

**THE
CLEVEDON
:: CASE ::**

BY
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CHAPTER I

A MIDNIGHT VISITOR

I BECAME mixed up with the Clevedon case—the Cartordale Mystery, as it has been called—in curious fashion. True, it was to some extent in my line of business, though I do not actually earn my living by straightening out tangles. With me it is all a matter of “copy.”

You may or may not have read my various books—there are eight of them now—on criminology. Their preparation has led me into all sorts of queer by-ways and has given me a curiously clear and analytical insight into the mind of the criminal. I have solved many mysteries—you will forgive the apparent boastfulness, but I have no useful Watson to detail my exploits—but I stop there, with solving them, I mean. When I know the answer, I hand the whole matter over to the police. “There is your man (or woman)—take him,” I say. And sometimes they do take him—and hang him. But occasionally they reply, “But we can’t take him—we couldn’t prove it against him.” That, however, is no business of mine. I am a scientist, not a police official, and have nothing to do with the foolery of their law courts or the flummery of what they call their rules of evidence.

I have supplied the answer to the conundrum and that suffices me. The mystery and its solution go into my notebooks, to be used eventually for my own purpose, it may be to illustrate a theory, or perhaps to demonstrate a scientific fact. I have no desire to pose and no intention of posing as a worker of miracles.

There is nothing marvellous about my methods nor wonderful in the results. I do but proceed from fact to fact, as you will see in this narrative, wherein I have set forth exactly what happened, however foolish it may make me look. The reader will accompany me step by step in my investigation of the Clevedon mystery and will learn precisely how the solution, which so bewildered and astonished the little group in Cartordale, came to me. You will see me groping in the dark, then you will discover, as I did, a pin-point of light which grows wider and wider until the whole story stands revealed. And if you guess the solution before I did, that will show that you are a cleverer detective than I am, which may very easily be.

I did not, by the way, go to Cartordale for the purpose of investigating this particular mystery. I became involved in it almost involuntarily. It was a queerly tangled skein enough, and that of itself would have been sufficient fascination to drag me into it, though I was deep in it long before any intention or even desire to solve the puzzle manifested itself. As a rule I carefully select my cases. Some appeal to me, others do not. But in this instance I was not entirely a free agent. I was in it before I quite knew where I was going. That being so, it may be interesting to explain how I came to be at Cartordale at all.

My Aunt Emily, to put it briefly, left me the house and the money that took me into the wilds of Peakshire. I had never met her in the flesh, and she, as far as I know, had never set eyes on me. In point of fact, she never forgave my father for taking to himself a second wife after my mother died. But that is family history and dry stuff. Aunt Emily made amends for past neglect by her will. She left me about eight hundred a year from investments, and the house at Cartordale, both very useful, though I was not exactly a poor man.

My books have provided me with a fairly steady income for some years.

Stone Hollow, the house I had inherited, was a square, rather gloomy-looking building—outwardly sombre, at all events—situated at the head of Cartordale, a wild and romantic valley in the heart of Peakshire, some sixteen miles from the large industrial city of Midlington. The name, Stone Hollow, had a comparatively recent derivation, arising from the fact that the house was built on the site of, and largely on the profits from, a now disused stone quarry.

The house itself stood on a sort of broad shelf, and behind it a tall hill sprang almost perpendicularly upwards, still showing on its face the marks and scars of former quarrying operations, though Nature was already busy trying to hide the evidences of man's vandalism behind a cover of green and brown. Before the house, the ground sloped gently downwards towards the Dale, while to the left was a stretch of heather clad moorland lying between Stone Hollow and White Towers, the residence of Sir Philip Clevedon.

It sounds rather well in description, but I will frankly confess that after a very few days at Cartordale I was bored. Though I had travelled widely, I had never actually lived out of London and was always very quickly eager to be back there. At first, I had done my best to persuade myself that a country life was really the ideal and that it would provide me with quiet and isolation that would be useful for literary work. But I soon arrived at the limit of my resources in self-deception. Which brings me to the night of February 23rd.

I was lolling on the couch in the room I had made my study, pretending to work and succeeding very badly.

“Nothing ever happens in a place like this,” I said aloud, with a yawn. “I should become a hopeless vegetable if I lived here. I couldn’t even write another book. There isn’t a chapter in the whole blessed place. Neither robbery nor murder ever happens. The folk wouldn’t know the meaning of the words without looking them up in a dictionary. Honesty is the badge of all their tribe, and honesty, if commendable, is dull.”

