THE MYSTERY GIRL

By CAROLYN WELLS. (Copyright, 1922.)

(Continued from Yesterday.)

"Miss Bascom put in the drawer!"

"Yes—that is, she must have done so, or—how else could they have been found there? You kno wyourself, now, don't you, Mr. Cray, that I'm not a burglar—or a bandit or a sneak thief? You know I never went into Dr. Waring's study and took those things. So, as I say, isn't it the only plausible theory that Miss Bascom, who found the valuables so readily, first put them there herself?"

"That matter can easily be settled," Cray said, and going to the door he asked Mrs. Adams to send Miss Bascom to them.

With an important air the spinster entered the room.

Holding herself very erect and even drawing aside her skirts as she passed Miss Austin, she took a seat on the other side of the room.

"Now, Miss Bascom," Cray began at once, "what made you think of looking in this lady's bureau drawer for that money?"

"I didn't look for it, Mr. Cray. I merely felt that she had done wrong and I thought perhaps some evidence would be hidden away in her room. And a top drawer is the place a woman oftenest hides things."

Cray gave a short laugh. "Rather clever of you, I admit. But Miss Austin says she did not put that money there, herself—that it was a plant."

"A plant?" Miss Bascom looked puzzled at the word.

"Yes; she thinks some ill-disposed person put it there to implicate her, falsely."

"Oh, I see. Well, Mr. Cray, let her say who did it, and who could have got that money to do it with."

The hard old face took on a look that was almost malignant in its accusation, and little Anita Austin gave a low cry as she saw it, and hid her face in her hands.

"Take her away," she moaned, "oh, take that woman away."

"You hear her," Miss Bascom went on, unrelentingly. "Now, Mr. Cray, I'm a bit of a detective myself, and while you've been down here talking to Miss Mystery, I've been searching her room more carefully, and I've found a few more things, of which I should like to tell you."

Cray was nonplused. His sympathies were all with the poor little girl, who, clinging to the arms of her chair, seemed about to go to pieces, nervously, but was bravely holding onto herself. Yet, if the Bascom woman was telling the truth, he must beware of the "poor little girl."

"I'm not sure you're within your rights, Miss Bascom," he began, but he was interrupted with:

"Rights! Indeed, the rights of this matter are above your jurisdiction! The blood of John Waring calls from the ground! I am the instrument of justice that has been chosen by an overruling Providence to discover the criminal. She sits before you! That girl—that mysterious wicked girl is both thief and murderess!"

"Oh, no!" Anita cried, putting up her arm as if to ward off a physical blow.

Then she suddenly became quiet—almost rigid in her composure.

"That is a grave accusation, Miss Bascom," she said, "you must prove it or retract it."

Cray stared at the girl in astonishment. Her agonized cry had been human, feminine, natural—but this sudden change to stony calm, to icy hauteur was amazing—and, to his mind, incriminating.

Miss Bascom, however, was in no way daunted.

"Prove it I will!" she said sternly. "In another drawer, Mr. Cray, I found the rolls of silver coin—exactly $100 worth—that we have been told were in the desk with the roll of bills. The ruby pin, you know about. And so, these thefts are proved. Now, as to the murder—I admit, it seems impossible that a girl should commit the awful crime—but I do say that I have found the weapon with which it was done hidden in Miss Austin's room."

Again that short, low cry—more like a hurt animal than a human being. And then, Anita Austin, the girl of mystery, fell back into the depths of her chair, and closed her eyes.

"You needn't faint, Miss Austin—or pretend to," admonished Miss Bascom brutally; "you're caught red-handed, and you know it, and you may as well give up."

"I didn't—I didn't—" came in low moans, but the girl's bravery had deserted her. Limp and despairing, she turned her great eyes toward Cray for help.

With an effort he looked away from her pleading face, and said:

"What is the weapon? Where did you find it?"

"It is a stiletto—an embroidery stiletto—and I found it tucked down in the crevice between the back and seat of a stuffed chair in Miss Austin's room. Did you put it there?"

She turned on the girl and fired the question at her with intentional suddenness, and though Anita uttered a scared "No," it was a palpable untruth.

"She did," Miss Bascom went on. "You can see for yourself, Mr. Cray, she is lying."

