

The CURVED BLADES

By CAROLYN WELLS

Author of "A Chain of Evidence," "The Gold Bag," "The Clue," "The White Alley," Etc.

CHAPTER XVI—Continued.

"And when you brought it to her?"

"She merely took it and laid it in a desk drawer without even unwrapping the parcel. I never saw it again till I saw it 'round her neck."

"And you do not think she placed it there herself?"

"I am sure she did not. The only reason I can ascribe for her wanting it is that she might have thought her dread of them a foolish whim and determined to accustom herself to the sight of them by means of the harmless toy. That's all I know about that snake, Mr. Stone. But the truth, as I have told it to you, is so strange, so almost unbelievable, that I knew it would only serve to attract suspicion to me, so I denied it. You know Miss Frayne is only waiting to pounce on it as complete evidence of my guilt."

"You and she are not good friends?"

"We have never been really friendly, though always polite on the surface of things. But she is jealous of me, and tried in every possible way to undermine my aunt's faith and trust in me, and even plotted to have me disinherited and my fortune bequeathed to herself."

"An ambitious plan!"

"She is ambitious. She intends to marry Mr. Haviland, and she intended to have my half of the Carrington money."

"You don't suspect her of the crime?" and Fleming Stone looked up quickly.

"Suspect is too strong a word. But to me there seems room for grave inquiries. I was in the hall at the time she declares I was in my aunt's room—"

"Wait a moment, Miss Stuart, isn't this a sort of deadlock? You say you were in the hall, Miss Frayne says you were in the boudoir. Why should I believe one in preference to the other?"

"There was infinite sadness in Pauline's eyes as she looked at her questioner. "That is so," she said, slowly; "why should you? I have only my unsupported word. Nor has Anita any witness. But, Mr. Stone, I thought a detective always looked first of all for the motive. What reason could I have for—"

"You put it plainly, Miss Stuart, and I will reply in an equally straightforward vein. The first thing we detectives think of is: Who will benefit by the crime? Naturally, money benefit is first thought of. The greatest money benefit comes to you and your cousin in Egypt. The nature of the crime makes it impossible that he could have committed it. There is, however, a possibility of your own connection with it, so we must question you. But there are others who benefit in a pecuniary way by the death of Miss Carrington, so they, too, must be questioned. You surely see the justice and the necessity of all this investigation?"

"Oh, yes, and it seems to me also justice that you investigate the story of Miss Frayne. She, too, has only her own unsupported word as to that conversation she relates. May she not have made it all up?"

"She has a witness, Miss Stuart, a credible witness. Mr. Haviland has told me that he saw Miss Frayne at the door of the boudoir at about 1:15."

"Gray saw her! He didn't tell me this, Mr. Stone, I hate to speak ill of another woman, but Miss Frayne can really wind Gray Haviland 'round her finger, and I have no doubt she has persuaded him to give this evidence whether—"

"Whether it is true or not?"

"Yes, that is what I meant, though I hated to say it."

"Miss Stuart, it is often hard to tell when a man speaks the truth, but I have no reason to disbelieve Mr. Haviland's statement. He told quite circumstantially of being up and down all night. He was restless and wandered about in several rooms during the small hours. You know he told of seeing the maid on the stairs, and he gives me the impression of a truth-

ful witness who would not lie outright even at the behest of a woman in whom he is interested."

"Then they are going to suspect me?" Pauline's voice was so full of despair that Fleming Stone caught his breath as he looked at her. Her great eyes were wide with fear, her hands were clenched and her whole body tense with horrified suspense.

"Give me some good reasons why you cannot be suspected," he cried, eagerly leaning forward in his chair. "Give me some proof that you were in the hall at that moment, or that you were in your own room, or—"

"That proves, Mr. Stone, that you do suspect me! Your assumption that I could have been in my own room shows that you do not believe I was in the hall—as I was."

"Then why didn't Miss Frayne see you there?"

"How do you know she didn't? Why do you accept her words as truth, yet disbelieve mine?" Pauline had risen now and stood before him. Her tall slimmness, her wonderful grace and her beautiful, angry countenance made an alluring picture. "I was not in favor of your taking this case, Mr. Stone, and I am even less so, now, that you refuse to believe what I say! I shall cable at once for my cousin to return. I do not wish Gray Haviland and Anita Frayne to arrange all this to suit themselves. I am mistress here in Mr. Loria's absence, and if my authority is doubted I want him here to stand up for me!"