I took up a batch of manuscript from the desk at my elbow and began to read in rather desultory fashion, making a correction here and there with a pencil.

“Another delusion shattered,” I murmured. “They say one can write so much better in the quiet of the country than amid the bustle and distractions of town. That is bunkum. This one can’t, anyway. I thought I would have made a good start with this book, but I have done next to nothing, and what there is of it is rotten. I could do more work in a week in London than I shall do in three months of this. I think I’ll be getting back next week.”

But I was wrong in saying that nothing ever happened in Cartordale. Adventure was even at that moment coming towards me with very hurried footsteps.

The time—it is essential always to be precise in details—was fifty-three minutes past eleven, and the date February 23rd.

It came, the beginning of the story, with a quick, almost peremptory tapping on the window-pane and then the bottom sash was slowly pushed up. I turned to the desk and took a revolver

from one of the small drawers, then strode across the room and raised the blind with a quick rattle, half expecting that my visitor would reveal himself in the shape of a burglar. What I saw brought even me to a standstill, little susceptible as I am to surprises of any sort.

My visitor was not a burglar—at least, not a male of that species—but a girl, who looked young enough to be in her teens, though she may have been a year or two outside them, and a great deal too pretty to be wandering about alone at that time of night. She was wearing a long, sleeveless cloak and a grey, woollen cap, from beneath which part of her hair had escaped and was blowing about her face in little wisps of bronze-gold cloud.

“Let me in,” she whispered. “Please—I have hurt myself and I am afraid to go on.”

I stretched out my hands and, placing them beneath her arms, lifted her over the low window-sill and into the room.

“How strong you are,” she murmured.

But even as she said that, the something that had kept her up gave way and she lay a limp, dead weight in my clasp. I carried her to the couch, but as I placed her down and began to unfasten the long, grey cloak, I noticed that the sleeve of her white blouse was stained with blood. That was evidently the hurt to which she had referred; and I began to wonder whether I had not better summon my housekeeper. It looked essentially a case for feminine aid. The girl, however, was already recovering.

“No, come here,” she said, as I began to move towards the door.

I returned to her side and gently lifted her arm.

“Yes, you have hurt yourself,” I remarked. “See—your arm, isn’t it?—there is blood—”

“Yes, it’s my arm,” she replied, lifting her cloak and showing a ragged tear in the blouse on the under-side of the sleeve. “It’s not very bad—I think—but it seems to be bleeding a good deal, and I—I am afraid of blood.”

“May I look at it?” I asked. “I could perhaps bandage it, and—”

“Are you a doctor—how nice!” she cried.

“No,” I replied with a smile, “I am not a doctor. But I am a first-aid expert, enough of one, anyway, to say whether or not a doctor is necessary. Yes, I have treated much bigger injuries than this. It is only a scratch, I fancy, and the blood looks more than it really is. A very little blood makes a mess of things. Lie still a minute. I have everything here within reach and we’ll soon put you right.”

I brought a pair of scissors and cut away the sleeve, finding the arm beneath it—the left arm, by the way—rather badly gashed.

“To-morrow you must show that to a doctor,” I said when I had washed and bandaged it. “Now I will give you a glass of wine and—”

“Is there anyone but you in the house?” the girl asked abruptly, as if some thought had suddenly occurred to her.

“There is my housekeeper,” I said, “and a maid. Shall I rouse them and—?”

“Mercy, no!” she exclaimed. “Whatever would they say if they found me here—at this time of night—?”

I nodded, quite comprehending the hint so conveyed.

“I have been visiting a friend,” she went on, observing me keenly through her drooping eyelashes, perhaps to see how I took the story, “and I—I lost my way.”

“Your friends should not have allowed you to attempt to find it by yourself,” I returned.

“My friends are not plural,” she retorted with a little trill of laughter. “They—or rather she—she is a maiden lady—and I am not in the least bit nervous. I am a country girl by birth and upbringing, and the darkness means nothing to me. It is the fog that worries me. I stayed later than I should have done, and in my hurry to get back I lost my way. Then I saw the light in your window and I came, meaning to ask where I was. I had to climb over a wall, and in doing that I cut my arm on some glass. I think it is very stupid to put glass on walls—”

“It shall be knocked off to-morrow,” I interrupted.