"But even if she is, Miss Bascom, I must ask you to cease torturing her! I can't stand for such cruelty!"

Cray's manhood revolted at the methods of the older woman who was causing such anguish to the poor child she accused.

"You are not a legal inquisitor, Miss Bascom," he went on; "it is for me to establish the truth or falsity of your suspicions."

"Yes, you! You're like all the other men! If a girl is pretty and alluring you would believe her statement that white is black!"

"I believe no statements that cannot be proved to my satisfaction. Miss Austin, do you own an embroidery stiletto?"

"Yes," was the hesitating answer and the dark eyes swept him a beseeching glance that made Miss Bascom fairly snort with scorn.

"Where is it?"

"I—I fear I must admit that it is just where Miss Bascom says it is—unless she has removed it. Tell me, Mr. Cray," and Miss Mystery suddenly resumed her most independent air, "must I submit to this? I thought accused people were entitled to a—oh, you know, counsel—a lawyer, or somebody to take care of them."

"Wait, Miss Austin. You're not accused yet—that is, not by legal authority."

"Oh, am I not? Then—" and she gave Miss Bascom a glance of unutterable scorn, "I have nothing to say."

"Nothing to say!" the spinster almost shrieked. "Nothing to say! Of course she hasn't! She kills a man, takes his valuables, and then declares she has nothing to say."

"Now, now, Miss Bascom, be careful! Why did you put your stiletto in such a place, Miss Austin?"

"I don't know."

The dark eyes gave him a gaze of childlike innocence, and Cray couldn't decide whether he was looking at a deep-dyed criminal or a helpless victim of unjust suspicion.

"And where did you get the money and the ruby pin?"

"I don't know—I mean I don't know how they got in my room. This lady says she found them there—that's all I know about them."

An indifferent shrug of the slim shoulders seemed to imply that was all Miss Mystery cared, either, and Cray asked:

"Then, if the valuables—the pin and the money are not yours, you are, of course, ready to relinquish possession of them."

"Of course I am not! Since I am accused of stealing them, I propose to retain possession until that accusation is proved or disproved! Perhaps Miss Bascom wishes to take them herself."

"You know, Miss Austin," Mr. Cray spoke very gravely, "you are making a mistake in treating this matter flippantly. You are in danger—real danger, and you must be careful what you say. Do you want a lawyer?"

"I don't know," the girl suddenly looked helpless. "Do you think I ought to have one?"

"Have you funds?"

"Yes. I am not a rich girl—but, neither am I poor. However, I think I shall ask advice of someone before I decide upon any course."

"Of whom? Perhaps no one can advise you better than I can."

"What is your advice, Mr. Cray?"

The sweet face looked at him hopefully, the curved red lips quivered a little as the speaker added, "I am very alone."

Again Miss Bascom sniffed. Unattractive herself, she resented with a sort of angry jealousy the appealing effect this girl had on men. She knew intuitively that Cray would sympathize with and pity the lonely girl.

"My advice is, Miss Austin, first, that you dispel this mystery that seems to surround you. Tell frankly who you are, what is your errand in Corinth, how you came in possession of Dr. Waring's ruby, and why you hid your stiletto, if it is merely one of your sewing implements."

Miss Mystery hesitated a moment, and then said, quietly:

"Your advice is good, Mr. Cray. But, unfortunately, I cannot follow it. However, I am willing to state, upon oath, that I did not kill Dr. Waring with that stiletto."

"I'm afraid your oath will be doubted," Miss Bascom intervened sharply. "And, too, Mr. Cray, even if this girl did not strike the fatal blow, she well knows who did! She is in league with the Japanese, Nogi. That I am sure of!"

"Nogi!" exclaimed Anita.

"Yes, Nogi," Miss Bascom went on, positively. "You came here only a day or two after he did. You have a Japanese kimono and several Japanese ornaments adorn your room. You went to the Waring house that night, Nogi let you in and out, and though the Japanese doubtless committed the murder, you stole the money and the ruby, and then, your partner in crime departed for parts unknown."

Miss Bascom sat back in her chair with a look of triumph on her plain, gaunt face.

(To Be Continued Monday.)

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