"Just a moment, Miss Stuart. You are not entirely just to me. It is necessary for me to question you, but you must see that your innocence—of which I have no doubt—will be more easily established by a policy of frankness on your part, than by futile anger toward Miss Frayne or Mr. Haviland. The incident of the paper snake, as explained by you, is not necessarily incriminating, and if you will wait a few days before calling your cousin home, I think very likely you will prefer not to do so. I understand that you do not wish him to come, unless he can be of assistance to you?"

"Yes, that is his desire, to stay over there unless I want him. But, Mr. Stone, and now the lovely face was almost smiling, "if you mean what you said, that you do not doubt my innocence, then I will not send for Mr. Loria. I am content to let it all rest in your hands."

The girl's beauty now was dazzling. Color showed in her cheeks, her eyes shone, and the curve of her exquisite red lips was almost a smile. Stone looked at her in amazement. He had spoken truly, he had not doubted her innocence, but this sudden elation on her part puzzled him. What did it mean? Only, as she meant it to seem, that if he believed in her innocence it could be easily proved? Well, he would accept that diagnosis of her attitude, but he would move warily. This case was unlike any other he had ever engaged in, so he must attack it in a different way. And first of all, he must decide which of these two women was speaking the truth. Yet, how could he decide? If Pauline had been in that room when Anita listened at the door, she would, of course, try to prove that she was elsewhere. But, in such a case, why not say she was in her own room? It wasn't plausible that she should confess to being in the hall, if she were really in the boudoir. That, then, was in Pauline's favor. But the conversation detailed by Anita! That must be further analyzed.

These thoughts flew through Stone's quick moving brain as he stood looking at his beautiful hostess.

"Puzzling it out, Mr. Stone?" and Pauline's smile was a full fledged one now; "perhaps I can help you. If you'll accept my assistance without doubting my word, I'm sure we can do wonders in a detective way."

This was not in Pauline's favor.

It was too much like bargaining with him to believe her innocent. Then, too, though all unconscious of it, Stone was influenced by the wonderful charm of the girl. Though her lips were smiling a little, her great dark eyes still held that look of fear, that hunger for protection, that desire for someone on whom to lean.

"And I won't send for my cousin just yet," she went on. "It's too bad to call him home when he's so busy over there. You know, Mr. Stone, that Mr. Loria is a wonderful man. His achievements in excavation have brought him fame and glory. And you mustn't think he's heartless because he doesn't return at once. You know it was all arranged for us to go over there next month and he had made all sorts of plans for us and for himself. He can't leave his work at a moment's notice, unless, as he says, I have need of him."

"Was he fond of his aunt?" inquired Stone, casually.

"He was her idol. To Aunt Lucy the sun rose and set in Carr. She was perfectly crazy to go on this trip to Egypt, in order to be with him. He was fond of her, yes. More so than I was, because she was always kind and good natured to him, while she was always unpleasant to me."

"Why was she?"

"I don't know. Well, I suppose I may as well tell you, one reason was because she was always envious of anyone whom whom she considered better looking than she was herself. This may sound strange to you, Mr. Stone, but it was the keynote of my aunt's existence. She adored beauty in every way—pictures, clothes, everything—but she was so sensitive about her own plainness, that a younger or prettier face made her, at times, irritable and even cruel. She would never engage a servant with any pretensions to good looks. Therefore, as she chose to consider Miss Frayne and myself of comely personal appearance, she was unkind to us both."

"And Mr. Loria? Is he not handsome?"

"Oh, yes, very. But Aunt Lucy liked handsome men. Carr Loria is like a picture. His father was of Italian descent, and Carr has the clear olive skin and dark beauty of that race. Gray Haviland is good looking, too, but it was only feminine prettiness that stirred up Aunt Lucy's ire."

"Why did she ever engage such an angel face as Miss Frayne?"

Fleming Stone watched closely for a sign of irritation at this speech, and saw it. Pauline's smile faded and she said, abruptly:

"Do you think her so beautiful?"

"She has the perfect blonde fairness usually typified by the celestial white robed creatures on the old canvases."

"Yes, Anita is a perfect example of a blonde. Why, she is the daughter of an old schoolmate of my aunt's, and so that's why Aunt Lucy took her, and then she proved such an efficient secretary and such a patient, meek thing to scold, that she kept her position."

"Miss Frayne doesn't seem so extraordinarily meek to me."

"No, indeed! She's not meek at all. But she always was to Miss Carrington. That, of course, to keep the position, which was both easy and lucrative. Easy, that is, except for my aunt's temper. That was vented on poor Anita, morning, noon and night."

