A Mystery Story for Girls

THE MAGIC CURTAIN

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By
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THE MAGIC CURTAIN

CHAPTER I
A FACE IN THE DARK

It was that mystic hour when witches are abroad in the land: one o’clock in the morning. The vast auditorium of the Civic Opera House was a well of darkness and silence.

Had you looked in upon this scene at this eerie hour you would most certainly have said, “There is no one here. This grandest of all auditoriums is deserted.” But you would have been mistaken.

Had you been seated in the box at the left side of this great auditorium, out of that vast silence you might have caught a sound. Faint, indistinct, like the rustle of a single autumn leaf, like a breath of air creeping over a glassy sea at night, it would have arrested your attention and caused you to focus your eyes upon a pair of exceedingly long drapes at the side of the opera hall. These drapes might have concealed some very long windows. In reality they did not.

Had you fixed your attention upon this spot you might, in that faint light that was only a little less than absolute darkness, have seen a vague, indistinct spot of white. This spot, resting as it did at a position above the bottom of the drape where a short person’s head would have come, might have startled you.

And well it might. For this was in truth the face of a living being. This mysterious individual was garbed in a dress suit of solemn black. That is why only his face shone out in the dark.

This person, seemingly a golden haired youth with features of unusual fineness, had called himself Pierre Andrews when, a short time earlier, he had applied for a position as usher in the Opera. Because of his almost startling beauty, his perfect manners and his French accent, he had been hired on the spot and had

been given a position in the boxes where, for this “first night” at least, those who possessed the great wealth of the city had been expected to foregather.

They had not failed to appear. And why should they fail? Was this not their night of nights, the night of the “Grand Parade”?

Ah, yes, they had been there in all their bejewelled and sable-coated splendor. Rubies and diamonds had vied with emeralds and sapphires on this grand occasion. Yes, they had been here. But now they had departed and there remained only this frail boy, hovering there on the ledge like a frightened gray bat.

Why was he here? Certainly a timid-appearing boy would not, without some very pressing reason, remain hidden behind drapes at the edge of a great empty space which until that night had been practically unknown to him.

And, indeed, at this moment the place, with its big empty spaces, its covered seats, its broad, deserted stage, seemed haunted, haunted by the ghosts of other years, by all those who, creeping from out the past, had stalked upon its stage; haunted, too, by those who only one or two short years before had paraded there on a “first night” in splendor, but who now, laid low by adverse circumstances, crept about in places of poverty. Yet, haunted or no, here was this frail boy peeking timidly out from his hiding place as the clock struck one.

He had asked a curious question on this night, had this boy of golden locks and expressive blue eyes. It was during the recess between acts while the curtain was down and the pomp that was Egypt had for a moment been replaced by the pomp that is America. Leaning over the balustrade, this thoughtful boy had witnessed the “Grand Parade” of wealth and pomp that passed below him. Between massive pillars, beneath chandeliers of matchless splendor where a thousand lights shone, passed ladies of beauty and unquestioned refinement. With capes of royal purple trimmed in ermine or sable but slightly concealing bare shoulders and breasts where jewels worth a king’s ransom shone, they glided gracefully down the long corridor. Bowing here and there, or turning to whisper a word to their companions, they appeared to be saying to all the throng that beheld them:

“See! Are we not the glory that is America in all her wealth and power?”

Then it was that this mysterious boy, poised there upon the ledge still half hidden by drapes, had asked his question. Turning to a white-haired, distinguished-

looking man close beside him, a man whom he had never before seen, he had said:

“Is this life?”

The answer he received had been quite as unusual as the question. Fixing strangely luminous eyes upon him, the man had said:

“It is a form of life.”

“A form of life.” Even at this moment the boy, standing in the shadows timid and terribly afraid, was turning these words over in his mind. “A form of life.”

There had been about him, even as he had performed his simple duties as usher in the boxes on this night, an air of mystery. He had walked—more than one had noted this—with the short, quick steps of a girl. His hair, too, was soft and fine, his cheeks like the softest velvet. But then, he was French. His accent told this. And who knows what the French are like? Besides, his name was Pierre. He had said this more than once. And Pierre, as everyone knows, is the name of a boy.

It was during the curtain before the last act that an incident had occurred which, for a few of the resplendent throng, had dimmed the glory of that night.

No great fuss was made about the affair. A slim girl seated in the box occupied by the man whose great wealth had made this opera house possible, had leaned over to whisper excited words in this gray-haired millionaire’s ears. With fingers that trembled, she had touched her bare neck.

With perfect poise the man had beckoned to a broad-shouldered person in black who had until now remained in the shadows. The man had glided forward. Some words had been spoken. Among these words were: “Search them.”

One would have said that the golden-haired usher standing directly behind the box had caught these words for he had suddenly turned white and clutched at the railing to escape falling.

Had you looked only a moment later at the spot where he had stood you might have noted that he was not there. And now here he was on the ledge, still all but concealed by drapes, poised as if for further flight.

And yet he did not flee. Instead, dropping farther into the shadows, he appeared to lose himself in thought.

What were these thoughts? One might suppose that he was recasting in his mind the events of the immediate past, that he read again the look of surprise and consternation on the face of the beautiful child of the very rich when she discovered that the string of beautifully matched pearls, bought by her father in Europe at a fabulous cost, were gone. One might suppose that he once again contemplated flight as the stout, hard-faced detective, who had so opportunely materialized from the shadows, had suggested searching the ushers and other attendants; that he shuddered again as he thought how barely he had escaped capture as, in the darkness attending the last act, he had glided past eagle-eyed sleuth Jaeger, and concealed himself behind the draperies. One might suppose that he lived again those moments of suspense when a quiet but very thorough search had revealed neither the priceless pearls nor his own humble person.

Yes, one might suppose all this. Yet, if one did, he would suppose in vain. Our minds are the strangest creation of God. “The thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts.”

The young person still half concealed by draperies and quite hidden by darkness was living again, not the scenes enacted among the boxes, but those which had been enacted upon the stage.

In his mind’s eye he saw again the glory that once was Egypt. Picturing himself as the heroine, Aida, he loved the prince of all Egypt’s warriors, and at the same time shuddered for her people.

As Radames, he heard the shouts of his people when he returned as a triumphant victor.

As Amneris, the Egyptian princess in the stately boat of those ancient days beneath a golden moon, he glided down the blue Nile. And all the time, as the matchless beauty of the scenes and the exquisite melody of the music filled him with raptures that could not be described, he was saying to himself:

“Oh, for one golden moment to stand before that assembled throng—all the rich, the learned of the great of this city—and to feel the glory of the past about me! To know love and adventure, the daring of a Captain of the Guard, the tender sentiments of an Aida, and to express it all in song! To do all this and to feel that

every heart in that throng beats in rapture or in sorrow, as my own! What glory! What matchless joy!”

And yet, even as these last thoughts passed into eternity, the young head with its crown of gold fell forward. There was a moment of relaxation expressing pain and all but hopeless despair. Then, like a mouse creeping out from the dark, he slipped from his place to glide stealthily along among the shadows and at last disappear into that place of darkness that is a great auditorium at night.

Having felt his way across a tier of boxes, he vaulted lightly over a low rail. Passing through a narrow corridor, he touched a door and pushed it noiselessly open. He was met by a thin film of light.

“Too much,” he murmured. “I shall be seen.”

Backing away, he retraced his steps.

Having moved a long way to the right, he tried still another door.

“Ah, it is better,” he breathed.

A moment later he found himself on the ground floor.

“But the way out?” He whispered the words to the vast silence that was all about him. No answer came to him. Yet, even as he paused, uncertainly, a sound reached his ears.

“A watchman. In the concourse. This is the way.”

He sprang toward the stage. A mouse could scarcely have made less sound, as, gliding down the carpeted aisle, he at last reached a door at the left of the stage.

The door creaked as he opened it. With one wild start, he dashed across the gaping stage to enter a narrow passageway.

Another moment and he was before a door that led to the outer air. It was locked, from within.

With breath that came short and quick, he stood there listening intently.

“Footsteps.” He did not so much as whisper the words. “The watchman. There is need for haste.

“The lock. Perhaps there is a key. Ah, yes, here it is!”

His skilled fingers fumbled in the darkness for a moment. The light from without streamed in. The door closed. He was gone.

CHAPTER II
PETITE JEANNE'S MASQUERADE

Fifteen minutes after his disappearance into the shadows, the youth, still clad in a dress suit, might have been seen walking between the massive pillars that front the Grand Opera House. Despite the fact that his small white hands clasped and unclasped nervously, he was able to maintain a certain air of nonchalance until a figure, emerging from the shadow cast by a pillar, sprang toward him.

At that instant he appeared ready for flight. One glance at the other, and he indulged in a low chuckle.

"It is you!" he exclaimed.

"It is I. But what could have kept you?" The person who spoke was a girl. A large, strongly built person, she contrasted strangely with her slender companion.

"Circumstances over which I had no control," the youth replied. "But come on!" He shuddered. "I am freezing!"

Having hurried west across the bridge, they entered a long concourse. From this they emerged into a railway station. Having crossed the waiting room, the slim one entered an elevator, leaving the other to wait below.

When the slim one reappeared he was wrapped from head to toe in a great blue coat.

"Ah, this is better, *ma chere*," he murmured, as he tucked a slender arm into his companion's own and prepared to accompany her into the chill of night.

The apartment they entered half an hour later was neither large nor new. It was

well furnished and gave forth an air of solid comfort. The living quarters consisted of a narrow kitchen and a fair-sized living-room. At either side of the living-room were doors that led each to a private room.

The big girl walked to the fireplace where a pile of kindling and firewood lay waiting. Having touched a match to this pile, she stood back to watch it break into a slow blaze, and then go roaring up the chimney.

“See!” she exclaimed. “How cozy we shall be in just a moment.”

“Ah, yes, yes, *mon ami*!” The slight one patted her cheek. “We shall indeed. But anon—”

The private door to the right closed with a slight rush of air. The slim one had vanished.

The stout girl’s gown revealed a powerful chest. Every curve of her well-formed body suggested strength, while the blonde-haired one, with all her slender shapeliness, seemed little more than a child—and a girl, at that. Yet, one cannot fully forget the dress suit that at this moment must rest upon a hanger somewhere behind that closed door.

“Well, now tell me about it,” said the stout one, as, some moments later, the blonde one reappeared in a heavy dressing gown and sat down before the fire.

“A pearl necklace was stolen,” the slight one said in a quiet tone. “It was worth, oh, untold sacks of gold. *Mon Dieu!* How is one to say how much? Since I was near, I was suspected. Who can doubt it? I bolted. In the darkness I concealed myself in the drapes that seemed to hide a window and did not.”

“But why did you run? You could not have done worse.”

“But, *mon Dieu*! There was talk of searching us. Could I be searched?”

“No.” A broad smile overspread the stout girl’s face. “No, you could not.”

“Ah, my good friend! *Ma chere!* My beloved Florence.” The slender one patted the other’s cheek with true affection. “You agree with me. What else can matter? You have made me happy for all my life.”

So now you know that this large, capable girl is none other than an old friend, one you have met many times, Florence Huyler. But wait, there is still more.

“But how now is it all to end?” Two lines appeared between the large girl’s eyes.

“I shall return!” the other exclaimed. “Tomorrow night I shall go back. I must go! It is too wonderful for words. All the rich, the great ones. The sable coats, the gowns, the rare jewels. And the stage! Oh, my friend, how perfectly exquisite, how glorious!”

“Yes, and they’ll arrest you.” The large girl’s tone was matter-of-fact. “And what will you see after that?”

“For what will they arrest me? Did I take the necklace? No! No! Nevair!”

“But you ran away.”

“Yes, and for a very good reason.” A faint flush appeared on the slim one’s cheek. “I could not be searched.”

“And will you tell them why?”

“Oh, no!”

“Then how can you go back?”

“Listen, my friend.” The slim one laid an impressive hand on the other’s arm. “Sometimes we have good fortune, is it not so? Yes. It is so. The young lady, that girl who lost the necklace, she will be there. She is kind. Something tells me this. She will not have Pierre Andrews arrested. Something tells me so. For look, now, as Pierre I am—how did you say it?—very handsome!”

“But, Petite Jeanne!” Florence broke short off. By this exclamation she had betrayed a secret. Since, however, only the walls and her companion heard it, it did not much matter. Our old friend, Petite Jeanne (the little French girl), and Pierre Andrews are one and the same person. On the stage Jeanne had played many a role. Now she was playing one in real life and playing it for a grand prize.

* * * * * * * *

But we must go back a little. Petite Jeanne, as you will recall if you have read that other book, *The Gypsy Shawl*, was a little French girl found wandering with the gypsies among the hills of France. Brought by a rich benefactress to America, she had made a splendid showing on the stage as a star in light opera.

All stage productions, however, have their runs and are no more. Petite Jeanne's engagement had come to an end, leaving her with a pocketful of money and one great yearning, a yearning to have a place upon the stage in Grand Opera.

This longing had come to her through contact with a celebrated opera star, Marjory Dean. Through Marjory Dean she had secured the services of a great teacher. For some time after that she had devoted her entire time to the mastering of the technique of Grand Opera and to the business of developing her voice.

"You will not go far without study abroad," Marjory Dean had warned her. "Yet, who knows but that some golden opportunity may come to you? You have a voice, thin to be sure, but very clear and well placed. What is still more, you have a feeling for things. You are capable of inspiring your audience with feelings of love, hate, hope, despair. This will carry you far."

"And I shall work! Oh, how I shall work!" Jeanne had replied.

That had been months ago. But teachers must be paid. Jeanne's pocketful of money no longer weighed her down. Then, too, times were hard. The little French girl could make people feel the things she did on the stage because she, too, had a warm heart. She could not resist wandering from time to time into the tenement districts where dwelt her gypsy friends. There she found poverty and great need. Always she came away with an empty purse. On Maxwell Street it was no better.

"I shall apply for work," she had told Florence at last.

"But what can you do?"

"I can act. I can sing."

"But no one wants you to act or sing."

"On the stage," Jeanne had shrugged, "perhaps no. But in life one may always act a part. I shall act. But what shall I be?"

“There, now!” she had cried a moment later. “I shall be a boy. I shall become an usher, an usher in Grand Opera. If I may not be on the stage, I may at least spend every night in the aisles. I shall see all the operas, and I shall earn a little.”

“But, Petite Jeanne!”

“No! No! Do not resist me!” Jeanne had cried. “I will do it. I must! It is my soul, my life, the stage, the opera. Hours each day I shall be near it. Perhaps I may steal out upon the stage and sing an aria when the hall is dark. Perhaps, too, I shall meet Marjory Dean, the great one this city adores.

“And who knows,” she had clasped her hands in ecstasy, “who knows but that in some mysterious way my opportunity may come?”

* * * * * * * *

“My opportunity,” she thought now, as, sitting before the glowing fire, she contemplated the future, “appears to be a bed in jail. But who knows?”

Jeanne refused to be depressed. Casting off her dressing gown, she sprang away in a wild dance as she chanted:

“Now I am Pierre,
Now I am Jeanne.
To-night I sleep on eiderdown,
To-morrow I am in jail.

“Oh, sweet mystery of life.”

Her voice rang out high and clear. Then, like the flash of sunshine across the brow of a hill, her mood changed.

“To-morrow!” she exclaimed, dropping into the depths of a great chair by the fire. “Why think of to-morrow? See! The tea kettle sings for us. Why not one good cup of black tea? And then—sweet dreams.”

A moment later there was a clinking of thin china cups. A belated midnight lunch was served.

An hour later, as Petite Jeanne twisted her pink toes beneath her silk-covered

eiderdown, brought all the way from her beloved France, she whispered low:

“To-morrow!”

And after a time, once again, faint, indistinct like a word from a dream:

“To-morrow.”

CHAPTER III
ON THE VERGE OF ADVENTURE

Long after Petite Jeanne's dainty satin slippers had danced her off to bed, Florence Huyler sat before the fire thinking. If your acquaintance with Florence is of long standing, you will know that she was possessed of both courage and strength. For some time a gymnasium director, she had developed her splendid physical being to the last degree. Even now, though her principal business in life had for some time been that of keeping up with the little French girl, she spent three hours each day in the gymnasium and swimming pool. Her courage surpassed her strength; yet as she contemplated the step Petite Jeanne had taken and the events which must immediately follow that move, she trembled.

"It's all too absurd, anyway," she told herself. "She wants to be an opera singer, so she dresses herself up like a boy and becomes an usher. What good could possibly come of that?"

All the time she was thinking this she realized that her objections were futile. Petite Jeanne believed in Fate. Fate would take her where she wished to go.

"If she wished to marry the President's son, she'd become a maid in the White House. And then—" Florence paused. She dared not say that Petite Jeanne would not attain her end. Up to this moment Jeanne had surmounted all obstacles. Adopted by the gypsies, she had lived in their camps for years. She had inherited their fantastic attitude toward life. For her nothing was entirely real, and nothing unattainable.

"But to-morrow night!" Florence shuddered. The little French girl meant to don her dress suit and as Pierre Andrews return to her post as usher in the boxes of that most magnificent of all opera houses.

“A necklace worth thousands of dollars was stolen.” She reviewed events. “Petite Jeanne was near. When they looked for her, she had vanished. She stole the necklace. What could be more certain than this? She stole it! They will say that. They’ll arrest her on sight.

“She stole it.” She repeated the words slowly. “Did she?”

The very question shocked her. Petite Jeanne was no thief. This she knew right well. She had no need to steal. She still had a little money in the bank. Yet, as a means to an end, had she taken the necklace, intending later to return it?

“No! No!” she whispered aloud. “Jeanne is reckless, but she’d never do that!

“But where is the necklace? Who did take it?” For a time she endeavored to convince herself that the precious string of pearls, having become unclasped, had slipped to the floor, that it had been discovered and even now was in its youthful owner’s possession.

“No such luck.” She prodded the fire vigorously. “In the end fortune smiles upon us. But in the beginning, nay, nay!

“And to-morrow evening—” She rose to fling her splendid arms wide. “To-morrow my little friend walks in, after many brave detectives have spent the day in a vain search for her, and says quite nonchalantly:

“‘There you are, madame. Shall I remove your sable coat? Or will you wear it? And will you have the chair, so? Or so? *Voila!*’

“Who can say it is not going to be dramatic? Drama in real life! That’s what counts most with Jeanne. Oh, my dear little Jeanne! What an adorable peck of trouble you are!”

And all the time, quite lost in the big, eager, hungry world that waited just outside her window, the little French girl lay among her pink eiderdown quilts and slept the sleep of the just.

The cold gray dawn of the morning after found Petite Jeanne considerably shaken in her mind regarding the outcome of this, her latest adventure.

“Will they truly arrest me?” she asked herself as, slipping into a heavy robe, she

sought the comfort of an early fire. “And if they arrest me, what then?” She shuddered. She had once visited a police court in this very city. An uninviting place it had been, too. With judge and lawyers alternately laughing and storming at crestfallen individuals who stood, some quite bewildered, others with an air of hopelessness about them, with two women weeping in a corner, and with an ill-smelling, ogling group of visitors looking on, the whole place had depressed her beyond words.

“Am I to stand there to be stared at? Will the lawyers and the judge make a joke of my misfortune?” She stamped her little foot angrily. “No! No! Nevair! They shall not!

“And yet,” she thought more soberly, “I must go back. I truly must!

“Oh, why did I run away? Why did I not say: ‘Search me if you must. You will see that I do not have your necklace!’

“But no!” She flushed. “As Petite Jeanne I might be searched. But as Pierre. Ah, no! No!”

A cup of steaming coffee revived her spirits; but for a few hours only. Then the dull, drab day bore down upon her with greater force than ever.

And indeed it was no sort of day to enliven spirits and bolster up courage. Gray skies, gray streets, gray fog, dripping walls of great buildings, these were all about her. And in the end a slow, weepy, drizzling rain began to fall.

There is but one way to endure such a day. That is to don storm rubbers, raincoat and an old hat, and defy it. Defy it Petite Jeanne did. And once in the cool damp of it all, she found relief.

She wandered on and on. The fog grew thicker. Clouds hung dark and low. Lights began to appear. Yet it was not night.

