The Mystery of the Summer House

CHAPTER XIII.

Sergeant Crisp "Reconstructs."

THAT particular phase of our ordeal was over, but I do not suppose it is possible, in the short span of a human life, for all that such an ordeal must imply, to be left behind. For the moment the most outrageous interference with the privacy which grief specially demands was at an end.

Of course, all the eyes and morbid curiosity of the public, for which the different newspapers catered, each in its particular manner, was enormously increased by the entry of Captain Vibart's figure on the stage. It introduced just that element of "wife's friend" which domestic drama and tragedy seem to require, but by sedulously avoiding all reading of the newspapers one could escape this added horror.

In spite of the most careful avoidance, however, one had to meet now and again some headline such as "The Mystery of the Summer-house," for that was the favorite form of the title which our misery had assumed in people's talk and in the journalists' writings.

Search for the knife with which the wound had been inflicted was being begun in a systematic manner which would leave its mark for many a long day in the shrubbery. The grass was scythed down and the low and bushy parts of the shrubs cut away for a considerable area in the neighborhood of the Summer-house—all under the direction of the police. I avoided that part of the grounds most carefully, but knew all that was going on there.

The only time that I went outside the grounds for several days after the inquest was on the Wednesday when we buried the body of my young aunt in the presence of an immense number of people of whom I do not suppose that as many as one-tenth would have been there to pay her respect had her death happened in any ordinary way. Two of her brothers came down for the funeral, but I am thankful to say that they did not stay in the house. I do not know how Uncle Ralph could have borne it if they had.

He was in a very curious state all these days, absolutely unlike his normal self. He had summoned me into the library soon after the inquest and had said:

"Now, please understand—I do not want to talk about all this. I want everything connected with it to be mentioned as little as possible between us. I want to ask you to make all arrangements about everything as far as possible without consulting me at all about them. I shall be satisfied with everything that you may arrange, or if I am not I will let you know, but I would much rather that you would do all without referring to me about it. I want to put it away from me as much as I can."

He said it in a hard, rather a bitter voice, just as unlike as could be his usual kindly tones. His look was fixed and firm and hard, too. He seemed quite changed. But, then, when he had said this almost as if he were repeating a lesson which he had taught himself to say, he added, in a much more kindly way, "Please do not think that I do not realize that I am asking a great deal of you in asking you this—am putting a good deal on you. I do realize it, and I shall be ever so grateful to you if you will do it. You do not know what a lot you will be sparing me."

This was a very long speech for Uncle Ralph, who was no great talker, and it was a great unfolding of himself, too, for he was not at all good at explaining himself or his actions even to himself. I knew the effort it must be to him, and so appreciated it the more and, of course, promised to do all I could for him so far as it was in my power. After all, it was only a little extension of what I had always done in the old times before Aunt Enid had made her appearance, and even in a large degree since.

It was a few days after Uncle Ralph had made this request to me that Grainger told me that Sergeant Crisp would like to see me. I had seen him once or twice about the grounds and in the house since the inquest — instructions had been given to the servants that he should be allowed to come and go where and as he liked—but I had not spoken to him.

We lived, during those days, under police surveillance, as it were. It was almost as if the place were not ours, but the Government's, and we were more or less prisoners or interned lunatics, allowed a modified and limited share of liberty in it. Police officers in uniform and others who had "policeman" written conspicuously in their bearing and general aspect, though they were not encased in blue cloth and brass buttons, appeared at the most unexpected corners and times. It was like living in a state of siege.

I had a sitting-room of my own, where I did the household accounts and to which I could retire out of range of boredom—that is, boredom by anybody except myself. I was there when Grainger told me that the sergeant had called, so I gave orders that he should come in. It was the room in which I had first seen the little man.

"Sergeant Crisp looked at me keenly enough—his glance could not be other than keen—but it was with a kindly keeness, as I thought."

I held out my hand to him as he came in, and I think that he was particularly pleased to be greeted in this manner, though one could scarcely do less to a man whose arm had been round one's waist, as his had been about mine when he supported me as I was going to faint at the inquest. I had learned by this time that he was very amenable to any treatment which seemed as if one regarded him as a human being and not as a mere crime-detecting machine.