“Oh, it doesn’t matter,” the girl said demurely. “I am not likely to come this way again. But do you know Cartordale?”

“Well, know is hardly the word. I am afraid I don’t very well. I have only been here a short time,” I answered. “I know very few people. I have never seen you before, for example.”

That was a leading question very thinly disguised, but she did not rise to it.

“I am afraid,” I went on, “it would be but another instance of the blind leading the blind if I attempted to guide you about the Dale. I will do my best if you will tell me where you live, unless, indeed,

you would prefer to stay here until morning. The place is at your service and I could very easily waken the—”

But my visitor’s negative gesture was very decided.

“What house is this?” she demanded.

“It is called Stone Hollow,” I told her.

“Oh, I know Stone Hollow,” she cried. “It was Mrs.—Mrs.—a lady with a curious name, but I have forgotten it.”

“Mrs. Mackaluce,” I volunteered. “She was my aunt.”

“Yes, that was the name, I remember now. I have been here before, but never by the—the back window. If you can put me on the roadway outside Stone Hollow I shall know where I am.”

“I can take you home, at all events, if you can show me the way,” I said.

The girl looked at me for a moment or two doubtfully as if that were not quite what she had intended.

“It is not right that you should be out alone at this time of the night,” I added.

“Oh, right and wrong are merely terms,” she replied, rising to her feet. “There is no law against being out at night. It isn’t forbidden in the Defence of the Realm Act, is it? If I like to be out at night it is right I should be.”

“I was thinking of the danger, not of the law,” I responded dryly.

“Why, whatever danger can there be?” the girl cried, opening wide her pretty eyes. “There are no highway robbers in Cartordale, nor any Germans.”

But I did not argue with her. I simply handed her the woollen cap which had fallen off when she fainted, then helped her to fasten the cloak around her, and finally led her into the hall, picking up my own hat and coat as I went. I was fully determined on seeing her to her own home, wherever that might be and whatever her objections. I opened the door noiselessly and closed it again with the merest click of the lock.

“It is very dark,” I muttered, being a man of the town and used to gas-lamps.

“Yes, it often is at midnight,” the girl replied demurely, but with a little catch in her voice as if she were choking back a laugh. “But I can see very well. Those who are country-born have eyes in their feet, you know, and never miss the path. Why, there are men of the Dale, and women too, for that matter, who will walk across the moors at dark and never miss the path for all it is no more than three feet wide.”

“But you have lost your way once already to-night,” I murmured.

“That doesn’t affect the question,” she retorted scornfully. “It was only because I was trying a short cut. I left the path of my own accord. If I had kept to the road I should have been home by now. The longest way round is the quickest way home. Is that a proverb? It sounds like one. If it isn’t it should be. It is true, anyway. Besides, it is foggy. That makes a difference. Give me your hand.”

Apparently she did see better than I, for the next minute I felt the grip of her slender fingers as she seized mine and began to pull me forward. We went swiftly and in silence, still hand in hand, for some minutes, then her clasp loosened.

For a moment or two the shadow of her lingered beside me, then suddenly disappeared into the fog. We had reached a part of the Dale that was flanked on one side by a wall of rock which deepened even the blackness of the night and made the darkness, to me, at all events, absolutely impenetrable. There was no sign of light or house, nor indeed of any building, and when I groped my way to the side of the road, I stumbled, first into a ditch and then against a low rubble wall, beyond which was only fog much thicker now than it had been earlier in the evening.

And it was there I lost her. How she went, or in which direction, I had no idea. But I had no doubt that she had evaded me of design—and that her home was nowhere thereabout. That she knew the Dale intimately was evident. She had deliberately led me to its darkest spot simply that she might there lose me. I smiled grimly as I realised that. She had fooled me with incomparable skill and wit. I paid a frank mental tribute to her cleverness. A young lady of brains, this, and one whose acquaintance was well worth cultivating.

I stood waiting for some little time—possibly ten minutes or a quarter of an hour—then lit a cigarette and walked slowly back to Stone Hollow, pondering over the queer little adventure, wondering who the girl was and whether—or rather when—I should see her again. She was evidently an inhabitant of the Dale—her familiarity with it at all events suggested that—in which case she could hardly expect to evade me permanently. I must

sooner or later meet and recognise her. At any rate it was a piquant little mystery, and I must confess that somehow Cartordale no longer seemed quite so dull as it had been.