Of a sudden, as she wandered aimlessly on, she became conscious of an astonishing fact: numbers of people were hurrying past her. A strange proceeding on a drab day when men prefer to be indoors. But strangest of all, each one of these individuals was shorter than Petite Jeanne herself. And the little French girl was far from tall.

“How extraordinary!” she murmured under her breath. “It is as if I were some half-grown Gulliver in the land of the Pygmies.”

She knew this was pure fancy. But who were these people? A look into one storm-clad, bemuffled face told her the answer:

“Orientals. But where can they be going? They must have come from many places.”

The question absorbed her attention. It drove trouble from her mind. She followed the one whose face she had scrutinized. In time she saw him dart up a short flight of stairs to enter a door on which were inscribed the words: “Members Only.”

Other figures appeared. One and all, they followed in this one’s wake.

As Jeanne looked up she saw that the three-story building was possessed of a highly ornamented front. Strange and grotesque figures, dragons, birds of prey, great, ugly faces all done in wood or metal and painted in gaudy colors, clustered in every available niche.

Suddenly she was seized with a desire to follow these little men.

“But no!” she whispered. “They would never allow me to pass.”

She looked for the street number. There was none. She walked a few paces to the left.

“Seven, three, seven,” she read aloud. She gave a sudden start. She knew this location. Only three blocks away was a costumer’s shop. For a dollar or two this costumer would turn her into any sort of person she might choose to be, a pirate, an Eskimo, yes, even a Chinaman. That was his business. At once Jeanne was on her way to that shop.

In an astonishingly short time she was back; or at least some person answering her description as to height, breadth of shoulders, glove number, etc., was coming down the street. But was it Jeanne? Perhaps not one of her best friends could have told. Certainly in the narrow hallway of that mysterious building, which little men were still entering, her nationality was not challenged. To these mysterious little people, who were gathering for who knows what good or evil

reason, she was for the moment an Oriental.

CHAPTER IV
A LIVING STATUE

In the meantime Florence, too, had gone for a walk in the rain. The discovery she made that day was destined to play a very large part in her immediate future.

Florence by nature belonged to the country, not to the city. Fate had, by some strange trick, cast her lot in the city. But on every possible occasion she escaped to quiet places where the rattle and bang of city life were gone and she might rest her weary feet by tramping over the good, soft, yielding earth.

Since their rooms were very near the heart of the city, at first thought it might seem impossible for her to reach such a spot of tranquility without enduring an hour-long car ride.

This was not true. The city which had for so long been Florence's home is unique. No other in the world is like it. Located upon a swamp, it turned the swamp first into a garden, then into a city where millions live in comfort. Finding a stagnant river running into the lake, it turned the river about and made it a swift one going from the lake. Lacking islands upon its shore-line, this enterprising metropolis proceeded to build islands. A brisk twenty-minute walk brought Florence to one of these islands.

This island at that time, though of a considerable size, was quite incomplete. In time it was to be a place where millions would tread. At that moment, save for one dark, dome-shaped building at its north end, it was a place of desolation, or so it seemed to Florence.

At either end the land rose several feet above the surface of the lake. In the center it was so low that in time of storm waves dashed completely over it.

Since the island had been some years in building a voluntary forest which might better, perhaps, be called a jungle, had sprung up on its southern extremity. Beyond this jungle lay the breakwater where in time of storm great waves mounted high and came crashing down upon heaps of limestone rocks as large as small houses.

To the left of this jungle, on the side facing the lake, was a narrow, sandy beach. It was toward this beach that Florence made her way. There she hoped to spend an hour of quiet meditation as she promenaded the hard-packed sand of the beach. Vain hope. Some one was there before her.

* * * * * * * *

Petite Jeanne had entered many strange places. None was more strange nor more fantastically beautiful than the one she found within the four walls of that dragon-guarded building in the heart of a great city.

Playing the role of an American born Chinese lady, she passed the attendant and climbed two flights of stairs unmolested.

As she reached the top of the second flight she found her feet sinking deep in the thick pile of an Oriental rug. One glance about her and she gripped at her heart to still it.

“It is a dream!” she told herself. “There is no place like this.”

Yet she dared not distrust her senses. Surely the lovely Chinese ladies, dressed in curious Chinese garments of matchless silk, gliding silently about the place, were real; so, too, was the faint, fragrant odor of incense, and the lamps that, burning dimly, cast a shadow of purple and old rose over all.

“Dragons,” she murmured, “copper dragons looking as old as time itself. Smoke creeps from their nostrils as if within them burned eternal fire. Lamps made of three thousand bits of glass set in copper. Banners of silk. Pictures of strange birds. Who could have planned all this and brought it into being?

“And there,” she whispered, as she dared a few steps across the first soft-carpeted space, “there is an altar, an altar to a god wholly unknown to me. The ladies are kneeling there. Suppose they invite me to join them!” At once she felt terribly frightened. She sank deep in the shadows. She was playing the part of a

Chinese lady, yet she knew nothing of their religion. And this appeared to be a temple.

She was contemplating flight when a sound, breaking in upon her attention, caused her to pause. From somewhere, seemingly deep down and far away, came the dong-dong of a gong. Deep, serene, melodious, it seemed to call to her. A simple, impulsive child of nature, she murmured:

“It calls. I shall go.”

Turning her back to the broad stairs that led down and away to the cool, damp, outer air, she took three steps downward on a narrow circular staircase which led, who could tell where?

Smoke rose from the spaces below, the smoke of many incense burners.

Pausing there, she seemed about to turn back. But again came the deep, melodious, all but human call of the gong. Moving like one in a trance, she took three more steps downward and was lost from sight.

* * * * * * * *

The person who had disturbed Florence’s hoped-for hour of solitude on the island beach was a girl. Yet, as Florence first saw her, she seemed less a living person than a statue. Tanned by the sun to a shade that matched the giant rock on which she stood, clad only in a scant bathing suit that in color matched her skin, standing rigid, motionless, she seemed a thing hewn of stone to stand there forever.

Yet, even as Florence looked on entranced, she flung her arms high, gave vent to a scream that sent gulls scurrying from rocky roosts, and then, leaping high, disappeared beneath the dull surface of the water.

That scream, together with the deft arching of her superb body as she dove, marked her as one after Florence’s own kind. Gone was her wish for solitude. One desire possessed her now: to know this animated statue of the island.

“Where does she live?” she asked herself. “How can she dare to visit this desolate spot alone?”

Even as she asked this question, the girl emerged from the water, shook back her tangled hair, drew a rough blue overall over her dripping bathing suit, and then, leaping away like a wild deer, cleared the breakwater at a bound and in a twinkling lost herself on a narrow path that wound through the jungle of low willows and cottonwoods.

“She is gone!” Florence exclaimed. “I have lost her!” Nevertheless, she went racing along the beach to enter the jungle over the path the girl had taken. She had taken up a strange trail. That trail was short. It ended abruptly. This she was soon enough to know.

CHAPTER V
THE SECRET PLACE

Petite Jeanne was a person of courage. Times there had been when, as a child living with the gypsies of France, she had believed that she saw a ghost. At the heart of black woods, beneath a hedge on a moonless night some white thing lying just before her had moved in the most blood-chilling fashion. Never, on such an occasion, had Jeanne turned to flee. Always, with knees trembling, heart in her throat, she had marched straight up to the “ghost.” Always, to be sure, the “ghost” had vanished, but Jeanne had gained courage by such adventures. So now, as she glided down the soft-carpeted, circular staircase with the heavy odor of incense rising before her and the play of eerie green lights all about her, she took a strong grip on herself, bade her fluttering heart be still, and steadily descended into the mysterious unknown.

The scene that met her gaze as at last she reached those lower levels, was fantastic in the extreme. A throng of little brown people, dressed in richest silks, their faces shining strangely in the green light, sat in small circles on rich Oriental rugs.

Scattered about here and there all over the room were low pedestals and on these pedestals rested incense burners. Fantastic indeed were the forms of these burners: ancient dragons done in copper, eagles of brass with wings spread wide, twining serpents with eyes of green jade, and faces, faces of ugly men done in copper. These were everywhere.

As Jeanne sank silently to a place on the floor, she felt that some great event in the lives of these people was about to transpire. They did not speak; they whispered; and once, then again, and yet again, their eyes strayed expectantly to a low stage, built across the far end of the room.

“What is to happen?” the girl asked herself. She shuddered. To forget that she was in a secret place at the very heart of a Chinese temple built near the center of a great city—this was impossible.

“I shouldn’t be here,” she chided herself. “Something may happen to me. I may be detained. I may not be able to reach the Opera House in time. And then—”

She wondered what that would mean. She realized with a sort of shock that she was strangely indifferent to it all. Truth was, events had so shaped themselves that she was at that moment undecided where her own best good lay. She had ventured something, had begun playing the role of a boy. She had done this that she might gain a remote end. The end now seemed very remote indeed. The perils involved in reaching that end had increased four-fold.

“Why go back at all?” she asked herself. “As Pierre I can die very comfortably. As Petite Jeanne I can live on. And no one will ever know. I am—”

Her thoughts were interrupted, not by a sound nor a movement, but by a sudden great silence that had fallen, like a star from the sky at night, upon the assembled host of little people.

Petite Jeanne was not a stranger to silence. She had stood at the edge of a clearing before an abandoned cabin, far from the home of any living man just as the stars were coming out, when a hush had fallen over all; not a leaf had stirred, not a bird note had sounded, and the living, breathing world had seemed far away. She had called that silence.

She had drifted with idle paddle in a canoe far out upon the glimmering surface of Lake Huron. There, alone, with night falling, she had listened until every tiniest wavelet had gone to rest. She had heard the throb of a motor die away in the distance. She had felt rather than heard the breath of air stirred by the last lone seagull on his way to some rocky ledge for rest. She had at last listened for the faintest sound, then had whispered:

“This is silence.”

It may have been, but never had a silence impressed her as did the silence of this moment as, seated there on the floor, far from her friends, an uninvited guest to some weird ceremony, she awaited with bated breath that which was to come.

She had not long to wait. A long tremulous sigh, like the tide sweeping across the ocean at night, passed over the motionless throng; a sigh, that was all.

But Petite Jeanne? She wished to scream, to rise and dash out of the room crying, “Fire! Fire!”

She did not scream. Something held her back. Perhaps it was the sigh, and perhaps the silence.

The thing that was happening was weird in the extreme. On the stage a curtain was slowly, silently closing. No one was near to close it. It appeared endowed with life. This was not all. The curtain was aflame. Tongues of fire darted up its folds. One expected this fire to roar. It did not. Yet, as the little French girl, with heart in throat and finger nails cutting deep, sat there petrified, flames raced up the curtain again and yet again. And all the time, in great, graceful folds, it was gliding, silently gliding from the right and the left.

“Soon it will close,” she told herself. “And then—”

Only one thought saved Jeanne from a scream that would have betrayed her; not a soul in that impassive throng had moved or spoken. It was borne in upon her that here was some form of magic which she did not know.

“It’s a magic curtain.” These words, formed by her lips were not so much as whispered.

But now from a dark corner of the stage a figure appeared. A weird stooping figure he was, clothed all in white. He moved toward the curtain with slow, halting steps. He seemed desirous of passing between the folds of the curtain before the opening; yet a great fear appeared to hold him back.

At this moment there came to Jeanne’s mind words from a very ancient book:

“*Draw not nigh hither. Put off thy shoes from thy feet.*”

“The burning bush!” she whispered. “It burned but was not consumed; a magic bush. This is a magic curtain.”

“*Remove thy shoes.*”

She seemed to hear someone repeat these words.

Her hands went to her feet. They were fully clad. A quick glance to right and left assured her that not another person in the room wore shoes.

“My shoes will betray me!” Consternation seized her. One look backward, a stealthy creeping toward the soft-carpeted stair, another stealthy move and she was on her way out.

But would she make it? Her heart was in her throat. A quarter of the way up she was obliged to pause. She was suffocating with fear.

“I must be calm,” she whispered. “I must! I must!” Of a sudden life seemed a thing of solemn beauty. Somehow she must escape that she might live on and on.

Once again she was creeping upward. Did a hand touch her foot? Was someone preparing to seize her? With an effort, she looked down. No one was following. Every eye was glued upon the magic curtain. The curtain was closed. The white-robed figure had vanished. What had happened? Had he passed through? Had the curtain consumed him? She shuddered. Then, summoning all her courage, she leaped up the stairs, glided silently across the room above, and passed swiftly on until she gained the open air.

Then how she sped away! Never had she raced so swiftly and silently as now.

It was some time before she realized how futile was her flight. No one pursued her.

In time she was able to still her wildly beating heart. Then she turned toward home.

Once she stopped dead in her tracks to exclaim: “The magic curtain! Oh! Why did I run away?”

Then, as another mood seized her, she redoubled her pace. Florence, she hoped, awaited her with a roaring fire, a cup of hot chocolate and a good scolding.

CHAPTER VI
THE WOMAN IN BLACK

By the time she reached the doorway that led to her humble abode, Petite Jeanne was in high spirits. The brisk walk had stirred her blood. Her recent adventure had quickened her imagination. She was prepared for anything.

Alas, how quickly all this vanished! One moment she was a heroine marching forth to face that which life might fling at her; the next she was limp as a rag doll. Such was Petite Jeanne. The cause?

The room she entered was dark; chill damp hung over the place like a shroud. Florence was not there. The fire was dead. Cheer had passed from the place; gloom had come.

Jeanne could build a fire. This is an art known to all wanderers, and she had been a gypsy. But she lacked the will to put her skill to the test, so, quite in despair, she threw herself in a chair and lay there, looking for all the world like a deserted French doll, as she whispered to herself:

“What can it matter? Life is without a true purpose, all life. Why should one struggle? Why not go down with the tide? Why—”

But in one short moment all this was changed. The door flew open. Florence burst into the room and with her came a whole gust of fresh lake air, or so it seemed to Jeanne.

“You have been to the island!” she exclaimed, as she became a very animated doll.

“Yes, I have been there.” Excitement shone from the big girl’s eyes. “And I have

made a surprising discovery. But wait. What ails the fire?”

“There is no fire.”

“But why?”

Jeanne shrugged. “One does not know,” she murmured.

Seizing the antiquated wood-hamper that stood by the hearth, Florence piled shavings and kindling high. Then, after scratching a match, she watched the yellow flames spread as shadows began dancing on the wall.

“You have been surrendering to gloom,” she said reprovingly. “Don’t do it. It’s bad for you. Where there is light there is hope. And see how our fire gleams!”

“You speak truth, my friend.” Jeanne’s tone was solemn.

“But tell me.” Her mood changed. “You have met adventure. So have I.” Her eyes shone.

“Yes.” Florence was all business at once. “But take a look at the clock. There is just time to rush out for a cup of tea, then—”

“Then I go to jail,” replied Jeanne solemnly. “Tell me. What does one wear in jail?”

“You are joking,” Florence replied. “This is a serious affair. But, since you will go, it will not help to be late. We must hurry.”

A moment later, arm in arm, they passed from the outer door and the dull damp of night swallowed them up.

When, a short time later, Petite Jeanne, garbed as Pierre Andrews, stole apprehensively through the entrance to the great opera house, her ever-fearful eyes fell upon two men loitering just within.

The change that came over one of these, a tall, dark young man with a steely eye, as he caught sight of Jeanne was most astonishing. Turning square about like some affair of metal set on wheels, he appeared about to leap upon her. Only a grip on his arm, that of his more stocky companion, appeared to save the girl.

“Watch out!” the other counseled savagely. “Think where you are!”

On the instant the look in those steely eyes changed. The man became a smiling wolf.

“Hey there, boy!” he called to Jeanne.

But Jeanne, in her immaculate suit of black, gave but one frightened backward look, and then sped for the elevator.

Her heart was doing double time as she saw the elevator door silently close.

“Who could that man be?” she questioned herself breathlessly. “He can’t have been a detective. They do not stand on ceremony. He would be here by my side, with a hand on my arm. But if not a detective, what then?” She could form no answer.

In the meantime, the dark, slim man was saying to the stocky one:

“Can you beat it? You can’t! Thought he’d cut for good! My luck. But no! Here he is, going back.”

“What do you care?” the other grumbled. “They’ll take him, and that’s the end of it. Come on outside.” His eyes strayed to the corner. A deep-chested man whose coat bulged in a strange way was loitering there. “Air’s bad in here.”

They passed out into the night. And there we leave them. But not for long. Men such as these are found in curious places and at unheard-of hours.

But Jeanne? With her heart stilled for a brief period of time, she rose to the floor above, only to be thrown into a state of mind bordering on hysteria at thought of facing the ordeal that must lie just before her.

Seeking a dark corner, she closed her eyes. Allowing her head to drop forward, she stood like one in prayer. Did she pray, or did she but surrender her soul and body to the forces of nature all about her? Who can say but that these two are the same, or at least that their effect is the same? However that may be, it was a changed Jeanne who, three minutes later, took up her post of duty in the boxes, for hers was the air of a sentry. Her movements were firm and steady, the look upon her face as calm as the reflection of the moon upon a still pool at midnight.

That which followed was silent drama. Throughout it all, not a word was spoken, no, not so much as whispered. The effect was like a thing of magic. Jeanne will never erase those pictures from her memory.

Scarcely had she taken her place at the door leading to the box than the great magnate, J. Rufus Robinson, and his daughter, she of the lost pearls, appeared. Jeanne caught her breath as she beheld the cape of green velvet trimmed with white fur and the matchless French gown of cream colored silk she wore. There was no lack of jewels despite the lost pearls. A diamond flashed here, a ruby burned there, yet they did not outshine the smile of this child of the rich.

“I am seeing life,” Jeanne whispered to herself. “I must see more of it. I must! I just must!”

Yet, even as she whispered these words she thought of the bearded man with those luminous eyes. She had asked him if all this was life—this wealth, this pomp and circumstance. And he had replied quite calmly: “It is a form of life.”

At that instant Jeanne thought of impending events that hung over her like a sword suspended by a hair, and shuddered.

Assisting the millionaire’s daughter to remove her wrap, she carried it to the cloak-room at the back, then assisted the pair to arrange their chairs. This done, she stepped back, a respectful distance.

While this was being done, a man, gliding forward with silent unconcern, had taken a place in the shadows at the back of the box. Deeper in the shadows stood a woman in black. Jeanne did not see the woman. She did see the man, and shuddered again. He, she realized, was the detective.

As she turned her back, the detective moved, prepared without doubt to advance upon her. But a curious thing happened. The woman in the shadows darted forward. Touching the arm of the rich young lady, she pointed at Jeanne and nodded her head. The girl in turn looked at the detective and shook her head. Then both the detective and the woman in black lost themselves in the shadows at the back of the box.

All this was lost to Jeanne. Her back had been turned. Her mind had been filled by a magic panorama, a picture of that which was to pass across the opera stage that night. Thus does devotion to a great art cause us to forget the deepest,

darkest trouble in our lives.

All during that long evening Petite Jeanne found herself profoundly puzzled. Why was nothing said to her regarding the pearls? Why was she not arrested?

“They have been found,” she told herself at last. Yet she doubted her own words, as well she might.

Two incidents of the evening impressed her. As she left the box during an intermission the rich girl turned a bright smile full upon her as she said:

“What is your name?”

Caught off her guard, the little French girl barely escaped betraying her secret. The first sound of “Jeanne” was upon her lips when of a sudden, without so much as a stammer or blush, she answered:

“Pierre Andrews, if you please.”

“What a romantic name.” The girl smiled again, then passed on.

“Now why did she do that?” Jeanne’s head was in a whirl.

Scarcely had she regained her composure when a voice behind her asked: “Are you fond of the opera?”

“Oh, yes! Yes, indeed I am.” She turned about.

“Then you may see much of it this season.” The mysterious woman in black was already turned about. She was walking away. Jeanne did not see her face, yet there was that about her voice, a depth, a melodious resonance, a something, that thrilled her to the very tips of her slender toes.

“Will wonders never end?” she asked herself, and found no answer.

CHAPTER VII
DREAMS OF OTHER DAYS

Petite Jeanne left the opera house that night in a brown study. She was perplexed beyond words. The necklace had not been found. She had made sure of that when, between the second and third act, she had discovered on a bulletin board of the lobby a typewritten notice of the loss and an offer of a reward for the return of the pearls.

