.

"You see," he said, "what goes in the underworld doesn't go with us in the Forty Club. We *look* all right; we seem all right; we know how to behave, and we do it. None of us care to live in the underworld. We're merely out for a million and don't care how we get it. And, when we get it, back to the fold for us—*inside* the law, Miss Dirck—that's our aim and ambition—the legit!"

She nodded.

"Interesting, isn't it?"

"Very."

"You expect to make your million?" he asked, smiling.

"All I want is that paper."

"Sorry," he said, flushing; "none of my business, of course. Your line is your secret unless you care to mention it."

"I have no other line, Mr. Lanier."

"You *are* an actress, aren't you?"

"I hope so."

After a moment: "Suppose," he said, "Barney Welper catches you at your little game, do you know he is quite certain to kill you?"

After a slight hesitation, Maddaleen Dirck leaned a little towards him and opened the reticule on her lap.

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Her pistol lay there beside handkerchief, purse and vanity case.

"So that's your answer, Miss Dirck?" he asked, placing one finger on the pistol.

"Yes," she said in a low voice, "that is my answer."

She closed the reticule. The taxi stopped at the same moment.

Lanier said coolly: "You've lived in Paris?"

"Yes. Why?"

"So have I. Don't blush when I tell them that we've lived there together."

"Need you say that?"

"Yes. We lived very quietly in the *rue d'Alençon, numero neuf. Y'êtes vous, mademoiselle.*"

"*Parfaitement, monsieur, si vous le trouvez nécessaire—*"

"Listen! We operated in the Opera quarter, and sometimes in the observatory and Luxembourg quarters. You know them?"

"I did—as a schoolgirl——"

"Then *that's* all right." He got out of the taxi, aided her.

She had her purse ready, but he insisted.

"You don't realize how much I owe our driver," she said with a nervous smile.

He looked at the metre, laughed, paid the fare. The taxi drove off.

"Now," he said, "here's The Forty Thieves. The moment I take you inside that door you're on your own."

She nodded.

"Have you ten thousand dollars in that reticule?"

"Yes, ten thousand-dollar bills."

"Very well," he said calmly, "—