He looked at me keenly enough—his glance could not be other than keen—but it was with a kindly keenness, as I thought, quite different from the steely hard gaze that had seemed to pierce me through when he was catechizing me at our first meeting. He began by saying something conventional about hoping I was better after my fainting attack.

I replied by thanking him for his help on the occasion, and that put us on good terms at once.

"It is possible," he said, "that I may have to ask you for a good deal of help in return."

I said that I should be very glad to give it him if he would explain in what way.

"Well," he said, "it is like this. Of course, my object in being here, almost the object of my existence, I may say"—he added this with a little smile—"is to find out the truth—the truth about this case and others like it. And it is almost impossible to find out the truth without some help from those who are nearest to it."

"Certainly," I said, "I will do all in my power to help you to the truth, but"——

I was going to say, "But I hardly can see of what help I can be," when he interrupted with something like the old metallic piercing look coming back into his eyes. "Yes, I believe that you will—now."

He said that "now" with just so much emphasis that it was impossible to let it go by without a challenge.

"What do you mean by 'now'?" I asked.

"Oh," he replied, "if you are going to ask me that, if you are not going to be candid enough to tell me that you know quite well what the meaning of that 'now' is—well, it is hardly worth while my asking your help. It is equivalent to refusing."

"Yes," I said, "yes." I quite knew, as he said, what he meant. He meant that when he was talking in that room before I was not, as a matter of fact, giving him every possible help. I was keeping something back from him all the while. It was quite true.

The little man was acute at guessing about what was going on in one's mind. As I hesitated a moment before replying, he went on: "Now, I'll help you to make up your mind to be candid with me by telling you how much I know already. I know that you had, at the back of your mind all the while that you were talking with me in this room before, something which you would not tell me. You kept back something. It was something which seemed to point suspicion at someone whom you are very fond of. Tell me, is not that a correct guess?"

"It is. But since you know so much"——

"Since I know so much it can surely do no harm to tell me more, to tell me all—especially since the doctor's evidence has proved that suspicion to be groundless—is it not so?"

"Yes, certainly, that is so," I admitted, "and I think I will tell you everything quite frankly. But do you tell me this first—how did you find out, I will not say that I was keeping something back—you may have conjectured that from my manner—but how did you find out that what I was keeping back pointed to a suspicion which the doctor's evidence dispelled?"

"My dear Miss Carlton," he answered, "surely that is most obvious. It was just this—the doctor's evidence—which caused you so much emotion. That could not have been so unless you had that suspicion. And you could not have had that suspicion unless you had some evidence, apparently pointing toward it, which you had kept back from me. The inferences, you see, are very simple."

"Simple, yes; if that is simplicity," I assented, "and now I really will tell you all."

The "all" that I had to tell him was very little, and it was quickly told, though it had meant a great deal to me; it was just the vision which I believed myself to have had of Uncle Ralph crossing the gravel front and going to the shrubbery plant.

I had noticed that it very often happened with Sergeant Crisp that giving him any information resulted in his asking some quite unexpected question. So now, when he had nodded his head once or twice in the course of my brief narrative, to show that he was following its points, he asked me:

"Had he an overcoat on?"

I paused a moment to think and then, rather to my shame, found myself obliged to reply, "Really, do you know—I'm not quite sure."

"No," he said, as if my answer was just what he had expected. "And a hat?"

Again I had to think, and again I was quite confused and surprised to discover that I did not know, that I had no clear vision in my mind, that I could not recall in any detail the figure that I had seen. It was but the general impression of Uncle Ralph crossing the gravel that I had retained. I did not know what the detective would think of my value as a witness.

Luckily he understood the psychology of the case far better than I did. "It is perfectly absurd," I had said. "I don't know what you will think of me, but, honestly, I cannot tell you whether he had a hat on or not."