“If the pearls had been found that notice would have been taken down,” she assured herself. “But if this is true, why did I go unmolested? One would suppose that at least I would be questioned regarding the affair. But no!” She shrugged her graceful shoulders. “They ask me nothing. They look and look, and say nothing. Oh, yes, indeed, they say: ‘What is your name?’ That most beautiful rich one, she says this. And the dark one who is only a voice, she says: ‘Do you like the opera?’ She asks this. And who is she? I know that voice. I have heard it before. It is very familiar, yet I cannot recall it. If she is here again I shall see her face.”

Having thus worked herself into a state of deep perplexity that rapidly ripened into fear, she glided, once her duties were done, down a narrow aisle, across the end of the stage where a score of stage hands were busy shifting scenes, then along a narrow passage-way, with which, as you will know from reading *The Golden Circle*, she was thoroughly familiar. From this passageway she emerged upon a second and narrower stage.

This was the stage of the Civic Theatre. The stage was dark. The house was dark. Only the faintest gleam of light revealed seats like ghosts ranged row on row.

How familiar it all seemed to her. The time had been when, not many months back, she had stood upon that stage and by the aid of her God-given gift, had stirred the audience to admiration, to laughter and to tears.

As she stood there now a wave of feeling came over her that she could not resist. This stage, this little playhouse had become to her what home means to many. The people who had haunted those seats were *her* people. They had loved her. She had loved them. But now they were gone. The house was dark, the light opera troop was scattered. She thought she knew how a mother robin must feel as she visits her nest long after the fledglings have flown.

Advancing to the center of the stage, she stretched her arms wide in mute appeal to the empty seats. But no least whisper of admiration or disapproval came back to her.

A moment she stood thus. Then, as her hands dropped, her breast heaved with one great sob.

But, like the sea, Jeanne was made of many moods. “No! No!” She stamped her small foot. “I will not come back to this! I will not! The way back is closed. Only the door ahead is open. I will go on.

“Grand Opera, this is all now. This is art indeed. Pictures, music, story. This is Grand Opera. Big! Grand! Noble! Some day, somehow I shall stand upon that most wonderful of all stages, and those people, those thousands, the richest, the most learned, the most noble, they shall be my people!”

Having delivered this speech to the deserted hall, she once again became a very little lady in a trim black dress suit, seeking a way to the outer air and the street that led to home.

She had come this way because she feared that the slender, dark-faced stranger who had accosted her earlier in the evening would await her at the door.

“If he sees me he will follow,” she told herself. “And then—”

She finished with a shudder.

In choosing this way she had counted upon one circumstance. Nor had she counted in vain. As she hurried down the dark aisle toward the back of the

theatre which was, she knew, closed, she came quite suddenly upon a man with a flashlight and time clock.

“Oh, Tommy Mosk!” she exclaimed in a whisper. “How glad I am that you are still here!”

The watchman threw his light upon her face.

“Petite Jeanne!” he exclaimed. “But why the masquerade?” Tommy belonged to those other days and, with the rest, had come to love the simple, big-hearted little light opera star. “Petite Jeanne! But why—”

“Please don’t make me tell.” She gripped his arm. “Only let me out, and see me safe into a taxi. And—and—” She put a finger to her lips. “Don’t whisper a word.”

“I—it’s irregular, but I—I’ll do it,” he replied gallantly.

Jeanne gave his arm another squeeze and they were away.

Three minutes later, still dressed as Pierre, the usher, she was huddled on the broad seat of a taxi, speeding for home.

CHAPTER VIII
AN ISLAND MYSTERY

When Florence, whose work as physical director required her attention until late hours three nights in the week, arrived, she found the little French girl still dressed as Pierre, curled up in a big chair shuddering in the cold and the dark.

“Wh-what’s happened?” She stared at her companion in astonishment.

“N-n-nothing happened!” wailed Petite Jeanne. “That is why I am so very much afraid. They have said not one word to me about the pearls. They believe I have them. They will follow me, shadow me, search this place. Who can doubt it? Oh, *mon Dieu*! Such times! Such troubles!

“And yes!” she cried with a fresh shudder. “There is the slim, dark-faced one who is after me. And how can I know why?”

“You poor child!” Florence lifted her from the chair as easily as she might had she been a sack of feathers. “You shall tell me all about it. But first I must make a fire and brew some good black tea. And you must run along and become Petite Jeanne. I am not very fond of this Pierre person.” She plucked at the black coat sleeve. “In fact I never have cared for him at all.”

Half an hour later the two girls were curled up amid a pile of rugs and cushions before the fire. Cups were steaming, the fire crackling and the day, such as it had been, was rapidly passing into the joyous realm of “times that are gone,” where one may live in memories that amuse and thrill, but never cause fear nor pain.

Jeanne had told her story and Florence had done her best to reassure her, when the little French girl exclaimed: “But you, my friend? Only a few hours ago you spoke of a discovery on the island. What was this so wonderful thing you saw

there?”

“Well, now,” Florence sat up to prod the fire, “that was the strangest thing! You have been on the island?”

“No, my friend. In the fort, but not on the island.”

“Then you don’t know what sort of half wild place it is. It’s made of the dumping from a great city: cans, broken bricks, clay, everything. And from sand taken from the bottom of the lake. It’s been years in the making. Storms have washed in seeds. Birds have carried in others. Little forests of willow and cottonwood have sprung up. The south end is a jungle. A fit hide-out for tramps, you’d say. All that. You’d not expect to find respectable people living there, would you?”

“But how could they?”

“That’s the queer part. They could. And I’m almost sure they do. Seems too strange to be true.

“And yet—” She prodded the fire, then stared into the flames as if to see reproduced there pictures that had half faded from her memories. “And yet, Petite Jeanne, I saw a girl out there, quite a young girl, in overalls and a bathing-suit. She was like a statue when I first saw her, a living statue. She went in for a dip, then donned her overalls to dash right into the jungle.

“I wanted to see where she went, so I followed. And what do you think! After following a winding trail for a little time, I came, just where the cottonwoods are tallest, upon the strangest sort of dwelling—if it was a dwelling at all—I have ever seen.”

“What was it like?” Jeanne leaned eagerly forward.

“Like nothing on land or sea, but a little akin to both. The door was heavy and without glass. It had a great brass knob such as you find on the cabin doors of very old ships. And the windows, if you might call them that, looked like portholes taken from ships.

“But the walls; they were strangest of all. Curious curved pillars rose every two or three feet apart, to a considerable height. Between these pillars brick walls

had been built. The whole was topped by a roof of green tile."

"And the girl went in there?"

"Where else could she have gone?"

"And that was her home?"

"Who could doubt it?"

"America—" Jeanne drew a long breath. "Your America is a strange place."

"So strange that even we who have lived here always are constantly running into the most astonishing things.

"Perhaps," the big girl added, after a brief silence, "that is why America is such a glorious place to live."

"But did you not endeavor to make a call at this strange home?" asked Jeanne.

"I did. Little good it did me! I knocked three times at the door. There was no answer. It was growing dark, but no light shone from those porthole windows. So all I could do was to retrace my steps.

"I had gone not a dozen paces when I caught the sound of a half suppressed laugh. I wheeled about, but saw no one. Now, what do you make of that?"

"It's a sweet and jolly mystery," said Jeanne. "We shall solve it, you and I."

And in dreaming of this new and apparently harmless adventure, the little French girl's troubles were, for the time being at least, forgotten. She slept soundly that night and all her dreams were dreams of peace.

But to-morrow was another day.

CHAPTER IX
CAUGHT IN THE ACT

And on that new day, like a ray of sunshine breaking through the clouds after a storm, there came to Jeanne an hour of speechless joy.

Having exercised as ever her gift of friendship to all mankind, she was able, through her acquaintance with the watchman, to enter the opera house when she chose. There was only one drawback to this; she must enter always as Pierre and never as Petite Jeanne.

Knowing that some sort of rehearsal would be in progress, she garbed herself in her Pierre costume and repaired to the place which to her, of all places on earth, seemed the home of pure enchantment—the opera.

Even now, when the seats were clothed like ghosts in white sheets, when the aisles, so often adorned with living models all a-glitter with silks and jewels, and echoing with the sound of applause and laughter, were dark and still, the great hall lost none of its charm.

As she tripped noiselessly down the foyer where pillars cut from some curious stone flanked her on every side and priceless chandeliers hung like blind ghosts far above her head, she thought of the hundreds who had promenaded here displaying rich furs, costly silks and jewels. She recalled, too, the remark of that strangely studious man with a beard:

“It is a form of life.”

“I wonder what he meant?” she said half aloud. “Perhaps some day I shall meet him again. If I do, I shall ask him.”

But Jeanne was no person to be living in the past. She dreamed of the future when only dreams were at her command. For her the vivid, living, all-entrancing *present* was what mattered most. She had not haunted the building long before she might have been found curled up in a seat among the dark shadows close to the back row on the orchestra floor. She had pushed the white covering away, but was still half hidden by it; she could be entirely hidden in a second's time if she so willed.

Behind and above her, black chasms of darkness, the boxes and balconies loomed. Before her the stage, all dark, seemed a mysterious cave where a hundred bandits might hide among the settings of some imposing scene.

She did not know the name of the opera to be rehearsed on this particular afternoon. Who, then, can describe the stirring of her blood, the quickening of her heart-beats, the thrill that coursed through her very being when the first faint flush of dawn began appearing upon the scene that lay before her? A stage dawn it was, to be sure; but very little less than real it was, for all that. In this matchless place of amusement shades of light, pale gray, blue, rosy red, all come creeping out, and dawn lingers as it does upon hills and forests of earth and stone and wood.

Eagerly the little French girl leaned forward to catch the first glimpse of that unknown scene. Slowly, slowly, but quite surely, to the right a building began looming out from that darkness. The trunk of a tree appeared, another and yet another. Dimly a street was outlined. One by one these objects took on a clearer line until with an impulsive movement, Jeanne fairly leaped from her place.

"It is France!" she all but cried aloud. "My own beloved France! And the opera! It is to be 'The Juggler of Notre Dame'! Was there ever such marvelous good fortune!"

It was indeed as if a will higher than her own had planned all this, for this short opera was the one Jeanne had studied. It was this opera, as you will remember from reading *The Golden Circle*, that Jeanne had once witnessed quite by chance as she lay flat upon the iron grating more than a hundred feet above the stage.

"And now I shall see Marjory Dean play in it once more," she exulted. "For this is a dress rehearsal, I am sure of that."

She was not long in discovering that her words were true. Scarcely had the full

light of day shone upon that charming stage village, nestled among the hills of France, than a company of peasants, men, women and children, all garbed in bright holiday attire, came trooping upon the stage.

But what was this? Scarcely had they arrived than one who loitered behind began shouting in the most excited manner and pointing to the road that led back to the hills.

“The juggler is coming,” Jeanne breathed. “The juggler of Notre Dame.” She did not say Marjory Dean, who played the part. She said: “the juggler,” because at this moment she lived again in that beautiful village of her native land. Once again she was a gypsy child. Once more she camped at the roadside. With her pet bear and her friend, the juggler, she marched proudly into the village to dance for pennies before the delighted crowd in the village square.

What wonder that Petite Jeanne knew every word of this charming opera by heart? Was it not France as she knew it? And was not France her native land?

Breathing deeply, clutching now and then at her heart to still its wild beating, she waited and watched. A second peasant girl followed the first to the roadside. She too called and beckoned. Others followed her. And then, with a burst of joyous song, their gay garments gleaming like a bed of flowers, their faces shining, these happy villagers came trooping back. And in their midst, bearing in one hand a gay, colored hoop, in the other a mysterious bag of tricks, was the juggler of Notre Dame.

“It is Marjory Dean, Marjory herself. She is the juggler,” Jeanne whispered. She dared not trust herself to do more. She wanted to leap to her feet, to clap her hands and cry: “Ray! Ray! Ray! *Vive! Vive! Vive!*”

But no, this would spoil it all. She must see this beautiful story through to its end.

So, calming herself, she settled back to see the juggler, arrayed in his fantastic costume, open his bag of tricks. She saw him delight his audience with his simple artistry.

She watched, breathless, as a priest, coming from the monastery, rebuked him for practicing what he believed to be a sinful art. She suffered with the juggler as he fought a battle with his soul. When he came near to the door of the monastery

that, being entered, might never again be abandoned, she wished to rise and shout:

“No! No! Juggler! Stay with the happy people in the bright sunshine. Show them more of your art. Life is too often sad. Bring joy to their lives!”

She said, in reality, nothing. When at last the curtain fell, she was filled with one desire: to be for one short hour the juggler of Notre Dame. She knew the words of his song; had practiced his simple tricks.

“Why not? Sometime—somewhere,” she breathed.

“Sometime? Somewhere?” She realized in an instant that no place could be quite the same to her as this one that in all its glories of green and gold surrounded her now.

When the curtain was up again the stage scene remained the same; but the gay peasants, the juggler, were gone.

After some moments of waiting Jeanne realized that this scene had been set for the night’s performance, that this scene alone would be rehearsed upon the stage.

“They are gone! It is over!” How empty her life seemed now. It was as if a great light had suddenly gone out.

Stealing from her place, she crept down the aisle, entered a door and emerged at last upon a dark corner of the stage.

For a moment, quite breathless, she stood there in the shadows, watching, listening.

“There is no one,” she breathed. “I am alone.”

An overpowering desire seized her to don the juggler’s costume, to sing his songs, to do his tricks. The costume was there, the bag of tricks. Why not?

Pausing not a second, she crept to the center of the stage, seized the coveted prizes, then beat a hasty retreat.

Ten minutes later, dancing lightly and singing softly, she came upon the stage.

She was there alone. Yet, in her mind's eye she saw the villagers of France, matrons and men, laughing lovers, dancing children, all before her as, casting her bag upon the green, she seized some trifling baubles and began working her charms.

For her, too, the seats were not dark, covered empties, but filled with human beings, filled with the light and joy of living.

Of a sudden she seemed to hear the reproving words of the priest.

Turning about, with sober face, she stood before the monastery door.

And then, like some bird discovered in a garden, she wanted to run away. For there, in very life, a little way back upon the vast stage, stood all the peasants of the opera. And in their midst, garbed in street attire, was Marjory Dean!

"Who are you? How do you dare tamper with my property, to put on my costume?" Marjory Dean advanced alone.

There was sternness in her tone. But there was another quality besides. Had it not been for this, Jeanne might have crumpled in a helpless heap upon the stage. As it was, she could only murmur in her humblest manner:

"I—I am only an usher. See!" She stripped off the juggler's garb, and stood there in black attire. "Please do not be too hard. I have harmed nothing. See! I will put it all back." This, with trembling fingers, she proceeded to do. Then in the midst of profound silence, she retreated into the shadows.

She had barely escaped from the stage into the darkness of the opera pit when a figure came soft-footedly after her.

She wished to flee, but a voice seemed to whisper, "Stay!"

The word that came ten seconds after was, "Wait! You can't deceive me. You are Petite Jeanne!"

It was the great one, Marjory Dean, who spoke.

"Why, how—how could you know?" Jeanne was thrown into consternation.

“Who could not know? If one has seen you upon the stage before, he could not be mistaken.

“But, little girl,” the great one’s tone was deep and low like the mellow chimes of a great clock, “I will not betray you.

“You did that divinely, Petite Jeanne. I could not have done it better. And you, Jeanne, are much like me. A little make-up, and there you are, Petite Jeanne, who is Marjory Dean. Some day, perhaps, I shall allow you to take my place, to do this first act for me, before all this.” She spread her arms wide as if to take in a vast audience.

“No!” Jeanne protested. “I could never do that. Never! Marjory Dean, I—no! No!”

She broke off to stare into the darkness. No one was there!

“I could almost believe I imagined it,” she told herself.

“And yet—no! It was true. She said it. Marjory Dean said that!”

Little wonder, then, that all the remaining hours of that day found on her fair face a radiance born, one might say, in Heaven.

Many saw that face and were charmed by it. The little rich girl saw it as Jeanne performed her humble duties as Pierre. She was so taken by it that, with her father’s consent, she invited Pierre to visit her at her father’s estate next day. And Pierre accepted. And that, as you well may guess, leads to quite another story.

CHAPTER X
THE ONE WITHIN THE SHADOWS

Having accepted an invitation from a daughter of the rich, Jeanne was at once thrown into consternation.

“What am I to wear?” she wailed. “As Pierre I can’t very well wear pink chiffon and satin slippers. And of course evening dress does not go with an informal visit to an estate in mid-afternoon. Oh, why did I accept?”

“You accepted,” Florence replied quietly, “because you wish to know all about life. You have been poor as a gypsy. You know all about being poor. You have lived as a successful lady of the stage. You were then an artist. Successful artists are middle class people, I should say. But your friend Rosemary is rich. She will show you one more side of life.”

“A form of life, that’s what he called it.”

“Who called it?”

“A man. But what am I to wear?”

“Well,” Florence pondered, “you are a youth, a mere boy; that’s the way they think of you. You are to tramp about over the estate.”

“And ride horses. She said so. How I love horses!”

“You are a boy. And you have no mother to guide you.” Florence chanted this. “What would a boy wear? Knickers, a waist, heavy shoes, a cap. You have all these, left from our summer in the northern woods.”

Why not, indeed? This was agreed upon at once. So it happened that when the great car, all a-glitter with gold and platinum trimmings, met her before the opera at the appointed hour, it was as a boy, perhaps in middle teens, garbed for an outing, that the little French girl sank deep into the broadcloth cushions.

“Florence said it would do,” she told herself. “She is usually right. I do hope that she may be right this time.”

Rosemary Robinson had been well trained, very well trained indeed. The ladies who managed and taught the private school which she attended were ladies of the first magnitude. As everyone knows, the first lesson to be learned in the school of proper training is the art of deception. One must learn to conceal one’s feelings. Rosemary had learned this lesson well. It had been a costly lesson. To any person endowed with a frank and generous nature, such a lesson comes only by diligence and suffering. If she had expected to find the youthful Pierre dressed in other garments than white waist, knickers and green cap, she did not say so, either by word, look or gesture.

This put Jeanne at her ease at once; at least as much at ease as any girl masquerading as a boy might be expected to achieve.

“She’s a dear,” she thought to herself as Rosemary, leading her into the house, introduced her in the most nonchalant manner to the greatest earthly paradise she had ever known.

As she felt her feet sink deep in rich Oriental rugs, as her eyes feasted themselves upon oil paintings, tapestries and rare bits of statuary that had been gathered from every corner of the globe, she could not so much as regret the deception that had gained her entrance to this world of rare treasures.

“But would I wish to live here?” she asked herself. “It is like living in a museum.”

When she had entered Rosemary’s own little personal study, when she had feasted her eyes upon all the small objects of rare charm that were Rosemary’s own, upon the furniture done by master craftsmen and the interior decorated by a real artist, when she had touched the soft creations of silk that were curtains, drapes and pillows, she murmured:

“Yes. Here is that which would bring happiness to any soul who loves beauty

and knows it when he sees it."

"But we must not remain indoors on a day such as this!" Rosemary exclaimed. "Come!" She seized her new friend's hand. "We will go out into the sunshine. You are a sun worshipper, are you not?"

"Perhaps," said Jeanne who, you must not forget, was for the day Pierre Andrews. "I truly do not know."

"There are many sun worshippers these days." Rosemary laughed a merry laugh. "And why not? Does not the sun give us life? And if we rest beneath his rays much of the time, does he not give us a more abundant life?"

"See!" Pierre, catching the spirit of the hour, held out a bare arm as brown as the dead leaves of October. "I *am* a sun worshipper!"

At this they went dancing down the hall.

"But, see!" Rosemary exclaimed. "Here is the organ!" She threw open a door, sprang to a bench, touched a switch here, a stop there, then began sending out peals of sweet, low, melodious music.

"A pipe organ!" Jeanne exclaimed. "In your home!"

"Why not?" Rosemary laughed. "Father likes the organ. Why should he not hear it when he chooses? It is a very fine one. Many of the great masters have been here to play it. I am taking lessons. In half an hour I must come here for a lesson. Then you must become a sun worshipper. You may wander where you please or just lie by the lily pond and dream in the sun."