"That, then, might give us a motive for Miss Frayne's desire to be rid of her cruel mistress and to get the inheritance that she knew would come to her at Miss Carrington's death."

Pauline shuddered. "I can't think of such a thing, Mr. Stone, but, if anybody in this house is to be suspected of the awful thing it can be no one but Anita. She tried, I know, to supplant me in my aunt's affection, and to have my inheritance, or part of it, transferred to herself."

"You know this?"

"Yes. For some time she has been making insinuations and telling my aunt tales about me—untrue ones—that would make Aunt Lucy angry at me. I tell you this, Mr. Stone, because I want you to know Anita Frayne as she really is."

There was the ring of sincerity in the tone, there was a look of truth in the big, dark eyes, and there was a most appealing expression on the lovely face that gazed into his own, but Fleming Stone turned from the speaker with a polite but decided gesture of dismissal, saying, "Please ask Miss Frayne to come here a few moments."

XVII.

THE OVERHEARD CONVERSATION

Awaiting the arrival of Anita Frayne, Stone thought rapidly. Forming his judgments, as always, more by impressions than by words, he found himself believing in Pauline Stuart. She had bought the paper snake, she had lied about it, but many women have done the same. Knowing that the purchase of the toy meant definite suspicion, wouldn't any innocent girl have feared and dreaded that exposure? If she had been guilty, she would scarcely have dared deny the facts of buying it, lest it be proved against her, and make matters worse. Again, it was impossible to connect that magnificent woman with crime! If she were connected with it, it could only be as the criminal herself. There was no theory that admitted of her being an accomplice, or a tool. Stay, there was that Loria man. Stone couldn't rid himself of a vague idea of implicating the distant nephew by means of an accomplice on the spot. But the notion was not logical. If Pauline had killed her aunt under her cousin's instructions, she was just as much a murderer as if she had done it entirely on her own initiative. And if the two cousins had conspired or worked in collusion, it was Stone's duty to fasten the deed on Pauline, as the available one of the pair. Stone ran over in his mind the letter from Loria. It gave no hint of greed or cupidity in his nature. He was engrossed in the pursuit of his hobby, archaeology, and was only willing to leave his work if that would definitely please his cousin, on whom, he fully appreciated, the responsibilities of the occasion would fall. He fully trusted Gray Haviland to look after all business affairs, so he was not a suspicious or over careful nature. He asked no immediate money and only desired some, in the course of time, to further his work. Whatever might be the truth, there was no reason to cast a glance of suspicion toward Carrington Loria. His opinion of Pauline's possible guilt Stone held in abeyance, and Miss Frayne entering, he greeted her with punctilious politeness and a confidential air, tending to put her at ease.

"Miss Frayne," he began, "the situation is a grave one. I am forced to the conclusion, tentatively at least, that Miss Carrington was deliberately poisoned by some of her own household. It may have been a servant, but it is difficult to imagine how or why a servant could accomplish the deed. At any rate, I must first consider the members of the family, and in so doing, I must request absolute truth and sincerity from all."

"I'm sure I've no reason to equivocate, Mr. Stone," and Anita's voice was almost flippant. "All I've told what I heard at Miss Carrington's door is absolutely true, and I can repeat it word for word."

"It seems strange you have it so accurately at your tongue's end."

"Not at all. I went to my room and wrote it down as soon as I heard it. I often make such memoranda. They are frequently useful later."

Fleming Stone mused. This seemed a strange thing to do, at least in view of the later events, but then, if Miss Frayne had been the guilty one, and had made up all this story of overheard conversation, surely she would not have done anything so peculiar as to make that detailed memorandum; or if she did, would not have told of it.

"I have, of course, a copy of that memorandum," continued Stone; "what I want is for you to tell me again why you think it could not have been entirely a soliloquy on the part of Miss Carrington."

"For two reasons. First, I have lived with the lady four years, and never have I known her to talk to herself or soliloquize aloud. Of course, this does not prove that she never did so, but I know it was not her habit. Second, nobody in soliloquy ever would use that definite intonation which is always used in speaking to a person. You know yourself, Mr. Stone, that a soliloquy is voiced slowly, mumblingly and usually in disjointed or partially incoherent sentences. The talk I heard was in clear, concise speeches, unmistakably addressed to somebody present. She could not in a soliloquy use that direct form of address, even if talking to someone in her imagination. She would not keep it up, but would go off in a reverie or drop into impersonal thought. I wish I could make this more clear to you."

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