I had little idea then as to what the mystery, in which I had thus become involved, really was or how quickly it would develop on tragic and very unexpected lines.

I reached Stone Hollow again at 2.7 a.m. The whole episode, from the knock on the window to my return home had occupied two hours fourteen minutes.

CHAPTER II

THE TRAGEDY AT WHITE TOWERS

WHEN I came down to Stone Hollow to take over my new inheritance, I found the house completely furnished on extremely comfortable if rather old-fashioned lines; and Martha Helter in possession. She had been my aunt's housekeeper for over twenty years and had evidently every intention of being mine also. I was quite agreeable, since it saved me a lot of trouble, nor have I so far seen any reason to regret that decision.

Mrs. Helter—the title had apparently been accorded her by courtesy, since she was still a spinster and everybody but myself used it; but I began with Martha, her Christian name, and Martha it is to this day—is a most capable manager and runs my household with a precision that reminds one of well-oiled wheels, and a careful economy that has its recommendation in these days of ridiculous prices. She seemed to know and to be known by almost everybody in the Dale, and was an all but exhaustless fountain of anecdote and news.

I say "all but" because she could not give me immediately the information I sought regarding my pretty midnight visitor. Not that I attached very much actual importance to that queer incident. It had amused me, and perhaps, though I would not confess it even to myself, I was just a little piqued at being so cleverly outwitted by a mere girl. I had cause during the day to revise my estimate of the

interest I was to take in my uninvited guest. But my first thought was to identify her.

“Martha,” I said to my housekeeper, “did you ever meet hereabouts a young lady wearing a grey woollen cap and a long cloak without sleeves, a sort of cape reaching to her boots?”

Martha Helter pondered the question for a minute or two, but shook her head.

“I don’t think I have ever seen a cloak like that in Cartordale,” she replied.

“I saw one yesterday,” I said, “and I wondered who the wearer was. Never mind, perhaps I shall see her—I mean it—again. It was the pattern of the cloak that took my fancy.”

I am not quite sure why I added that last phrase, though if Martha noticed anything she kept a perfectly straight face.

“A grey woollen cap and a long cloak without sleeves?” said the little maid who entered the room at that moment and to whom the housekeeper propounded the question. “Why, yes’m, that’s Miss Kitty Clevedon—lives with her ladyship, you know. There are two gentlemen to see the master,” she added.

“Bring them in,” I said. “Who are they? Do you know them?”

“One of them is Sergeant Gamley, of the County Police,” Susan replied, “but the other is a stranger and did not give his name.”

“Bring them in,” I repeated.

Sergeant Gamley was in uniform, a tall, thin man with a long hatchet face and an air of important solemnity which he never shed.

His companion was rather more rotund in build, with puffy red cheeks above which peered small, keen eyes that did not seem to linger long on anything, but which for all that missed nothing. Abraham Pepster was chief of the detective force at Peakborough, the county town, and one may judge to some extent his prevailing characteristic by the fact that his nickname among disrespectful subordinates was “Gimlet-eyes.” It was, however, Sergeant Gamley who opened the conversation on this particular occasion.

“We have called, Mr. Holt,” he said, “with regard to the tragedy at White Towers. Sir Philip Clevedon—”

“A tragedy—of what nature?” I interrupted. “I have heard nothing of it. There is nothing in the papers about it, is there? Or have I missed it?”

I interposed just then because I wanted to slow down the story a little. The girl who had visited me last night was named Clevedon—Susan had just told me so—and now there was a Sir Philip Clevedon and a tragedy. I could not help wondering, of course, what connection there could be between the two, but I was determined to feel my way cautiously, resolved not to be hustled or bounced into saying more than I wanted to say. The story, whatever it was, should come from them without any help from me.

“No, Mr. Holt, I dare say you haven’t heard anything yet—not many have,” Sergeant Gamley went on. “As you say, it isn’t in the papers. You are a stranger among us—yes, yes. For the moment I had forgotten that. I knew your late respected aunt very well indeed, Mr. Holt. There was a little matter of a burglary in this very house some four years ago. Mr. Holt”—he turned to his

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