"I am fond of dreaming."

"Then you shall dream."

The grounds surrounding the great house were to the little French girl a land of enchantment. The formal garden where even in late autumn the rich colors of bright red, green and gold vied with the glory of the Indian Summer sunshine, the rock garden, the pool where gold-fish swam, the rustic bridge across the brook, and back of all this the primeval forest of oak, walnut and maple; all this, as they wandered over leaf-strewn paths, reminded her of the forests and hedges,

the grounds and gardens of her own beloved France.

“Truly,” she whispered to herself, “all this is worth being rich for.

“But what a pity—” Her mood changed. “What a pity that it may not belong to all—to the middle class, the poor.

“And yet,” she concluded philosophically, “they have the parks. Truly they are beautiful always.”

It was beside a broad pool where lily pads lay upon placid waters that Jeanne at last found a place of repose beneath the mellow autumn sun, to settle down to the business of doing her bit of sun worship.

It was truly delightful, this spot, and very dreamy. There were broad stretches of water between the clusters of lily pads. In these, three stately swans, seeming royal floats of some enchanted midget city, floated. Some late flowers bloomed at her feet. Here bees hummed drowsily. A dragon fly, last of his race, a great green ship with bulging eyes, darted here and there. Yet in his movements there were suggestions of rest and dreamy repose. The sun was warm. From the distance came the drone of a pipe organ. It, too, spoke of rest. Jeanne, as always, had retired at a late hour on the previous night. Her head nodded. She stretched herself out upon the turf. She would close her eyes for three winks.

“Just three winks.”

But the drowsy warmth, the distant melody, the darting dragon fly, seen even in her dreams, held her eyes tight closed.

As she dreamed, the bushes not five yards away parted and a face peered forth. It was not an inviting face. It was a dark, evil-eyed face with a trembling leer about the mouth. Jeanne had seen this man. He had called to her. She had run away. That was long ago, before the door of the opera. She did not see him now. She slept.

A little bird scolding in a tree seemed eager to wake her. She did not wake.

The man moved forward a step. Someone unseen appeared to move behind him. With a wolf-like eye he glanced to right and left. He moved another step. He was like a cat creeping upon his prey.

“Wake up, Jeanne! Wake up! Wake! Wake! Wake up!” the little bird scolded on. Jeanne did not stir. Still the sun gleamed warm, the music droned, the dragon fly darted in her dreams.

But what is this? The evil-eyed one shrinks back into his place of hiding. No footsteps are heard; the grass is like a green carpet, as the master of the estate and his wife approach.

They would have passed close to the sleeping one had not a glance arrested them.

“What a beautiful boy!” whispered the lady. “And see how peacefully he sleeps! He is a friend of Rosemary, a mere child of the opera. She has taken a fancy to him.”

“Who would not?” the man rumbled low. “I have seen him at our box. There was the affair of the pearls. He—”

“Could a guilty person sleep so?”

“No.”

“Not upon the estate of one he has robbed.”

“Surely not. Do you know,” the lady’s tone became deeply serious, “I have often thought of adopting such a child, a boy to be a companion and brother to Rosemary.”

Could Jeanne have heard this she might well have blushed. She did not hear, for the sun shone on, the music still droned and the dragon fly darted in her dreams.

The lady looked in the great man’s eyes. She read an answer there.

“Shall we wake him and suggest it now?” she whispered.

Ah, Jeanne! What shall the answer be? You are Pierre. You are Jeanne.

But the great man shakes his head. “The thing needs talking over. In a matter of so grave importance one must look carefully before one moves. We must consider.”

So the two pass on. And once again Jeanne has escaped.

And now Rosemary comes racing down the slope to discover her and to waken her by tickling her nose with a swan's feather.

"Come!" she exclaims, before Jeanne is half conscious of her surroundings. "We are off for a canter over the bridle path!" Seizing Jeanne's hand, she drags her to her feet. Then together they go racing away toward the stables.

The remainder of that day was one joyous interlude in Petite Jeanne's not uneventful life. Save for the thought that Rosemary believed her a boy, played with her and entertained her as a boy and was, perhaps, just a little interested in her as a boy, no flaw could be found in this glorious occasion.

A great lover of horses since her days in horse-drawn gypsy vans, she gloried in the spirited brown steed she rode. The day was perfect. Blue skies with fleecy clouds drifting like sheep in a field, autumn leaves fluttering down, cobwebs floating lazily across the fields; this was autumn at its best.

They rode, those two, across green meadows, down shady lanes, through forests where shadows were deep. Now and again Rosemary turned an admiring glance upon her companion sitting in her saddle with ease and riding with such grace.

"If she knew!" Jeanne thought with a bitter-sweet smile. "If she only knew!"

"Where did you learn to ride so well?" Rosemary asked, as they alighted and went in to tea.

"In France, to be sure."

"And who taught you?"

"Who but the gypsies?"

"Gypsies! How romantic!"

"Romantic? Yes, perhaps." Jeanne was quick to change the subject. She was getting into deep water. Should she begin telling of her early life she must surely, sooner or later, betray her secret.

“Rich people,” she thought, as she journeyed homeward in the great car when the day was done, “they are very much like others, except when they choose to show off. And I wonder how much they enjoy that, after all.

“But Rosemary! Does she suspect? I wonder! She’s such a peach! It’s a shame to deceive her. Yet, what sport! And besides, I’m getting a little of what I want, a whole big lot, I guess.” She was thinking once more of Marjory Dean’s half-promise.

“Will she truly allow me to be her understudy, to go on in her place when the ‘Juggler’ is done again?” She was fairly smothered by the thought; yet she dared to hope—a little.

CHAPTER XI
A DANCE FOR THE SPIRITS

When Jeanne arrived at the rooms late that night, after her evening among the opera boxes, she found a half burned out fire in the grate and a rather amusing note from Florence on the table:

“I am asleep. Do not disturb me.” This is how the note ran.

She read the note and smiled. “Poor, dear, big Florence,” she murmured. “How selfish I am! She works hard. Often she needs rest that she does not get. Yet I am always hoping that she will be here to greet me and to cheer me with jolly chatter and something warm to drink.”

Still in this thoughtful mood, she entered her chamber. She did not switch on the light at once, but stood looking out of the window. Somewhat to her surprise, she saw a dark figure lurking in the shadows across the street.

“Who could it be?” she whispered.

She had little hope of solving this problem when an automobile light solved it for her and gave her a shock besides. The light fell full upon the man’s face. She recognized him instantly.

“Jaeger!” She said the name out loud and trembled from head to foot.

Jaeger was the detective who haunted the boxes at the opera.

“He is shadowing me!” She could not doubt this. “He believes I stole those pearls. Perhaps he thinks he can catch me trying them on. Not much chance of that.” She laughed uneasily. “It is well enough to know you are innocent; but to

convince others, that is the problem."

She thought of the lady in black. "If only I could see her, speak to her!" She drew the shades, threw on the light and disrobed, still in a thoughtful mood. She was remembering the voice of that lady.

There was something hauntingly familiar about that voice. It brought to her mind a feeling of forests and rippling waters, the scent of balsam and the song of birds. Yet she could not tell where she had heard it before.

Joan of Arc was Jeanne's idol. Once as a child, wandering with the gypsies, she had slept within the shadows of the church where Joan received her visions. At another time she had sat for an entire forenoon dreaming the hours away in the chamber that had once been Joan's own. Yet, unlike Joan, she did not love wearing the clothes of a boy. She was fond of soft, clinging, silky things, was this delicate French child. So, dressed in the silkiest of all silks and the softest of satin robes, she built herself a veritable mountain of pillows before the fire and, sinking back into that soft depth, proceeded to think things through.

To this strange girl sitting at the mouth of her cave made of pillows, the fire on the hearth was a magic fire. She prodded it. As it blazed red, she saw in it clearly the magic curtain. She felt again the thrill of this mysterious discovery. Once more she was gazing upon strange smoking images, bronze eagles, giants' heads, dragons. She smelled the curious, choking incense. And again the feeling of wild terror seized her.

So real was the vision that she leaped to her feet, sending the soft walls of her cave flying in every direction.

Next instant she was in complete possession of her senses. "Why am I afraid?" she asked herself. "Why was I afraid then? It is but a stage setting, some Oriental magic."

A thought struck her all of a heap. "Stage setting! That's it!" she exclaimed in a low whisper. "Why not? What a wonderful setting for some exotic little touch of Oriental drama!

"I must return to that place. I must see that Magic Curtain once more." She rearranged the door to her cave. "I must take someone with me. Why not Marjory Dean?"

The thought pleased her. She mused over it until the fire burned low.

But with the dimming of the coals her spirits ebbed. As she gazed into the fire she seemed to see a dark and evil face leering at her, the man who had called to her at the opera door.

Had she seen that same face staring at her on that other occasion when she slept in the sun on the Robinson estate, she might well have shuddered more violently. As it was, she asked but a single question: “Who is he?”

She threw on fuel. The fire flamed up. Once more she was gay as she heard Marjory Dean whisper those magic words:

“You did that divinely, Petite Jeanne. I could not have done it better. Some day, perhaps, I shall allow you to take my place.”

“Will you?” she cried, stretching her arms wide. “Oh! Will you, Marjory Dean?”

After this emotional outburst she sat for a long time quite motionless.

“I wonder,” she mused after a time, “why this desire should have entered my heart. Why Grand Opera? I have done Light Opera. I sang. I danced. They applauded. They said I was marvelous. Perhaps I was.” Her head fell a little forward.

“Ambition!” Her face was lifted to the ceiling. “It is ambition that drives us on. When I was a child I danced in the country lanes. Then I must go higher, I must dance in a village; in a small city; in a large city; in Paris. That so beautiful Paris! And now it must be Grand Opera; something drives me on.”

She prodded the fire and, for the last time that night, it flamed high.

Springing to her feet she cast off her satin robe to go racing across the floor in the dance of the juggler. Low and clear, her voice rose in a French song of great enchantment. For a time her delicate, elf-like form went weaving in and out among the shadows cast by the fire. Then, all of a sudden, she danced into her chamber. The show, given only for spirits and fairies, was at an end.

“To-morrow,” she whispered low, as her eyes closed for sleep, “to-morrow there is no opera. I shall not see Marjory Dean, nor Rosemary, nor those dark-faced

ones who dog my steps. To-morrow? Whom shall I see? What strange new acquaintance shall I make; what adventures come to me?”

CHAPTER XII
THE LOST CAMEO

In spite of the fact that the Opera House was dark on the following night, adventure came to Petite Jeanne, adventure and excitement a-plenty. It came like the sudden rush of an ocean's wave. One moment she and Florence were strolling in a leisurely manner down the center of State Street; the next they were surrounded, completely engulfed and carried whither they knew not by a vast, restless, roaring, surging sea of humanity.

For many days they had read accounts of a great autumn festival that was to occur on this night. Having never witnessed such a fete, save in her native land, Petite Jeanne had been eager to attend. So here they were. And here, too, was an unbelievable multitude.

Petite Jeanne cast a startled look at her companion.

Florence, big capable Florence, smiled as she bent over to speak in the little French girl's ear.

"Get in front of me. I'll hold them back."

"But why all this?" Petite Jeanne tried to gesture, only to end by prodding a fat man in the stomach.

"This," laughed Florence, "is Harvest Jubilee Night. A city of three million invited all its citizens to come down and enjoy themselves in six city blocks. Bands are to play. Radio stars are to be seen. Living models will be in all the store windows.

"The three million are here. They will hear no bands. They will see no radio

stars, nor any living models either. They will see and hear only themselves."

"Yes. And they will feel one another, too!" the little French girl cried, as the crush all but pressed the breath from her lungs. The look on her face was one of pure fright. Florence, too, was thinking serious thoughts. That which had promised only a bit of adventure in the beginning bade fair to become a serious matter. Having moved down the center of a block, they had intended turning the corner. But now, caught in the tremendous crush of humanity, by the thousands upon thousands of human beings who thronged the streets, carried this way and that by currents and counter-currents, they were likely to be carried anywhere. And should the crush become too great, they might well be rendered unconscious by the vise-like pressure of the throng.

This indeed was Harvest Jubilee Night. The leading men of this city had made a great mistake. Wishing to draw thousands of people to the trading center of the city, they had staged a great fete. As Florence had said, men and women of note, actors, singers, radio stars were to be found on grand stands erected at every street crossing. All this was wonderful, to be sure! Only one fact had been lost sight of: that hundreds of thousands of people cannot move about freely in the narrow space of six city blocks.

Now, here were the laughing, shouting, crowding, groaning, weeping thousands. What was to come of it all? Petite Jeanne asked herself this question, took one long quivering breath, then looked up at her stout companion and was reassured.

"We came here for a lark," she told herself. "We must see it through.

"I only hope," she caught her breath again, "that I don't see anyone in this crowd who makes me trouble. Surely I cannot escape him here!" She was thinking of the dark-faced man with the evil eye.

"Keep up courage," Florence counseled. "We'll make it out of here safe enough."

But would they? Every second the situation became more tense. Now they were carried ten paces toward Wabash Avenue; now, like some dance of death, the crowd surged backward toward Dearborn Street. And now, caught in an eddy, they whirled round and round.

In such a time as this the peril is great. Always, certain persons, deserting all

caution, carried away by their own exuberance, render confusion worse confounded. Bands of young men, perhaps from high school or college, with hands on shoulders, built up flying wedges that shot through the crowd like bullets through wood.

Just such a group was pressing upon the stalwart Florence and all but crushing the breath out of her, when for the first time she became conscious of a little old lady in a faded shawl who fairly crouched at her feet.

“She’s eighty if a day,” she thought, with a sudden shock. “She’ll be killed unless—

“Petite Jeanne,” she screamed, “there are times when human beings have neither eyes, ears nor brains. They can always feel. You have sharp elbows. Use them now to the glory of God and for the life of this dear old lady in her faded shawl.”

Suiting actions to her own words, she kicked forth lustily with her square-pointed athletic shoe. The shoe made contact with a grinning youth’s shins. The look of joy on the youth’s face changed to one of sudden pain. He ceased to shove and attempted a retreat. One more grinning face was transformed by an elbow thrust in the stomach. This one doubled up and did his best to back away.

Jeanne added her bit. As Florence had said, her elbows were sharp and effective.

In an incredibly short time there was space for breathing. One moment the little old lady, who was not five feet tall and did not weigh ninety pounds, was in peril of her life; the next she was caught in Florence’s powerful arms and was being borne to safety. And all the time she was screaming:

“Oh! Oh! Oh! It is gone! It is lost! It is lost!”

“Yes,” Florence agreed, as she dropped her to the curbing, well out of the crush, “you have lost a shoe. But what’s a shoe? You would have lost your life. And, after all, how is one to find a shoe in such a place of madness?”

The little old lady made no answer. She sat down upon the curb and began silently to sob while her slight body rocked from side to side and her lips whispered words that could not be heard.

“Was there ever such another night?” Petite Jeanne cried, in real distress. She

was little and quick, very emotional and quite French.

“We came here for a gay time,” she went on. “And now, see how it is! We have been tossed about from wave to wave by the crowd, which is a sea, and now it has washed us ashore with a weeping old lady we have never seen before and may never see again.”

“Hush!” Florence touched her lips. “You will distress her. You came here to find joy and happiness. Joy and happiness may be found quite as often by serving others less fortunate than ourselves as in any other way. We will see if this is not true.

“Come!” She placed gentle hands beneath the bent form of the little, old lady on the curb. “Come, now. There is a bright little tea room right over there. A good cup of black tea will cheer you. Then you must tell us all about it.”

A look of puzzled uncertainty gave way to a smile on the wrinkled face as this strange derelict of the night murmured:

“Tea. Yes, yes, a good cup of black tea.”

The tea room was all but deserted. On this wild night of nights people did not eat. Vendors of ice cream sandwiches found no customers. Baskets of peanuts were more likely to be tumbled into the street than eaten. The throng had indeed become a wild, stormy sea. And a stormy sea neither eats nor sleeps.

“Tell me,” said Florence, as the hot tea warmed the white-haired one’s drowsy blood, “why did you weep at the loss of a shoe?”

“A shoe?” The little old lady seemed puzzled. She looked down at her feet. “A shoe? Ah, yes! It is true. One shoe is gone.

“But it is not that.” Her voice changed. Her dull blue eyes took on fresh color. “I have lost more—much more. My purse! Money? No, my children. A little. It is nothing. I have lost my cameo, my only treasure. And, oh, I shall never see it again!” She began wringing her hands and seemed about to give way once more to weeping.

“Tell us about it,” Petite Jeanne put in eagerly. “Perhaps we can help you.”

“Tell you? Help me?” The old eyes were dreamy now. “My cameo! My one great treasure. It was made in Florence so many, many years ago. It was my own portrait done in onyx, pink onyx. I was only a child, sixteen, slight and fair like you.” She touched Jeanne’s golden hair. “He was young, romantic, already an artist. He became very famous when he was older. But never, I am sure, did he carve such a cameo, for, perhaps—perhaps he loved me—just a little.

“But now!” This was a cry of pain. “Now it is gone! And I have kept it all these long years. I should not have come to-night. I had not been to the heart of the city for ten years. But this night they told me I was to see ‘Auld Sandy’ himself. He’s on the radio, you know. He sings old Scotch songs so grandly and recites Burns’ poems with so much feeling. I wanted to see him. I did not dare leave the cameo in my poor room. My cameo! So I brought it, and now—

“But you said you would help me.” Once again her face brightened.

“Yes.” Florence’s tone was eager, hopeful. “We will help you. Someone will find your purse. It will be turned in. The police will have it. We will get it for you in the morning. Only give us your address and we will bring it, your treasure, your cameo.”

“Will you?”

Florence heard that cry of joy, and her heart smote her. Could they find it?

They wrote down the little old lady’s address carefully; then escorting her to the elevated platform, they saw her safely aboard a train.

“Now why did I do that?” Florence turned a face filled with consternation to Petite Jeanne. “Why did I promise so much?”

She was to wonder this many times during that night of mysterious and thrilling adventure.

“Let us go back,” said Petite Jeanne. “See! The trains are loaded with people returning home. The crowd must not be so great. The little lady’s purse must have been kicked about; but we may yet find it.”

“That,” replied Florence, “would seem too good to be true. Yes, let us go back. We must not hope too much, for all that. Many are going, but others are coming.

Surely this is one wild night in a great city."

And so it was. Hardly had they descended the iron steps to the street and walked half a block than the waves of humanity were upon them again.

"The tide is set against us." Florence urged her companion into the momentary security of a department store entrance. There, from a vantage point of safety, they watched the crowds surging by. They were at a point where the pressure of the throng was broken. It was interesting to study the faces of those who emerged into a place of comparative quiet. Some were exuberant over the struggle they had waged and won, others crushed. Here was one in tears and there was one who had fainted, being hurried away by others to a place of first aid.

"They are poor," Petite Jeanne murmured. "At least they are not rich, nor even well-to-do. They are working people who came for a good time. Are they having it? Who can tell? Surely, never before have they seen so many people. And perhaps they never will see so many again. To-morrow they will talk. How they will talk of this night's adventure! As for me," she sighed, "I prefer a quiet place beneath the stars."

"Do you?" Florence spoke up quickly. "Then we will go to just such a place."

"Surely not in this great city."

"Ten minutes by elevated train, ten minutes walk after that, and we are there. Come! We can never hope to reach the spot where the cameo was lost. Come!"

Nor did she fail to make good her promise. Twenty minutes later they were walking in a spot where, save for the low swish of water against rocks, silence reigned supreme.

"How strange! How fascinating! What stillness!" Petite Jeanne gripped her companion's arm hard. "Here are silence, starlight, moonlight, grass beneath one's feet and the gleam of distant water in our eyes."

"Yes." Florence's tone was low like the deep notes of a cello. "And only a short time ago, perhaps a year ago, the waters of the lake lay ten feet deep at the very spot on which we stand. Such is the wondrous achievement of man when inspired by a desire to provide a quiet place for a weary multitude. This is 'made

land' a park in the making. Great squares of limestone were dumped in the lake. With these as a barrier to hold back the onrush of the lake waters, men have hauled in sand, clay, ashes, all the refuse of a great city. Nature has breathed upon that ugly pile of debris. The sun has caressed it, the wind smoothed it, rain beat down upon it, birds brought seeds, and now we have soft earth, grass, flowers, a place of beauty and quiet peace."