But he answered, "Oh, no, it is not in the least absurd, and, really, I should have been rather surprised if you had been able to tell me. It would have been very absurd if anyone trained as we are in our profession had not been able to tell me, but I had not expected it of you or of any untrained person. It is all one with the old story of the person who is not accustomed to observing things for the purpose of drawing them being asked about a hansom cab—where the driving seat goes, how the shafts and the wheels are attached and so on. He has seen the whole thing ten thousand times, but the attention which would tell him these details has never been applied. It is all in that—the attention."

"Thanks," I said with a laugh, "for making such a fine excuse for what I must regard as my stupidity. But now, will you tell me, why it is that you asked me these questions? Surely it was not only to prove to me how stupid I was?"

"It is not a question of stupidity, at all, Miss Carlton," he replied, as, in duty bound, and then he was intent a moment or two, going to the window and looking out, as if communing with himself. When he came back he answered me—he had made up his mind.

"Yes, I will tell you," he said. "You have been candid with me and I will be candid with you, as you deserve that I should be. And, for another thing, I want a helper in this house. I want all the help I can get. And Sir Ralph doesn't seem able or willing to give it to me. I can understand that it is all too painful for him—he cannot bear to speak about it. Of course, there is the maid, the Frenchwoman, Mademoiselle Celeste, but"——

He left me to finish his meaning about Celeste, and it was not difficult. He meant that something more than a lack of attention was wanting to make her information of high value. I was in two minds whether to send her away immediately, paying her a month's wages in advance. I should have been glad to be quit of her out of the house. But it was Sergeant Crisp himself, when I consulted him on the subject, who begged me to keep her for a while. "It is quite possible that we may get the truth from her far more often than she intends to tell it to us," he said. "I want to have her where I can lay my hands on her."

It was easy to pretend that she was of use in arranging poor Aunt Enid's things and so on. There was enough to keep her more or less busy for a week or so, and I kept her on.

"But now," I said to the sergeant, "candor for candor—what are you going to tell me?"

"You have told me," he said, "what it was that gave rise in your mind to a very terrible suspicion. I am going to tell you now what it was that gave rise in mine to precisely the same suspicion—though the evidence was quite different. I will tell you that first, and after that, if it will interest you at all, I will tell you what my theory is as to the real meaning of those pieces of evidence which misled both you and me. And when I have told you that, then you will see the meaning of those questions which you were not able to answer about the coat and hat."

"That all sounds thrillingly interesting," I said, and I settled myself with great eagerness to hear what he had to say.

The first thing that he had to tell me—the first piece of evidence which had directed his suspicions toward Uncle Ralph—was that impress of the shoe outside the Summer-house window. And, as he told it me, that did indeed seem a witness of the most extraordinary directness and force. And then, after that, he told me of the statements of Celeste and of Heasden about actually seeing Uncle Ralph coming away from the Summer-house, and of Heasden going and looking through the window afterward, and all the rest of it just as related already.

"But, of course," I exclaimed, when he had carried the story thus far, "of course you had to believe that it was Uncle Ralph. You must have been certain that it was he, especially as you had not been able to find the doctor and hear his evidence. But even now—I don't see—I don't understand—why was it that uncle said that he did not go out that evening? What object could he have had in saying so? That is what I can't understand."

"Shall I tell you why I think it was, Miss Carlton?" he asked.

"I very much wish you would," was my reply.

"In my opinion," the little man said firmly and decisively, "the reason why your uncle said that he did not go out that night before he was summoned by the keeper is this, solely and simply—that he did not go out."

"But," I exclaimed, greatly taken aback, "but I saw him—and you yourself saw his footprint—you say you measured it—and Celeste saw him and Heasden saw him! What can you mean—did not go out that night?"

The sergeant gave a little cackle of his dry laughter.

"Well," he said, "these are just the points—you have noted them off very clearly—that we have to examine. Did you actually see him? Did I find his footprint? Did Mademoiselle Celeste and Heasden see him? We will take the first, in its order, first—the evidence of your own eyes. I hope you will forgive me, but I asked you those questions about the coat and hat just to make you sure what it was that you really did see when you looked from the window that night. It is now evident—is it not?—that what you did see was just a figure of which you had the general impression that it was the figure of your uncle, of Sir Ralph? That is a correct statement of your impression, is it not?"

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