The place they had entered is strange. A great city, finding itself cramped for breathing space, has reached out a mighty hand to snatch land from the bottom of the lake. Thirty blocks in length, as large as an ordinary farm, this space promises to become, in the near future, a place of joy forever.

At the time of our story it was half a field of tangled grass and half a junk pile. As the two girls wandered on they found themselves flanked on one side by a tumbled line of gigantic man-made boulders and on the other by a curious jumble of waste. Steel barrels, half rusted away, lay among piles of cement blocks and broken plaster.

"Come," said Florence, "let us go out upon the rocks."

A moment of unsteady leaping from spot to spot, and they sat looking out on a band of gold painted across the waters by the moon.

"How still it is!" Jeanne whispered. "After all the shouting of the throng, I feel that I may have gone suddenly deaf."

"It *is* still," Florence replied. "No one here. Not a soul. Only you and I, the moon and the night."

And yet, even as she spoke, a sudden chill gripped her heart. She had caught a sound. Someone was among the rocks close at hand; there could be no mistaking that. Who could it be?

Her heart misgave her. Had she committed a dangerous blunder? She had been here before, but never at night. The city, with all its perils, its evil ones, was but a few steps away. As she listened she even now caught indistinctly the murmur of it. Someone was among the rocks. He might be advancing. Who could it be, at this hour of the night?

Strangely enough at this instant one thought entered her mind: "Nothing must

happen to me. I have a sacred duty to perform. I have pledged myself to return that priceless cameo to that dear little old lady."

At the same instant the light from a distant automobile, making a turn on the drive, fell for a space of seconds upon the tumbled pile of rocks. It lit up not alone the rocks but a face; a strangely ugly face, not ten paces away.

One second the light was there. The next it was gone. And in that same second the moon went under a cloud. The place was utterly dark.

CHAPTER XIII
A NYMPH OF THE NIGHT

Florence had never seen the face lit up there in the night; yet it struck fear to her heart. What must we say, then, of Petite Jeanne? For this was the face of one who, more than any others, inspired her with terror. He it had been who called after her at the door of the opera, he who had looked out from the bushes as she slept in the sun. At sight of him now, she all but fell among the rocks from sheer panic.

As for Florence, she was startled into action. They were, she suddenly realized, many blocks from any human habitation, on a deserted strip of man-made shore land lighted only by stars and the moonlight. And at this moment the moon, having failed them, had left the place black as a tomb.

With a low, whispered “Come!” and guided more by instinct than sight, she led Jeanne off the tumbled pile of rocks and out to the path where grass grew rank and they were in danger at any moment of tripping over pieces of debris.

“Who—who was that?”

Florence fancied she heard the little French girl’s heart beating wildly as she asked the question.

“Who can tell? There may be many. See! Yonder, far ahead, is a light.”

The light they saw was the gleam of a camp fire. In this desolate spot it seemed strangely out of place; yet there is that about fire and light that suggests security and peace. How often in her homeland had Petite Jeanne felt the cozy warmth of an open fireplace and, secure from all danger, had fallen asleep in the corner of a gypsy’s tent. How often as a child had Florence, in a cane-seated rocker, sat

beside the humble kitchen stove to hear the crackle of the fire, to watch its glow through its open grate and to dream dreams of security and peace.

What wonder, then, that these two bewildered and frightened ones, at sight of a glowing fire, should leap forward with cries of joy on their lips?

Nor were they destined to disappointment. The man who had built that fire loved its cheerful gleam just as they did, and for the very same reason: it whispered to him of security and peace.

He was old, was this man. His face had been deeply tanned and wrinkled by many a sun. His hair was snow white. A wandering philosopher and preacher, he had taken up his abode in a natural cavern between great rocks. He welcomed these frightened girls to a place of security by his fireside.

“Probably nothing to frighten you,” he reassured them. “There are many of us sleeping out here among the rocks. In these times when work is scarce, when millions know not when or where they are to eat and when, like our Master, many of us have nowhere to lay our heads, it will not seem strange that so many, some by the aid of a pile of broken bricks and some with cast-off boards and sheet-iron, should fashion here homes of a sort which they may for a brief time call their own.

“Of course,” he added quickly, “all too soon this will be a thing of the past. Buildings will rise here and there. They are rising even now. Three have been erected on these very shores. Scores of buildings will dot them soon. Palm trees will wave, orange trees blossom, grass and flowers will fringe deep lagoons where bright boats flash in the sun. All this will rise as if by magic and our poor abodes built of cast-off things will vanish, our camp fires gleam no more.” His voice trailed off into nothingness. For a time after that they sat there silent, staring at the fire.

“That,” said Florence, speaking with some effort, “will be too bad.”

“No, I suppose not.” The old man’s voice was mellow. “It’s going to be a Fair, a great Exposition. Millions of eager feet will tramp over the very spot where we now sit in such silence and peace. They are to call it the ‘Century of Progress.’ Progress,” he added dreamily. “Progress. That is life. There must be progress. Time marches on. What matter that some are left behind?

“But, see!” His tone changed. “Great clouds are banking up in the west. There will be a storm! My poor shelter does well enough for me. For you it will not suffice.

“You will do well to go forward,” he advised, as they sprang to their feet. “It is a long way back over the path you have come. If you go forward it is only a matter of a few blocks to a bridge over the railroad tracks. And across that bridge you will find shelter and a street car to carry you home.”

As he stood there by the fire, watching their departure, he seemed a heroic figure, this wandering philosopher.

“Surely,” Florence whispered to herself, “it is not always the rich, the famous, the powerful who most truly serve mankind.”

Once more she was reminded of the little old lady and her one treasure, the priceless cameo fashioned by skilled and loving fingers so many years ago.

“And I promised to return it to her!” This thought was one almost of despair.

“And yet,” she murmured, “I made that promise out of pure love. Who knows how Providence may assist me?”

There appeared to be, however, little time for thoughts other than those of escape from the storm. Their hurried march south began at once.

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As for the man who had so inspired them with terror, the one of the evil eye, he had not followed them. There is some reason to doubt that he so much as saw them. Had his attention been directed toward them, it seems probable that he would have passed them by as unknown to him and quite unimportant for he, as we must recall, knew Jeanne only as the boy usher, Pierre.

Truth was, this young man, who would have laughed to scorn any suggestion that his home might be found in this tumbled place, was engaged in a special sort of business that apparently required haste; for, after passing down the winding path at a kind of trotting walk, he hastened past a dark bulk that was a building of some size, turned to the right, crossed a temporary wooden bridge to come out at last upon the island which was also a part of the city’s “made land.” It was

upon this island that Florence, a few evenings before, had discovered the mysterious girl and the more mystifying house that was so much like a ship, and yet so resembled a tiny church.

Even while the two girls talked to the ragged philosopher, this evil-eyed one with the dark and forbidding face had crossed the island and, coming out at the south end, had mounted the rock-formed breakwater where some frame-like affair stood.

At the far end of the frame was a dark circle some twenty feet in diameter. This circle was made of steel. It supported a circular dip-net for catching fish. There was a windlass at the end of the pole supporting the net. By unwinding the windlass one might allow the net to sink into the water. If luck were with him, he might hope to draw it up after a time with a fair catch of perch or herring.

All day long this windlass might be heard screaming and creaking as it lifted and lowered the net. For the present it was silent. The fisherman slept. Not so this dark prowler.

The man with the evil eye was not alone upon the rocks that night, though beyond a shadow of a doubt he believed himself to be. Off to the left, at a distance of forty yards, a dark figure, bent over in a position of repose and as still as the rocks themselves, cast a dark shadow over the near-by waters. Did this figure’s head turn? Who could say? Certainly the man could not, for he believed himself alone. However, he apparently did not expect to remain unmolested long, for his eyes were constantly turning toward the barren stretch of sand he had crossed.

His movements betrayed a nervous fear, yet he worked rapidly. Having searched about for some time, he located a battered bucket. This he filled with water. Bringing it up, he threw the entire contents of the bucket upon the windlass. Not satisfied with this, he returned for a second bucket of water and repeated the operation.

Satisfied at last, he drew a package wrapped in black oilcloth from beneath his coat and tossed it to the center of the dangling net. Then with great care lest the rusty windlass, for all the careful soaking he had given it, should let out a screeching complaint, he quietly lowered the net into the lake. The water had done its work; the windlass gave forth no sound.

After this he turned and walked slowly away.

He was some fifty feet from the windlass, busy apparently in contemplating the dark clouds that threatened to obscure the moon, when almost at the same instant two causes for disturbance entered his not uneventful life. From the direction of the lake came a faint splash. At the brow of the little ridge over which he had passed to reach this spot, two men had appeared.

That the men were not unexpected was at once evident. He made no attempt to conceal himself. That the splash puzzled him went without question. He covered half the distance to the breakwater, then paused.

“Poof! Nothing! Wharf rat, perhaps,” he muttered, then returned to his contemplation of the clouds. Yet, had he taken notice before of that silent figure on the rocks, he might now have discovered that it had vanished.

The two men advanced rapidly across the stretch of sand. As they came close there was about their movements an air of caution. At last one spoke:

“Don’t try anything, Al. We got you.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. And the goods are on you!”

“Yeah?”

The dark, evil-eyed one who was apparently known as Al, stood his ground.

The moon lost itself behind a cloud. The place went dark. Yet when the moon reappeared, bringing out the gleam of an officer’s star upon the breast of one of the newcomers, he stood there motionless.

“Will you hand it over, or shall we take you in?” It was the man with the star who spoke.

“You’ve got nothing on me!” Al threw open his coat. “Look me over.”

“We will. And then—”

“Yeah? And then?”

“We’ll see.”

At that instant, all unseen, a dripping figure emerged from the water close to the submerged fishing net. It was the figure that, but a short half hour before had rested motionless upon the rocks; a slender girl whose figure was for a second fully outlined by a distant flash of lightning. She carried some dark object beneath her right arm.

CHAPTER XIV
THE DISAPPEARING PARCEL

In the meantime Florence and Jeanne were making the best of their opportunity to leave the “made land.” They hoped to cross the bridge and reach the car line before the threatened storm broke. Petite Jeanne was terribly afraid of lightning. Every time it streaked across the sky she gripped her strong companion’s arm and shuddered.

It was impossible to make rapid progress. From this point the beaten path disappeared. There were only scattered tracks where other pedestrians had picked their way through the litter of debris.

Here Florence caught her foot in a tangled mass of wire and all but fell to the ground; there Jeanne stepped into a deep hole; and here they found their way blocked by a heap of fragments from a broken sidewalk.

“Why did we come this way?” Petite Jeanne cried in consternation.

“The other was longer, more dangerous. Cheer up! We’ll make it.” Florence took her arm and together they felt their way forward through the darkness that grew deeper and blacker at every step.

Rolling up as they did at the back of a city’s skyscrapers, the mounting clouds were terrible to see.

“The throng!” Petite Jeanne’s heart fairly stopped beating. “What must a terrific thunderstorm mean to that teaming mass of humanity?”

Even at her own moment of distress, this unselfish child found time for a compassionate thought for those hundreds of thousands who still thronged the

city streets.

As for the crowds, not one person of them all was conscious that a catastrophe impended. Walled in on every side by skyscrapers, no slightest glance to the least of those black clouds was granted them. Their ears filled by the honk of horns, the blare of bands and the shouts of thousands, they heard not one rumble of distant thunder. So they laughed and shouted, crowded into this corner and that, to come out shaken and frightened; but never did one of them say, “It will storm.”

Yet out of this merry-mad throng two beings were silent. A boy of sixteen and a hunchback of uncertain age, hovering in a doorway, looked, marveled a little, and appeared to wait.

“When will it break up?” the boy asked out of the corner of his mouth.

“Early,” was the reply. “There’s too many of ’em. They can’t have much fun. See! They’re flooding the grandstands. The bands can’t play. They’ll be going soon. And then—” The hunchback gave vent to a low chuckle.

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After snatching a pair of boy’s strap-overalls from the rocks the girl, who had emerged from the water beside the submerged net, with the dark package under her arm hurried away over a narrow path and lost herself at once in the tangled mass of willows and cottonwood.

She had not gone far before a light appeared at the end of that trail.

Seen from the blackness of night, the structure she approached took on a grotesque aspect. With two small round windows set well above the door, it seemed the face of some massive monster with a prodigious mouth and great gleaming eyes. The girl, it would seem, was not in the least frightened by the monster, for she walked right up to its mouth and, after wrapping her overalls about the black package which still dripped lake water, opened the door, which let out a flood of yellow light, and disappeared within.

Had Florence witnessed all this, her mystification regarding this child of the island might have increased fourfold.

As you already know, Florence was not there. She was still with Petite Jeanne on the strip of “made land” that skirted the shore. They were more than a mile from the island.

They had come at last to a strange place. Having completely lost their way in the darkness, they found themselves of a sudden facing a blank wall.

A strange wall it was, too. It could not be a house for, though made of wood, this wall was composed not of boards but of round posts set so close together that a hand might not be thrust between them.

“Wh—where are we?” Jeanne cried in despair.

“I don’t know.” Florence had fortified her mind against any emergency. “I do know this wall must have an end. We must find it.”

She was right. The curious wall of newly hewn posts did have an end. They were not long in finding it. Coming to a corner they turned it and again followed on.

“This is some enclosure,” Florence philosophized. “It may enclose some form of shelter. And, from the looks of the sky, shelter is what we will need very soon.”

“Yes! Yes!” cried her companion, as a flare of lightning gave her an instant’s view of their surroundings. “There is a building looming just over there. The strangest sort of building, but a shelter all the same.”

Ten minutes of creeping along that wall in the dark, and they came to a massive gate. This, too, was built of logs.

“There’s a chain,” Florence breathed as she felt about. “It’s fastened, but not locked. Shall we try to go in?”

“Yes! Yes! Let us go in!” A sharp flash of lightning had set the little French girl’s nerves all a-quiver.

“Come on then.” There was a suggestion of mystery in Florence’s tone. “We will feel our way back to that place you saw.”

The gate swung open a crack. They crept inside. The door swung to. The chain rattled. Then once more they moved forward in the dark.

After a time, by the aid of a vivid flash, they made out a tall, narrow structure just before them. A sudden dash, and they were inside.

“We—we’re here,” Florence panted, “but where are we?”

“Oo—o! How dark!” Petite Jeanne pressed close to her companion’s side. “I am sure there are no windows.”

“The windows are above,” whispered Florence. A flash of lightning had revealed an opening far above her head.

At the same instant she stumbled against a hard object.

“It’s a stairway,” she announced after a brief inspection. “A curious sort of stairway, too. The steps are shaped like triangles.”

“That means it is a spiral stairway.”

“And each step is thick and rough as if it were hand-hewn with an axe. But who would hew planks by hand in this day of steam and great sawmills?”

“Let’s go up. We may be able to see something from the windows.”

Cautiously, on hands and knees, they made their way up the narrow stairway. The platform they reached and the window they looked through a moment later were quite as mysterious as the stairway. Everywhere was the mark of an axe. The window was narrow, a mere slit not over nine inches wide and quite devoid of glass.

Yet from this window they were to witness one of God’s greatest wonders, a storm at night upon the water.

The dark clouds had swung northward. They were now above the surface of the lake. Blackness vied with blackness as clouds loomed above the water. Like a great electric needle sewing together two curtains of purple velvet for a giant’s wardrobe, lightning darted from sky to sea and from sea to sky again.

“How—how marvelous! How terrible!” Petite Jeanne pressed her companion’s arm hard.

“And what a place of mystery!” Florence answered back.

“But what place *is* this?” Jeanne’s voice was filled with awe. “And where are we?”

“This,” Florence repeated, “is a place of mystery, and this is a night of adventure.

“Adventure and mystery,” she thought to herself, even as she said the words. Once more she thought of the cameo.

“I promised to return it to-morrow. And now it seems I am moving farther and farther from it.”

Had she but known it, the time was not far distant when, like two bits of flotsam on a broad sea, she and the lost cameo would be drifting closer and closer together. And, strange as it may seem, the owner of the cameo, that frail, little, old lady, was to play an important part in the lives of Petite Jeanne and Florence.

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In the meantime the two officers and the man of the evil eye were playing a bit of drama all their own on the sand-blown desert portion of the island.

“You’ll have to come clean!” the senior officer was saying to the man whom he addressed as Al.

“All you got to do is search me. You’ll find nothing on me, not even a rod.” The man stood his ground.

“Fair enough.” With a skill born of long practice, the veteran detective went through the man’s clothes.

“You’ve cachéd it,” he grumbled, as he stood back empty-handed.

“I’m not in on the know.” The suspicion of a smile flitted across the dark one’s face. “Whatever you’re looking for, I never had it.”

“No? We’ll look about a bit, anyway.”

The officers mounted the breakwater to go flashing electric lanterns into every cavity. As the boom of thunder grew louder they abandoned the search to go tramping back across the barren sand.

Left to himself, Al made a pretense of leaving the island, but in reality lost himself from sight on the very brush-grown trail the nymph of the lake had taken a short time before.

“Well, I’ll be—!” he muttered, as he brought up squarely before the structure that seemed a monster’s head, whose eyes by this time were quite sightless. The light had blinked off some moments before.

After walking around the place twice, he stood before the door and lifted a hand as if to knock. Appearing to think better of this, he sank down upon the narrow doorstep, allowed his head to fall forward, and appeared to sleep.

Not for long, however. Foxes do not sleep in the night. Having roused himself, he stole back over the trail, crept to the breakwater, lifted himself to a point of elevation, and surveyed the entire scene throughout three lightning flashes. Then, apparently satisfied, he made his way to the windlass he had left an hour or two before. He repeated the process of drowning the complaining voice of the windlass and then, turning the crank, rapidly lifted the dripping net from the bottom of the lake.

With fingers that trembled slightly, he drew a small flashlight from his pocket to cast its light across the surface of the net.

Muttering a curse beneath his breath, he flashed the light once again, and then stood there speechless.

What had happened? The meshes of that net were fine, so fine that a dozen minnows not more than two inches long struggled vainly at its center. Yet the package he had thrown in this net was gone.

“Gone!” he muttered. “It can’t have floated. Heavy. Heavy as a stone. And I had my eyes on it, every minute; all but—but the time I went down that trail.

“They tricked me!” he growled. He was thinking now of the policemen. “But no! How could they? I saw them go, saw them on the bridge. Couldn’t have come back. Not time enough.”

At this he thrust both hands deep in his pockets and went stumping away.

CHAPTER XV
STRANGE VOICES

As for Florence and Jeanne, they were still hidden away in that riddle of a place by the lake shore on “made land.”

A more perplexing place of refuge could not have been found. What was it? Why was it here? Were there men about the place within the palisades? These were the questions that disturbed even the stout-hearted Florence.

They were silent for a long time, those two. When at last Jeanne spoke, Florence started as if a stranger had addressed her.

“This place,” said Petite Jeanne, “reminds me of a story I once read before I came to America. In my native land we talked in French, of course, and studied in French. But we studied English just as you study French in America.

“A story in my book told of early days in America. It was thrilling, oh, very thrilling indeed! There were Indians, real red men who scalped their victims and held wild war dances. There were scouts and soldiers. And there were forts all built of logs hewn in the forest. And in these forts there were—”

“Fort,” Florence broke in, “a fort. Of course, that is what this is, a fort for protection from Indians.”

“But, Indians!” Jeanne’s tone reflected her surprise. “Real live, wild Indians! There are none here now!”

“Of course not!” Florence laughed a merry laugh. “This is not, after all, a real fort. It is only a reproduction of a very old fort that was destroyed many years ago, old Fort Dearborn.”

“But I do not understand. Why did they put it here?” Petite Jeanne was perplexed.

“It is to be part of the great Fair, the Century of Progress. It was built in order that memories of those good old frontier days might be brought back to us in the most vivid fashion.

“Just think of being here now, just we alone!” Florence enthused. “Let us dream a little. The darkness is all about us. On the lake there is a storm. There is no city now; only a village straggling along a stagnant stream. Wild ducks have built their nests in the swamps over yonder. And in the forest there are wild deer. In the cabins by the river women and children sleep. But we, you and I, we are sentries for the night. Indians prowl through the forest. The silent dip of their paddles sends their canoes along the shallow water close to shore.

“See! There is a flash of light. What is that on the lake? Indian canoes? Or floating logs?

“Shall we arouse the garrison? No! No! We will wait. It may be only logs after all. And if Indians, they may be friendly, for this is supposed to be a time of peace, though dark rumors are afloat.”

Florence’s voice trailed away. The low rumble of thunder, the swish of water on a rocky shore, and then silence.

Petite Jeanne shook herself. “You make it all so very real. Were those good days, better days than we are knowing now?”

“Who can tell?” Florence sighed. “They seem very good to us now. But we must not forget that they were hard days, days of real sickness and real death. We must not forget that once the garrison of this fort marched forth with the entire population, prepared to make their way to a place of greater safety; that they were attacked and massacred by the treacherous red men.

“We must not forget these things, nor should we cease to be thankful for the courage and devotion of those pioneers who dared to enter a wilderness and make their homes here, that we who follow after them might live in a land of liberty and peace.”

“No,” Petite Jeanne’s tone was solemn, “we will not forget.”

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In the meantime the pleasure-seeking throng, all unconscious of the storm that had threatened to deluge them, still roamed the streets. Their ranks, however, were thinning. One by one the bands, which were unable to play because of the press, and might not have been heard because of the tumult, folded up their music and their stands and instruments and, like the Arabs, “silently stole away.” The radio stars who could not be seen answered other calls. Grandstands were deserted, street cars and elevated trains were packed. The great city had had one grand look at itself. It was now going home.

And still, lurking in the doorway, the grown boy in shabby clothes and the hunchback lingered, waiting, expectant.

“It won’t be long now,” the hunchback muttered.

“It won’t be long,” the other echoed.

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Petite Jeanne, though a trifle disappointed by the dispelling of the mystery of their immediate surroundings, soon enough found herself charmed by Florence’s vivid pictures of life in those days when Chicago was a village, when the Chicago River ran north instead of south, and Indians still roamed the prairies in search of buffaloes.

How this big, healthy, adventure-loving girl would have loved the life they lived in those half forgotten days! As it was, she could live them now only in imagination. This she did to her heart’s content.

So they lingered long, these two. Seated on a broad, hand-hewn bench, looking out over the dark waters, waiting in uncertainty for the possible return of the storm that, having spent its fury in a vain attempt to drown the lake, did not return, they lived for the most part in the past, until a clock striking somewhere in the distance announced the hour of midnight.

“Twelve!” Petite Jeanne breathed in great surprise. “It will not rain now. We must go.”

“Yes.” Florence sprang to her feet. “We must go at once.”

The moon was out now; the storm had passed. Quietly enough they started down the winding stairs. Yet startling developments awaited them just around the corner.

In the meanwhile on the city streets the voice of the tumult had died to a murmur. Here came the rumble of a passing train; from this corner came the sound of hammers dismantling grandstands that the morning rush might not be impeded. Other than these there was no sign that a great city had left its homes and had for once taken one long interested look at itself only to return to its homes again.

As Florence and Jeanne stepped from the door of the blockhouse they were startled by the sound of voices in low but animated conversation.

“Here, at this hour of the night!” At once Florence was on the defensive. The fort, she knew, was not yet open to the public. Even had it been, located as it was on this desolate stretch of “made land,” it would be receiving no visitors at midnight.

“Come!” she whispered. “They are over there, toward the gate. We dare not try to go out, not yet.”

Seizing Jeanne by the hand, she led her along the dark shadows of a wall and at last entered a door.

The place was strange to them; yet to Florence it had a certain familiarity. This was a moment when her passion for the study of history stood her in good stead.

“This is the officers’ quarters,” she whispered. “There should be a door that may be barred. The windows are narrow, the casements heavy. Here one should be safe.”

She was not mistaken. Hardly had they entered than she closed the door and let down a massive wooden bar.

“Now,” she breathed, “we are safe, unless—”

She broke short off. A thought had struck her all of a heap.

“Unless what?” Jeanne asked breathlessly.

“Unless this place has a night watchman. If it has, and he finds us here at this hour of the night we will be arrested for trespassing. And then we will have a ride in a police wagon which won’t be the least bit of fun.”

“No,” agreed Jeanne in a solemn tone, “it won’t.”

“And that,” whispered Florence, as she tiptoed about examining things, “seems to be about what we are up against. I had thought the place a mere unfurnished wooden shell. That is the way the blockhouse was. But see! At the end of this room is a fireplace, and beside it are all sorts of curious cooking utensils, great copper kettles, skillets of iron with yard-long handles and a brass cornhopper. Coming from the past, they must be priceless.”

“And see! There above the mantel are flintlock rifles,” Jeanne put in. “And beside the fireplace are curious lanterns with candles in them. How I wish we could light them.”

“We dare not,” said Florence. “But one thing we can do. We can sit in that dark corner where the moon does not fall, and dream of other days.”

“And in the meantime?” Jeanne barely suppressed a shudder.

“In the meantime we will hope that the guard, if there be one, goes out for his midnight lunch and that we may slip out unobserved. Truly we have right enough to do that. We have meant no harm and have done none.”

So, sitting there in the dark, dreaming, they played that Florence was the youthful commander of the fort and that the slender Jeanne was his young bride but recently brought into this wilderness.

“The wild life and the night frighten you,” Florence said to Jeanne. “But I am young and strong. I will protect you. Come! Let us sit by the fire here and dream a while.”

Jeanne laughed a low musical laugh and snuggled closer.

But, for Jeanne, the charm of the past had departed. Try as she might, she could not overcome the fear that had taken possession of her upon realizing that they were not alone.

“Who can these men be?” she asked herself. “Guards? Perhaps, and perhaps not.”

She thought of the dark-faced man who so inspired her with fear. “We saw him out there on the waste lands,” she told herself, as a chill coursed up her spine. “It is more than probable that he saw us. He may have followed us, watching us like a cat. And now, at this late hour, when a piercing scream could scarcely be heard, like a cat he may be ready to spring.”

In a great state of agitation she rose and crept noiselessly toward the window.

“Come,” she whispered. “See yonder! Two men are slinking along before that other log building. One is stooped like a hunchback. He is carrying a well-filled sack upon his back. Surely they cannot be guards.

“Can it be that this place is left unguarded, and that it is being robbed?”

Here was a situation indeed. Two girls in this lonely spot, unguarded and with such prowlers about.

“I am glad the door is b-barred.” Jeanne’s teeth chattered.

Having gone skulking along the building across the way, the men entered and closed the door. Two or three minutes later a wavering light appeared at one of the narrow windows.

“Perhaps they are robbing that place of some precious heirlooms!” Florence’s heart beat painfully, but she held herself in splendid control.

“This buil-building will be next!” Jeanne spoke with difficulty.

“Perhaps. I—I think we should do something about it.”

“But what?”

“We shall know. Providence will guide us.” Florence’s hand was on the bar. It lifted slowly.

What was to happen? They were going outside, Jeanne was sure of that. But what was to happen after that? She could not tell. Getting a good grip on herself,

she whispered bravely:

“You lead. I’ll follow.”

CHAPTER XVI
THROUGH THE WINDOW

“Come!” Florence whispered, as the door of the ancient barracks swung open and they tiptoed out into the night. “We must find out what those men are doing. This place was built in memory of the past for the good of the public. Generous-hearted people have loaned the rare treasures that are stored here. They must not be lost.”

Skirting the buildings, gliding along the shadows, they made their way past the powder-magazine all built of stone, moved onward the length of a log building that loomed in the dark, dashed across a corner and arrived at last with wildly beating hearts at the corner of the building from which the feeble, flickering light still shone.

“Now!” Florence breathed, gripping her breast in a vain attempt to still the wild beating of her heart. “Not a sound! We must reach that window.”

Leading the way, she moved in breathless silence, a foot at a time along the dark wall. Now she was twenty feet from the window, now ten, now—. She paused with a quick intake of breath. Did she hear footsteps? Were they coming out? And if they did?

Flattening herself against the wall, she drew Jeanne close to her. A moment passed. Her watch ticked loudly. From some spot far away a hound baying the moon gave forth a long-drawn wail.

Two minutes passed, three, four.

“They—they’re not coming out.”

Taking the trembling hand of the little French girl in her own, she once more led her forward.

And now they were at the window, peering in with startled eyes.

What they saw astonished them beyond belief.

Crouching on the floor, lighted only by a flashlight lantern, was a grown boy and a hunchbacked man. The boy at that moment was in the act of dumping the contents of a large bag upon the log floor of the building.

“Loot!” whispered Florence.

“But why do they pour it out?”

Florence placed two fingers on her companion’s lips.

That the articles had not been taken from the fort they realized at once, for the boy, holding up a modern lady’s shoe with an absurdly high heel, gave forth a hoarse laugh.

There were other articles, all modern; a spectacle-case with broken lenses inside but gold rims still good, another pair of glasses with horn rims that had not been broken; and there were more shoes.

And, most interesting of all, there were several purses. That the strange pair regarded these purses with the greatest interest was manifested by the manner in which they had their heads together as the first was opened.

Shaking the contents into his huge fist, the hunchback picked out some small coins and handed them to the boy. A glittering compact and a folded bill he thrust into the side pocket of his coat. The boy frowned, but said not a word. Instead he seized upon a second pocket-book and prepared to inspect it for himself.

“Pickpockets!” Jeanne whispered. “They have been working on that helpless throng. Now they have come here to divide their loot.”

Florence did not answer.

The crouching boy was about to open the second purse, the hunchback making no protest, when to the girls there came cause for fresh anxiety. From the far side of the enclosure there came the rattle of chains.

“Someone else,” Florence whispered, “and at this hour of the night. But they cannot harm us,” came as an after-thought. “The chain is fastened on the inside.” She was thankful for this, but not for long.

“But how did these get in?” Petite Jeanne pointed to the crouching pair within.

“Let’s get out!” Jeanne pleaded. “This is work for an officer. We can send one.”

“Someone is at the gate,” Florence reminded her.

Then there happened that which for the moment held them glued to the spot. Having thrust a hand into the second purse, a small one, well worn, the crouching boy drew forth an object that plainly puzzled him. He held it close to the light. As he did so, Florence gave vent to an involuntary gasp.

“The cameo! The lost cameo!” she exclaimed half aloud. “It must belong to our little old lady of the merry-mad throng.”

At the same instant there came from behind her a man’s gruff voice in angry words:

“Here, you! What you doing? Why do you lock the gate? Thought you’d keep me out, eh?

“But I fooled you!” the voice continued. “I scaled the palisades.”

Instantly there came sounds of movement from within. The crouching figures were hastily stuffing all that pile back into the sack and at the same time eagerly looking for an avenue of escape.

Florence caught the gleam of a star on the newcomer’s coat.

“Oh, please!” she pleaded. “We have taken nothing, meant no harm. The storm —

“But please, officer,” her tone changed, “that pair within have been doing

something, perhaps robbing. They have a precious cameo that belongs to a dear old lady. Please don't let them escape."

In answer to this breathless appeal the officer made no reply. Instead he strode to the window, looked within, then rapped smartly on the sash with his club. At the same time he pointed to his star.

The strange intruders could not fail to understand. They shouldered their sack and came forth meekly enough.

"You come with me, all of you!" the officer commanded. "Let's get this thing straight.

"Now then," he commanded, after they had crossed the enclosure in silence and he had lighted a large lamp in a small office-like room, "dump that stuff on the floor."

"I want to tell ye," the hunchback grumbled, "that we hain't no thieves, me an' this boy. We hain't. We—"

"Dump it out!" The officer's tone was stern.

The hunchback obeyed. "We found this, we did; found all of it."

"Ye-s, you found it!" The officer bent over to take up a purse. He opened it and emptied a handful of coins on the table at his side.

"Purses!" he exclaimed. "How many?" He counted silently. "Seven of 'em and all full of change. And you found 'em! Tell that to the judge!"

"Honest, we found them." The grown boy dragged a ragged sleeve across his eyes. "We was down to the Jubilee. People was always crushin' together and losin' things in the scramble, shoes and purses an' all this." He swept an arm toward the pile. "So we just stayed around until they was gone. Then we got 'em."

"And you thought because you found 'em they were yours?"

"Well, ain't they?" The hunchback grew defiant.

“Not by a whole lot!” The officer’s voice was a trifle less stern. “If you find a purse or any other thing on the street, if it’s worth the trouble, you’re supposed to turn it in, and you leave your name. If it’s not called for, you get it back. But you can’t gather things up in a sack and just walk off. That don’t go.

“See here!” He held up a tiny leather frame taken from the purse he had emptied. “That’s a picture of an old lady with white hair; somebody’s mother, like as not. What’s it worth to you? Not that!” He snapped his fingers. “But to the real owner it’s a precious possession.”

“Yes, yes,” Florence broke in eagerly, “and there’s a ragged little purse in that pile that contains a dear old lady’s only real possession, a cameo.”

“How’d you know that?” The officer turned sharply upon her.

“We saw it in his hand.” She held her ground, nodding at the boy. “We were with the lady, helping her out of the crush, when she lost it.”

“You—you look like that kind,” the officer said slowly, studying her face. “I—I’m going to take a chance. Got her address?”

“Yes, yes,” eagerly.

“Give it to me.”

“Here. Write it down.”

“Good. Now then, you pick out the purse and show me this thing you call a cameo. Never heard of one before, but if it’s different from everything else I’ve seen it must be one of them cameos.”

“Oh tha-thank you!” Florence choked. She had made a promise to the little old lady. Now the promise was near to fulfillment.

The purse was quickly found and the cameo exposed to view.

“That’s a cameo all right,” the officer grinned. “It’s nothing else I ever saw. You take it to her and may God bless you for your interest in an old lady.”

Florence found her eyes suddenly dimmed.

“As for you!” The officer’s tone grew stern once more as he turned to the marauding pair. “You give me your names and tell me where you live. I’ll just keep all this stuff as it is, and turn it in. If any of it remains unclaimed we’ll let you know.”

Glad to know that they were not to be sent to jail for a misdemeanor they had committed in ignorance, the strange pair gave their names and place of residence and then disappeared into the shadows whence they had come.

The officer, whose duty it was to keep an eye on lake shore property, escorted the girls to the street car line, then bade them good-night.

There were times when the little French girl could not sleep. On returning to her room, she found that, despite the lateness of the hour, her nerves were all a-tingle, her eyes wide and staring.

Long after Florence had retired for the night, she lay rolled in a soft, woolly blanket, huddled up in a great chair before the fire.

At first, as she stared at the fire she saw there only a confusion of blurred impressions. In time these impressions took form and she saw much of her own life spread out before her. The opera, its stage resplendent with color, light and life; the boxes shrouded in darkness; these she saw. The great estate, home of Rosemary Robinson, was there, and the glowing magic curtain that appeared to burn but was not consumed; these were there too.

As in a dream she heard voices: The lady in black spoke, Jaeger, the detective, and Rosemary. She seemed to catch the low murmur of the hunchback and that boy of his; heard, too, the sharp call of the man with the evil eye.

“All this,” she said aloud, “fits in somehow. ‘There is a destiny that shapes our ends, rough hew them how we may.’ If I could see it all as it is to be when all is finished they would all have their places, their work to do, the little old lady, the crushing throng, the hooters, yes, even the one with the dark face and evil eye: all these may serve me in the end.

“Serve me. Poor little me!” She laughed aloud, and, blazing with a merry crackle, the fire appeared to laugh back.

CHAPTER XVII
STARTLING REVELATIONS

The circular fishing net, which had for so unusual a purpose been lowered into the lake at the dead of night and brought up later, quite empty, belonged to a youth, known among his acquaintances as “Snowball.” Snowball was black, very black indeed.

When Snowball arrived at his net next morning he found a white man sitting by his windlass. This young man’s eye had a glint of blue steel in it that set the black boy’s knees quivering.

“That your net?” The stranger nodded toward the lake.

“Yaas, sir!”

“Deep down there?”

“Tol’able deep. Yaas, sir.”

“Swim?”

“Who? Me? Yaas, sir.”

“Here.” The man slipped a bill between two boards and left it fluttering there. “Skin off and dive down there. Black package down there. See? Bring it up. See?”

“Yaas, sir. Oh, yas, yas, sir.” There surely was something strange about the glint of those eyes.

Snowball struggled out of his few bits of loose clothing and, clad only in trunks, disappeared beneath the surface of the lake.

A moment later he came to the surface.

“Got it?” Those eyes again.

“N—no, sir.” The black boy’s teeth chattered. “Nothin’ down there. Not nothin’ at all.”

“Go down again. You got poor eyes!” The man made a move. Snowball disappeared.

He came up again sputtering. “Hain’t nothin’. Tellin’ y’ th’ truth, sir. Just nothin’ at all.”

The stranger made a threatening move. Snowball was about to disappear once more, when a shrill laugh came rippling across the rocks.

The man turned, startled, then frowned.

“What’s pleasing you, sister?” He addressed this remark to a slim girl in a faded bathing suit, seated on a rock a hundred feet away.

“Snowball’s right.” The girl laughed again. “Nothing down there. Nothing at all.”

The man gave her a quick look, then sprang to his feet. The next instant he was scrambling over the rocks.

When he arrived at the spot where the girl had been, she was nowhere to be seen. It was as if the lake had swallowed her up; which, perhaps it had.

Apparently the man believed it had, for he sat down upon the rocks to wait. Ten minutes passed. Not a ripple disturbed the surface.

He looked toward the windlass and the net. Snowball, too, had vanished.

“Crooks!” he muttered. “All crooks out here!”

At that, after picking his way across the breakwater, he took to the stretches of

sand and soon disappeared.

* * * * * * * *

When, later that same day, Petite Jeanne started away, bent on the joyous business of returning a lost cameo to a dear old lady, she expected to come upon no fresh mystery.

“Certainly,” she said to Florence, who, because of her work, could not accompany her, “in the bright light of day one experiences no thrills.” Surprise came to her all the same.

She had reached the very street crossing at which she was to alight before she realized that the address the little old lady had given was in Chinatown.

“Surprise number one,” she murmured. “A white lady living in Chinatown. I can’t be wrong, for just over there is the temple where I saw the magic curtain.” If other evidence were lacking, she had only to glance at the pedestrians on the street. Nine out of every ten were Chinese.

For a moment she stood quite still upon the curb. Perhaps her experience on that other occasion had inspired an unwarranted fear.

“For shame!” She stamped her small foot. “This is broad day! Why be afraid?”

Surprise number two came to her upon arriving at the gate of the place she sought. No dingy tenement this. The cutest little house, set at the back of a tiny square of green grass, flanked a curious rock garden where water sparkled. The whole affair seemed to have been lifted quite complete from some Chinese fairy book.

“It’s the wrong address.” Her spirits drooped a little.

But no. One bang at the gong that hung just outside the door, and the little old lady herself was peeping through a narrow crack.

“Oh! It is you!” she exclaimed, throwing the door wide. “And you have my cameo!”

“Yes,” Jeanne smiled, “I have your cameo.”

Because she was French, Jeanne was not at all disturbed by the smothering caress she received from the old lady of this most curious house.

The next moment she was inside the house and sinking deep in a great heap of silky, downy pillows.

“But, my friend,” she exclaimed, as soon as she had caught her breath after a glance about the room where only Oriental objects, dragons, curious lanterns, silk banners, and thick mats were to be found, “this is Chinatown, and you are not Oriental!”

“No, my child. I am not.” The little lady’s eyes sparkled. “But for many years my father was Consul to China. I lived with him and came to know the Chinese people. I learned to love them for their gentleness, their simplicity, their kindness. They loved me too a little, I guess, for after my father died and I came to America, some rich Chinese merchants prepared this little house for me. And here I live.

“Oh, yes,” she sighed contentedly, “I do some translating for them and other little things, but I do not have a worry. They provide for me.

“But this!” She pressed the cameo to her lips. “This comes from another time, the long lost, beautiful past when I was a child with my father in Venice. That is why I prize it so. Can you blame me?”

“No! No!” The little French girl’s tone was deeply earnest. “I cannot. I, too, have lived long in Europe. France, my own beautiful France, was my childhood home.

“But tell me!” Her tone took on an excited note. “If you know so much of these mysterious Chinese, you can help me. Will you help me? Will you explain something?”

“If I can, my child. Gladly!”

“A few days ago,” the little French girl leaned forward eagerly, “I saw the most astonishing curtain. It burned, but was not consumed, like the burning bush.”

“You saw that?” It seemed that the little lady’s eyes would pop from her head. “You saw that? Where?”

“Over yonder.” Jeanne waved a hand. “In that Chinese temple.”

“I—did not—know it—was—here.” The little lady spoke very slowly.

“Then you have seen it!” In her eagerness Jeanne gripped the arms of her chair hard. “Tell me! What is it? How is it done? Could one borrow it?”

“Borrow it? My child, you do not know what you are asking!

“But you—” She lowered her voice to a shrill whisper. “How can you have seen it?”

Quite excitedly and with many a gesture, the little French girl told of her visit to the Chinese temple on that rainy afternoon.

“Oh, my child!” The little lady was all but in tears as she finished, tears of excitement and joy. “My dear child! You cannot know what you have done, nor how fortunate you are that you escaped unharmed.”

“But this is America, not China!” Jeanne’s tone showed her amazement.

“True, my child. But every great American city is many cities in one. On the streets you are safe. When you pry into the secrets of other people, that is quite another matter.”

“Secrets!”

“The Chinese people seem to be simple, kindly, harmless folks. So they are, on the street. But in their private dealings they are the most secretive people in the world.

“That temple you visited!” It was her turn to lean far forward. “That is more than a temple. It is a place of business, a chamber of commerce and the meeting place of the most powerful secret society the Chinese people have ever known, the Hop Sing Tong.”

“And that meeting, the magic curtain—” Jeanne’s eyes went wide.

“That was beyond doubt a secret meeting of the Tong. You came uninvited. Because of the darkness you escaped. You may thank Providence for that! But

never, never do that again!”

“Then,” Jeanne’s tone was full of regret, “then I may never see the magic curtain again.”

“O, I wouldn’t say that.” The little lady smiled blandly. “Seeing the magic curtain and attending the meeting of a secret society are two different matters. The Chinese people are very kind to me. Some of the richest Chinese merchants __”

“Oh! Do you think you could arrange it? Do you think I might see it, two or three friends and I?”

“It might be arranged.”

“Will you try?”

“I will do my best.”

“And if it can be, will you let me know?” Jeanne rose to go.

“I will let you know.”

As Jeanne left the room, she found herself walking in a daze.

“And to think!” she whispered to herself, “that this little old lady and her lost cameo should so soon begin to fit into the marvelous pattern of my life.”

She had wonderful dreams, had this little French girl. She would see the magic curtain once more. With her on this occasion should be Marjory Dean, the great opera star, and her friend Angelo who wrote operas. When the magic curtain had been seen, an opera should be written around it, an Oriental opera full of mystery; a very short opera to be sure but an opera all the same.

“And perhaps!” Her feet sped away in a wild fling. “Perhaps I shall have a tiny part in that opera; a very tiny part indeed.”

CHAPTER XVIII
THEY THAT PASS IN THE NIGHT

The opera presented that night was Wagner's *Die Valkyre*. To Petite Jeanne, the blithesome child of sunshine and song, it seemed a trifle heavy. For all this she was fascinated by the picture of life as it might have been lived long before man began writing his own history. And never before had she listened to such singing.

It was in the last great scene that a fresh hope for the future was borne in upon her. In the opera, Brunhilde having, contrary to the wishes of the gods, interceded for her lover Sigmund, she must be punished. She pleads her own cause in vain. At last she asks for a special punishment: that she be allowed to sleep encircled by fire until a hero of her people is found strong enough to rescue her.

Her wish is granted. Gently the god raises her and kisses her brow. Slowly she sinks upon the rock while tongues of flame leap from the rocks. Moment by moment the flames leap higher until the heroine is lost from sight.

It was at the very moment when the fires burned fiercest, the orchestra played its most amazing strains, that a great thought came to Jeanne.

"I will do it!" she cried aloud. "How wonderful that will be! We shall have an opera. The magic curtain; it shall be like this."

Then, realizing that there were people close at hand, she clapped a hand to her lips and was silent.

A moment more and the strains of delectable music died away. Then it was that a man touched Jeanne's arm.

“You are French.” The man had an unmistakable accent.

“Yes, monsieur.”

“I would like a word with you.”

“Yes, yes. If you will please wait here.” As Pierre, in a dress suit, Jeanne still had work to do.

Her head awhirl with her bright new idea, her eyes still seeing red from the fires that guarded Brunhilde, she hurried through with her humble tasks. Little wonder that she had forgotten the little Frenchman with the small beard. She started when he touched her arm.

“Pardon, my son. May I now have a word with you?”

She started at that word “son,” but quickly regained her poise.

“Surely you may.” She was at his command.

“I am looking,” he began at once, “for a little French girl named Petite Jeanne.”

“Pet—Petite!” The little French girl did not finish. She was trembling.

“Ah! Perhaps you know her.”

“No, no. Ah, yes, yes,” Jeanne answered in wild confusion.

“You will perhaps tell me where she lives. I have a very important message for her. I came from France to bring it.”

“From France?” Jeanne was half smothered with excitement. What should she do? Should she say: “I am Petite Jeanne?” Ah, no; she dared not. Then an inspiration came to her.

“You wish this person’s address? This Petite Jeanne?”

“If you will,” the man replied politely.

“Very well. I will write it down.”

Drawing a small silver pencil from her pocket with trembling fingers, she wrote an address upon the back of a program.

“There, monsieur. This is it.

“I think—” She shifted her feet uneasily. “I am sure she works rather late. If you were to call, perhaps in an hour, you might find her there.”

“So late as this?” The Frenchman raised his eyebrows.

“I am sure she would not mind.”

“Very well. I shall try. And a thousand thanks.” He pressed a coin in her unwilling hand. The next moment he had vanished.

“Gone!” she murmured, sinking into a seat. “Gone! And he had an important message for me! Oh! I must hurry home!”

Even as she spoke these words she detected a rustle at the back of the box. Having turned quickly about, she was just in time to see someone pass into the narrow aisle. It was the lady in black.

“I wonder if she heard?” Jeanne’s heart sank.

As she left the Opera House the little French girl’s spirits were low.

The lady in black frightened her. “What can she mean, always dogging my footsteps?” she asked herself as she sought the street.

“And that dark-faced one? I saw him again to-night by the door. Who is he? What can he want?”

There was a little group of people gathered by the door. As she passed out, she fancied she caught a glimpse of that dark, forbidding face, those evil eyes.

With a shudder she sped away. She was not pursued.

At her apartment she quickly changed into her own plain house dress. Having lighted the living-room fire, she waited a little for the return of Florence, who should have been home long before.

“What can be keeping her?”

With nervous, uncertain steps, she crossed to her own chamber door. Having entered, she went to the window. Her room was dark. The street below was half dark. A distant lamp cast a dim, swaying light. At first no one was to be seen. Then a single dark figure moved stealthily up the street. The swaying light caused this person to take on the appearance of an acrobat who leaped into the air, then came down like a rubber ball. Even when he paused to look up at the building before him, he seemed to sway like a drunken sailor.

“That may be the man.” Her pulse quickened.

A moment more and a car, careering down the street, lighted the man’s face. It did more. It brought into the open for a second another figure, deeper in the shadows.

“What a strange pair!” she murmured as she shrank back.

The man least concealed was the dark-faced one with the evil eye. The other man was Jaeger, the detective.

“But they are not together,” she assured herself. “Jaeger is watching the other, and the dark one is watching me.”

Even as she said this, a third person came into view.

Instantly, by his slow stride, his military bearing, she recognized the man.

“It is he!” She was thrown into a state of tumult. “It is my Frenchman.”

But what was this? He was on the opposite side of the street, yet he did not cross over, nor so much as glance that way. He marched straight on.

She wanted to rush down the stairs and call to him; yet she dared not, for were not those sinister figures lurking there?

To make matters worse, the dark-faced one took to following the Frenchman. Darting from shadow to shadow, he obviously believed himself unobserved. False security. Jaeger was on his trail.

“What does it all mean?” Jeanne asked herself. “Is this little Frenchman after all but a tool of the police? Does he hope to trap me and secure the pearls—which I do not have? Or is he with that evil one with the desperate eyes? Or is it true that he came but now from France and bears a message for me?”

Since she could answer none of these questions, she left her room, looked to the fastening of the outer door, then took a seat by the fire. There for a long time she tried to read her fortune in the flames, but succeeded in seeing only a flaming curtain that was not consumed.

CHAPTER XIX
THE UNSEEN EYE

Five days passed. Uneventful days they were for Petite Jeanne; yet each one was charged with possibilities both wonderful and terrible. She saw no more of Marjory Dean. What of her promise? Had she forgotten?

The little old lady of the cameo she visited once. The Chinese gentleman who might secure for her one more shuddering look at the magic curtain was out of town.

Never did she enter the opera at night without casting fearful glances about lest she encounter the dark-faced man of the evil eye. He was never there. Where was he? Who was he? What interest could he have in a mere boy usher of the opera? To these questions the little French girl could form no answer.

There were times when she believed him a gypsy, or at least a descendant of gypsies from France. When she thought of this she shuddered anew. For in France were many enemies of Bihari's band. And she was one of that band.

At other times she was able to convince herself that she had seen this dark-faced one at the back of the boxes on that night when the priceless pearls had vanished. Yet how this could be when Jaeger, the detective, and the mysterious lady in black haunted those same shadows, she could not imagine.

Of late Jaeger was not always there. Perhaps he was engaged in other affairs. It might be that on that very night Jeanne had seen him follow the dark-faced one, he had made an important arrest. If so, whom had he apprehended, the dark-faced one or the little Frenchman with a military bearing?

Jeanne could not but believe that the little man from France was honest and

sincere, that he truly bore an important message for her.

“But why then did he not come that night and deliver it?” she said to Florence.

“Perhaps he lost his way.”

“Lost his way? How could he? He was here, just across the way.”

“You say two men followed him?”

“Yes, yes!”

“Then he may have been frightened off.”

“If so, why did he not return?”

“Who can say?”

Ah, yes, who could? Certainly no one, for no one knew the full truth, which was that in her excitement Jeanne had mixed her numbers and, instead of presenting him with her own address, had sent him five blocks down the street where, as one must know, he found no little French girl named Petite Jeanne. So here is one matter settled, straight off. But what of the business-like little Frenchman? Did he truly bear a message of importance? If so, what was the message? And where was the man now? Not so easy to answer, these questions.

Jeanne asked herself these questions and many more during these days when, as Pierre, she served the occupants of the boxes faithfully, at the same time drinking in all the glory and splendor of music, color and drama that is Grand Opera at its best.

A glimpse now and then of the lady in black lurking in deep shadows never failed to thrill her. Never did she see her face. Not once did there come to her a single intimation of the position she filled at the opera. As she felt that unseen eye upon her, Jeanne experienced a strange sensation. She went hot and cold all over. Then a great calm possessed her.

“It is the strangest thing!” she exclaimed to Florence one night. “It is like—what would you call it?—a benediction. I am dreadfully afraid; yet I find peace. It is like, shall I say, like seeing God? Should you be afraid of God if you saw Him?”

“Yes, I think I might,” Florence answered soberly.

“Yet they say God is Love. Why should one fear Love?”

“Who knows? Anyway, your friend is not God. She is only a lady in black. Perhaps she is not Love either. Her true name may be Hate.”

“Ah, yes, perhaps. But I feel it is not so. And many times, oh my friend, when I *feel* a thing is so it *is* so. But when I just think it is true, then it is not true at all. Is this not strange?”

“It is strange. But you gypsies are strange anyway.”

“Ah, yes, perhaps. For all that, I am not all gypsy. Once I was not gypsy at all, only a little French girl living in a little chateau by the side of the road.”

“Petite Jeanne,” Florence spoke with sudden earnestness, “have you no people living in France?”

“My father is dead, this I know.” The little French girl’s head drooped. “My mother also. I have no brothers nor sisters save those who adopted me long ago in a gypsy van. Who else can matter?”

“Uncles and aunts, cousins, grandparents?”

“Ah, yes.” The little French girl’s brow clouded. “Now I remember. There was one—we called her grandmother. Was she? I wonder. We play that so many things are true, we little ones. I was to see her twice. She was, oh, so grand!” She clasped her hands as if in a dream. “Lived at the edge of a wood, she did, a great black forest, in a castle.

“A very beautiful castle it was to look at on a sunny day, from the outside. Little towers and spires, many little windows, all round and square.

“But inside?” She made a face and shuddered. “Oh, so very damp and cold! No fires here. No lights there. Only a bit of a brazier that burned charcoal, very bright and not warm at all. A grandmother? A castle? Ah, yes, perhaps. But who wants so grand a castle that is cold? Who would wish for a grandmother who did not bend nor smile?

“And besides,” she added, as she sank into a chair, “she may not have been my grandmother at all. This was long ago. I was only a little one.”

“All the same,” Florence muttered to herself, some time later, “I’d like to know if that was her grandmother. It might make a difference, a very great difference.”

CHAPTER XX
A PLACE OF ENCHANTMENT

Then came for Petite Jeanne an hour of swiftly passing glory.

She had arisen late, as was her custom, and was sipping her black coffee when the telephone rang.

“This is Marjory Dean.” The words came to her over the wire in the faintest whisper. But how they thrilled her! “Is this Petite Jeanne? Or is it Pierre?” The prima donna was laughing.

“It is Petite Jeanne at breakfast,” Jeanne answered. Her heart was in her throat. What was she to expect?

“Then will you please ask Pierre if it will be possible for him to meet me at the Opera House stage door at three this afternoon?”

“I shall ask him.” Jeanne put on a business-like tone. For all that, her heart was pounding madly. “It may be my great opportunity!” she told herself. “I may yet appear for a brief space of time in an opera. What glory!”

After allowing a space of thirty seconds to elapse, during which time she might be supposed to have consulted the mythical Pierre, she replied quite simply:

“Yes, Miss Dean, Pierre will meet you at that hour. And he wishes me to thank you very much.”

“Sh! Never a word of this!” came over the phone; then the voice was gone.

Jeanne spent the remainder of the forenoon in a tumult of excitement. At noon

she ate a light lunch, drank black tea, then sat down to study the score of her favorite opera, “The Juggler of Notre Dame.”

It is little wonder that Jeanne loved this more than any other opera. It is the story of a simple wanderer, a juggler. Jeanne, as we have said before, had been a wanderer in France. She had danced the gypsy dances with her bear in every village of France and every suburb of Paris.

And Cluny, a suburb of Paris, is the scene of this little opera. A juggler, curiously enough named Jean, arrives in this village just as the people have begun to celebrate May Day in the square before the convent.

The juggler is welcomed. But one by one his poor tricks are scorned. The people demand a drinking song. The juggler is pious. He fears to offend the Virgin. But at last, beseeching the Virgin’s forgiveness, he grants their request.

Hearing the shouts of the crowd, the prior of the monastery comes out to scatter the crowd and rebuke the singer. He bids the poor juggler repent and, putting the world at his back, enter the monastery, never more to wander over the beautiful hills of France.

In the juggler’s poor mind occurs a great struggle. And in this struggle these words are wrung from his lips:

“But renounce, when I am still young,
Renounce to follow thee, oh, Liberty, beloved,
Careless fay with clear golden smile!
’Tis she my heart for mistress has chosen;
Hair in the wind laughing, she takes my hand,
She drags me on chance of the hour and the road.
The silver of the waters, the gold of the blond harvest,
The diamonds of the nights, through her are mine!
I have space through her, and love and the world.
The villain, through her, becomes king!
By her divine charm, all smiles on me, all enchants,
And, to accompany the flight of my song,
The concert of the birds snaps in the green bush.
Gracious mistress and sister I have chosen.
Must I now lose you, oh, my royal treasure? Oh, Liberty, my beloved,

Careless fay of the golden smile!”

“Liberty ... careless fay of the golden smile.” Jeanne repeated these words three times. Then with dreamy eyes that spanned a nation and an ocean, she saw again the lanes, the hedges, the happy villages of France.

“Who better than I can feel as that poor juggler felt as he gave all this up for the monastery’s narrow walls?” she asked. No answer came back. She knew the answer well enough for all that. And this knowledge gave her courage for the hours that were to come.

She met Marjory Dean by one of the massive pillars that adorn the great Opera House.

“To think,” she whispered, “that all this great building should be erected that thousands might hear you sing!”

“Not me alone.” The prima donna smiled. “Many, many others and many, I hope, more worthy than I.”

“What a life you have had!” the little French girl cried rapturously. “You have truly lived!

“To work, to dream, to hope,” she went on, “to struggle onward toward some distant goal, this is life.”

“Ah, no, my child.” Marjory Dean’s face warmed with a kindly smile. “This is not life. It is but the beginning of life. One does not work long, hope much, struggle far, before he becomes conscious of someone on the way before him. As he becomes conscious of this one, the other puts out a hand to aid him forward. Together they work, dream, hope and struggle onward. Together they succeed more completely.

“And then,” her tone was mellow, thoughtful, “there comes the time when the one who had been given the helping hand by one before looks back and sees still another who struggles bravely over the way he has come. His other hand stretches back to this weaker one. And so, with someone before to assist, with one behind to be assisted, he works, dreams, hopes and struggles on through his career, be it long or short. And this, my child, is life.”

“Yes, I see it now. I knew it before. But one forgets. Watch me. I shall cling tightly to your hand. And when my turn comes I shall pray for courage and strength, then reach back to one who struggles a little way behind.”

“Wise, brave child! How one could love you!”

With this the prima donna threw her arm across Jeanne’s shoulder and together they marched into the place of solemn enchantment, an Opera House that is “dark.”

CHAPTER XXI
FROM THE HEIGHTS TO DESPAIR

“To-day,” said Marjory Dean, as they came out upon the dimly lighted stage, “as you will see,” she glanced about her where the setting of a French village was to be seen “we are to rehearse ‘The Juggler of Notre Dame.’ And to-day, if you have the courage, you may play the juggler in my stead.”

“Oh!” Jeanne’s breath came short and quick. Her wild heartbeats of anticipation had not been in vain.

“But the company!” she exclaimed in a low whisper. “Shall they know?”

“They will not be told. Many will guess that something unusual is happening. But they all are good sports. And besides they are all of my—what is it you have called it?—my ‘Golden Circle.’”

“Yes, yes, your ‘Golden Circle.’”

“And those of our ‘Golden Circle’ never betray us. It is an unwritten law.”

“Ah!” Jeanne breathed deeply. “Can I do it?”

“Certainly you can. And perhaps, on the very next night when the ‘Juggler’ is done—oh, well, you know.”

“Yes. I know.” Jeanne was fairly choking with emotion.

When, however, half an hour later, garbed as the juggler with his hoop and his bag of tricks, she came before the troop of French villagers of the drama, she was her own calm self. For once again as in a dream, she trod the streets of a

beautiful French village. As of yore she danced before the boisterous village throng.

Only now, instead of stick and bear, she danced with hoop and bag.

She was conscious at once that the members of the company realized that she was a stranger and not Marjory Dean.

“But I shall show them how a child of France may play her native drama.” At once she lost herself in the character of Jean, the wandering-juggler.

Eagerly she offered to do tricks with cup and balls, to remove eggs from a hat.

Scorned by the throng, she did not despair.

“I know the hoop dance.”

The children of the troop seized her by the hands to drag her about. And Jeanne, the lithe Jeanne who had so often enthralled thousands by her fairy-like steps, danced clumsily as the juggler must, then allowed herself to be abused by the children until she could break away.

“What a glorious company!” she was thinking in the back of her mind. “How they play up to me!”

“My lords,” she cried when once more she was free, “to please you I’ll sing a fine love salvation song.”

They paid her no heed. As the juggler she did not despair.

As Jeanne, she saw a movement in a seat close to the opera pit. “An auditor!” Her heart sank. “What if it is someone who suspects and will give me away!” There was scant time for these thoughts.

As the juggler she offered songs of battle, songs of conquest, drama. To all this they cried:

“No! No! Give us rather a drinking song!”

At last yielding to their demand she sang: “Hallelujah, Sing the Hallelujah of

Wine.”

Then as the prior descended upon the throng, scattering them like tiny birds before a gale, she stood there alone, defenseless, as the prior denounced her.

Real tears were in her eyes as she began her farewell to the glorious liberty of hedge and field, river, road and forest of France.

This farewell was destined to end unfinished for suddenly a great bass voice roared:

“What is this? You are not Marjory Dean! Where is she? What are you doing here?”

A huge man with a fierce black mustache stood towering above her. She recognized in him the director of the opera, and wished that the section of the stage beneath her feet might sink, carrying her from sight.

“Here I am,” came in a clear, cold tone. It was Marjory Dean who spoke. She advanced toward the middle of the stage.

Riveted to their places, the members of the company stood aghast. Full well they knew the fire that lay ever smouldering in Marjory Dean’s breast.

“And what does this mean? Why are you not rehearsing your part?”

“Because,” Miss Dean replied evenly, “I chose to allow another, who can do it quite as well, to rehearse with the company.”

“And I suppose,” there was bitter sarcasm in the director’s voice, “she will sing the part when that night comes?”

“And if she did?”

“Then, Miss Dean, your services would no longer be required.” The man was purple with rage.

“Very well.” Marjory Dean’s face went white. “We may as well—”

But Petite Jeanne was at her side. “Miss Dean, you do not know what you are

saying. It is not worth the cost. Please, please!" she pleaded with tears in her voice. "Please forget me. At best I am only a little French wanderer. And you, you are the great Marjory Dean!"

Reading the anguish in her upturned face, Marjory Dean's anger was turned to compassion.

"Another time, another place," she murmured. "I shall never forget you!"

Half an hour later the rehearsal was begun once more. This time Marjory Dean was in the stellar role. It was a dead rehearsal. All the sparkle of it was gone. But it was a rehearsal all the same, and the director had had his way.

CHAPTER XXII
THE ARMORED HORSE

As for Jeanne, once more dressed as Pierre and feeling like just no one at all, she had gone wandering away into the shadows of the orchestra floor, when suddenly she started. Someone had touched her arm.

Until this moment she had quite forgotten the lone auditor seated there in the dark. Now as she bent low to look into that person's face she started again as a name came to her lips.

"Rosemary Robinson!"

"It is I," Rosemary whispered. "I saw it all, Pierre." She held Jeanne's hand in a warm grasp. "You were wonderful! Simply magnificent! And the director. He was beastly!"

"No! No!" Jeanne protested. "He was but doing his duty."

"This," Rosemary replied slowly, "may be true. But for all that you are a marvelous 'Juggler of Notre Dame.' And it is too bad he found out.

"But come!" she whispered eagerly, springing to her feet. "Why weep when there is so much to be glad about? Let us go exploring!

"My father," she explained, "has done much for this place. I have the keys to every room. There are many mysteries. You shall see some of them."

Seizing Jeanne's hand, she led the way along a corridor, down two gloomy flights of stairs and at last into a vast place where only here and there a light burned dimly.

They were now deep down below the level of the street. The roar and thunder of traffic came to them only as a subdued rumble of some giant talking in his sleep.

The room was immense. Shadows were everywhere, shadows and grotesque forms.

“Where are we?” Jeanne asked, scarcely able to repress a desire to flee.

“It is one of the property rooms of the Opera House. What will you have?” Rosemary laughed low and deep. “Only ask for it. You will find it here. All these things are used at some time or another in the different operas.”

As Jeanne’s eyes became accustomed to the pale half-light, she realized that this must be nearly true. In a corner, piled tight in great dark sections, was a miniature mountain. Standing on edge, but spilling none of its make-believe water, was a pond where swans were wont to float.

A little way apart were the swans, resting on great heaps of grass that did not wither and flowers that did not die.

In a distant corner stood a great gray castle. Someone had set it up, perhaps to make sure that it was all intact, then had left it standing.

“What a place for mystery!” Jeanne exclaimed.

“Yes, and listen! Do you hear it?”

“Hear what?”

“The river. We are far below the river. Listen. Do you not hear it flowing?”

“I hear only the rumble of traffic.”

“Perhaps I only imagine it, but always when I visit this place I seem to hear the river rushing by. And always I think, ‘What if the walls should crumble?’”

“But they will not crumble.”

“We shall hope not.

“But see.” The rich girl’s mood changed. “Here is a charger! Let us mount and

ride!”

She sprang toward a tall object completely covered by a white cloth. When the cloth had been dragged off, a great steed all clad in glittering armor stood before them.

“Come!” Rosemary’s voice rose high. “Here we are! You are a brave knight. I am a defenseless lady. Give me your hand. Help me to mount behind you. Then I will cling to you while we ride through some deep, dark forest where there are dragons and cross-bowmen and all sorts of terrifying perils.”

Joining her in this spirit of make-believe, Jeanne assisted her to the back of the inanimate charger.

Having touched some secret button, Rosemary set the charger in motion. They were riding now. Swaying from side to side, rising, falling, they seemed indeed to be passing through some dark and doleful place. As Jeanne closed her eyes the illusion became quite complete. As she felt Rosemary clinging to her as she might cling to some gallant knight, she forgot for the time that she was Petite Jeanne and that she had suffered a dire disappointment.

“I am Pierre!” she whispered to herself. “I am a brave knight. Rosemary loves me.”

The disquieting effect of this last thought awakened her to the realities of life. Perhaps, after all, Rosemary did love her a little as Pierre. If this were true—

Sliding off the steed, then lifting Rosemary to the floor, she exclaimed:

“Come! Over yonder is a castle. Let us see who is at home over there.”

Soon enough she was to see.

The castle was, as all stage castles are, a mere shell; very beautiful and grand on the outside, a hollow echo within. For all that, the two youthful adventurers found a certain joy in visiting that castle. There was a rough stairway leading up through great empty spaces within to a broad, iron-railed balcony. From this balcony, on more than one night, an opera lover had leaned forth to sing songs of high enchantment, luring forth a hidden lover.

They climbed the stairs. Then Petite Jeanne, caught by the spell of the place, leaned far out of the window and burst into song, a wild gypsy serenade.

Rosemary was leaning back among the rafters, drinking in the sweet mystery of life that was all about her, when of a sudden the French girl's song broke off. Her face went white for an instant as she swayed there and must surely have fallen had not Rosemary caught her.

"Wha—what is it?" she whispered hoarsely.

For a space of seconds there came no answer, then a low whisper:

"Those eyes! I saw them. Those evil eyes. Back of the mountain. They glared at me."

"Eyes?"

"The dark-faced man. He—he frightens me! The way out! We must find it!"

Roused by her companion's fears, Rosemary led the way on tiptoe down the stairs. Still in silence they crossed the broad emptiness of the castle, came to a rear door, tried it, felt it yield to their touch, and passed through, only to hear the intruder come racing down the stairs.

"He—he did not see us!" Rosemary panted. "For now we are safe. This—come this way!"

She crowded her way between a stairway lying upon its side and a property porch. Jeanne, whose heart was beating a tattoo against her ribs, followed in silence.

"What a brave knight I am!" she told herself, and smiled in spite of her deathly fears.

"The way out," Rosemary whispered over her shoulder. "If I only can find that!"

A sound, from somewhere behind, startled them into renewed effort.

Passing through a low forest of property trees, they crossed a narrow bare space to find themselves confronted by a more formidable forest of chairs and tables.

Chairs of all sorts, with feet on the floor or high in air, blocked their way.

As Rosemary attempted to creep between two great piles, one of these toppled to the floor with a resounding crash.

“Come!” Her tone was near despair. “We must find the way out!”

As for Jeanne, she was rapidly regaining her composure. This was not the only time she had been lost in an Opera House. The Paris Opera had once held her a prisoner.

“Yes, yes. The way out!” She took the lead. “I think I see a light, a tiny red light.”

For a second she hesitated. What was this light? Was it held in the hand of the unwelcome stranger? Was it an “Exit” light?

“It’s the way out!” she exulted. A quick turn, a sharp cry and she went crashing forward. Some object had lain in her path. She had stumbled upon it in the dark.

What was it? This did not matter. All that mattered were Rosemary and the way out.

Where was Rosemary? Leaping to her feet, she glanced wildly about. A move from behind demoralized her. One more wild dash and she was beneath that red light. Before her was a door. And at that door, pressing the knob, was Rosemary.

Next instant they had crowded through that door.

But where were they? Narrow walls hemmed them in on every side.

“It’s a trap!” Rosemary moaned.

Not so Jeanne. She pressed a button. They were in a French elevator. They went up.

Up, up they glided. The light of a door came, then faded, then another and yet another.

In consternation lest they crash at the top, Jeanne pressed a second button. They

came to a sudden halt. A light shone above them. A second, slower upward glide and they were before still another door. The door swung open. Still filled with wild panic, they rushed into a room where all was dark, and lost themselves in a perfect labyrinth where costumes by hundreds hung in rows.

Crowded together, shoulder to shoulder, with scarcely room to breathe, they stood there panting, waiting, listening.

Slowly their blood cooled. No sound came to their waiting ears. Still Jeanne felt Rosemary's heart beating wildly.

"To her I am a knight," she thought. "I am Pierre."

Then a thought struck her all of a heap. "Perhaps I am not Pierre to her. She may suspect. Yes, she may know!" A cold chill gripped her heart. "If she finds out, what an impostor she will believe me to be!

"And yet," she thought more calmly, "I have meant no wrong. I only wanted to be near the opera, to be ready for any great good fortune that might befall me.

"Besides, how could she know? Who would tell her? The lady in black? But how could she know? No! No! My secret is safe.

"Come!" she whispered a moment later, "I think we have escaped from those most terrible eyes."

Creeping out, they made their way along a corridor that welcomed them with ever-increasing brightness until they stood before a passenger elevator. A moment later they stood in the clear bright light of late autumn afternoon.

Throwing back her chest, the little French girl, who for a moment was Pierre, drank in three deep breaths, then uttered a long-drawn:

"Wh-e-w!"

"This," said Rosemary, extending her hand as she might had she been leaving a party, "has been delightful. So perfectly wonderful. Let's do it again sometime.

"One more thing!" She whispered this. "They have never found my pearls. But it really does not matter, at least not very much. What are pearls among friends?"

Before Petite Jeanne could recover from her surprise she was gone.

“I suppose,” she sighed as she turned to go on her way, “that some people have many terrible adventures and want none, and some have none but want many. What a crazy, upside-down world this is, after all.”

She was well on her way home when a question, coming into her mind with the force of a blow, left her stunned.

“Why did Rosemary say: ‘The pearls have not been found. It does not matter?’

“Does she believe I took the pearls?” she asked herself, when she had partially recovered her poise. “And was she telling me I might keep them?

“How absurd! And yet, what did she mean?

“And, after all, how could she help believing that I took them? I ran away. There has been no explanation. Unless—unless she knows that I am Petite Jeanne and not Pierre! And how could she know?”

That night as, once more playing the role of Pierre, she entered the boxes, she found Jaeger, the detective, in his place. And, lurking deep in the shadows was the lady in black. She shuddered anew.

CHAPTER XXIII
FLORENCE SOLVES A MYSTERY

That night, by the light of a fickle moon that ever and anon hid himself behind a cloud, Florence made her way alone to the shores of that curious island of “made land” on the lake front. She had determined to delve more deeply into the mysteries of this island. On this night she was destined to make an astonishing discovery.

It was not a promising place to wander, this island. There, when the moon hid his face, darkness reigned supreme.

Yet, even at such times as these, she was not afraid. Strong as a man, endowed with more than the average man’s courage, she dared many things. There were problems regarding that island which needed solving. She meant to solve them. Besides, the place was gloriously peaceful, and Florence loved peace.

She did not, however, love peace alone. She yearned for all manner of excitement. Most of all she was enchanted by sudden contrast. One moment: silence, the moon, the stars, placid waters, peace; the next: a sound of alarm, darkness, the onrush of adventure and unsolved mystery. This, for Florence, was abundance of life.

She had come to the island to find peace. But she would also probe into a mystery.

As she neared the southern end of the island where stood the jungle of young cottonwood trees, she paused to look away at the ragged shore line. There, hanging above the rough boulders, was Snowball’s fishing derrick. Like a slim, black arm, as if to direct the girl’s search out to sea, it pointed away toward black waters.

“No! No!” Florence laughed low. “Not there. The mystery lies deep in the heart of this young forest.”

Straight down the path she strode to find herself standing at last before that challenging door of massive oak.

“Ah!” she breathed. “At home. They can’t deny it.” Light was streaming through the great round eyes above her.

Her heart skipped a beat as she lifted a hand to rap on that door. What sort of people were these, anyway? What was she letting herself in for?

She had not long to wait. The door flew open. A flood of white light was released. And in that light Florence stood, open-mouthed, speechless, staring.

“Wa-all,” came in a not unfriendly voice, “what is it y’ want?”

“Aunt—Aunt Bobby!” Florence managed to stammer.

“Yes, that’s me. And who may you be? Step inside. Let me have a look.

“Florence! My own hearty Florence!” The aged woman threw two stout arms about the girl’s waist. “And to think of you findin’ me here!”

For a moment the air was filled with exclamations and ejaculations. After that, explanations were in order.

If you have read *The Thirteenth Ring*, you will remember well enough that Aunt Bobby was a ship’s cook who had cooked her way up and down one of the Great Lakes a thousand times or more, and that on one memorable journey she had acted as a fairy godmother to one of Florence’s pals. Florence had never forgotten her, though their journeys had carried them to different ports.

“But, Aunt Bobby,” she exclaimed at last, “what can you be doing here? And how did such a strange home as this come into being?”

“It’s all on account of her.” Aunt Bobby nodded toward a slim girl who, garbed in blue overalls, sat beside the box-like stove. “She’s my grandchild. Grew up on the ship, she did, amongst sailors. Tie a knot and cast off a line with the best of them, she can, and skin up a mast better than most.

“But the captain would have it she must have book learnin’. So here we are, all high and dry on land. And her a-goin’ off to school every mornin’. But when school is over, you should see her—into every sort of thing.

“Ah, yes,” she sighed, “she’s a problem, is Meg!”

Meg, who might have been nearing sixteen, smiled, crossed her legs like a man, and then put on a perfect imitation of a sailor contemptuously smoking a cob pipe—only there was no pipe.

“This place, do you ask?” Aunt Bobby went on. “Meg calls it the cathedral, she does, on account of the pillars.

“Them pillars was lamp-posts once, broken lamp-posts from the boulevard. Dumped out here, they was. The captain and his men put up the cathedral for us, where we could look at the water when we liked. Part of it is from an old ship that sank in the river and was raised up, and part, like the pillars, comes from the rubbish heap.

“I do say, though, they made a neat job of it. Meg’ll show you her stateroom after a bit.

“But now, Meg, get down the cups. Coffee’s on the stove as it always was in the galleys.”

Florence smiled. She was liking this. Here she was finding contrast. She thought of the richly appointed Opera House where at this moment Jeanne haunted the boxes; then she glanced about her and smiled again.

She recalled the irrepressible Meg as she had seen her, a bronze statue against the sky, and resolved to know more of her.

As they sat dreaming over their coffee cups, Aunt Bobby began to speak of the romance of other days and to dispense with unstinting hand rich portions from her philosophy.

“Forty years I lived on ships, child.” She sighed deeply. “Forty years! I’ve sailed on big ones and small ones, wind-jammers and steamers. Some mighty fine ones and some not so fine. Mostly I signed on freighters because I loved them best of all. They haul and carry.

“They’re sort of human, ships are.” She cupped her chin in her hands to stare dreamily at the fire. “Sort of like folks, ships are. Some are slim and pretty and not much use except just to play around when the water’s sparklin’ and the sun shines bright. That’s true of folks and ships alike. And I guess it’s right enough. We all like pretty things.

“But the slow old freighter, smelling of bilge and tar, she’s good enough for me. She’s like the most of us common workers, carrying things, doing the things that need to be done, moving straight on through sunshine and storm until the task is completed and the work is done.

“Yes, child, I’ve sailed for forty years. I’ve watched the moon paint a path of gold over waters blacker than the night. I’ve heard the ice screaming as it ground against our keel, and I’ve tossed all night in a storm that promised every minute to send us to the bottom. Forty years, child, forty years!” The aged woman’s voice rose high and clear like the mellow toll of a bell at midnight. “Forty years I’ve felt the pitch and toss, the swell and roll beneath me. And now this!” She spread her arms wide.

“The ground beneath my feet, a roof over my head.

“But not for long, child. Not for long. A few months now, and a million pairs of feet will tramp past the spot where you now stand. What will these people see? Not the cathedral, as Meg will call it, nothing half as grand.

“And we, Meg and me, we’ll move on. Fate will point his finger and we’ll move.

“Ah, well, that’s life for most of us. Sooner or later Fate points and we move. He’s a traffic cop, is Fate. We come to a pause. He blows his whistle, he waves his arm. We move or he moves us.

“And, after all,” she heaved a deep sigh that was more than half filled with contentment, “who’d object to that? Who wants to sit and grow roots like stupid little cottonwood trees?”

CHAPTER XXIV
THE BLACK PACKET

“Meg, show Florence your stateroom.” Aunt Bobby rose after her soliloquy. “Mine’s more plain-like,” she apologized. “The men set a heap of store on Meg, so they took what was the stateroom of the captain in the balmy days of that old ship and set it up for Meg, right here on the island.

“It’s all there, walls and cabinet all done in mahogany and gold, wide berth, and everything grand.”

“It’s not like sleeping on the water with a good hull beneath you.” Meg’s tone was almost sullen. “Just you wait! I’m going back!”

Once inside her stateroom her mood changed. It became evident at once that she was truly proud of this small room with its costly decorations that had come down from the past. Two great lanterns made of beaten bronze hung one at the head and one at the foot of her berth.

“It’s wonderful!” Florence was truly impressed. “But this island, it is a lonely spot. There must be prowlers about.”

“Oh, yes. All the time. Some good ones, some bad.”

“But are you not afraid?”

“Afraid? No. I laugh at them. Why not?

“And besides. Look!” Her slender finger touched a secret button. A cabinet door flew open, revealing two revolvers. Their long blue barrels shone wickedly in the light.

“But you couldn’t fire them.”

“Oh, couldn’t I? Come over some day just before dark, when the waves are making a lot of noise. I’ll show you.

“You see,” she explained, “I must be careful. If the police heard, they’d come and take them from me.

“But on board ship!” Her eyes danced. “I could out-shoot them all. You know how long a freighter is?”

“Yes.”

“We used that for a shooting range. I could out-shoot all the men. It was grand! If we missed the target, the bullet went plump into the sea! And that was all.

“No,” she said thoughtfully as she dropped into a chair, “I’m not afraid. There was one man, though, who had me almost scared. His face was so dark! He had such ugly eyes!”

“Dark face, ugly eyes!” Florence recalled Jeanne’s description of the man who had hounded her footsteps.

“But I fooled him!” Meg chuckled. “I fooled him twice. And I laughed in his face, too.”

Rising, she pressed a second button in the wall to reveal still another secret compartment. “See that!” She pointed to a black packet. “That was his. It’s mine now.

“I wonder why he put it where he did?” she mused.

“Where?”

“In Snowball’s net.”

“What?”

“That’s just what he did. I was sitting alone among the rocks at night. He came out, acting mysterious. He poured two buckets of water on Snowball’s windlass

so it wouldn’t creak and then he threw this package into the net and lowered away.

“It is heavy. Went right to the bottom. I slipped into the water and went after it. Got it, too. See! There it is!

“And do you know,” her voice fell to an excited whisper, “that’s to be my birthday present to myself. It’s to be my surprise.”

“Surprise! Haven’t you unwrapped it?”

“No. Why should I? That would spoil my fun.”

Florence looked at this slim girl in overalls, and smiled. “You surely are an unusual child!”

“He came back next day.” Meg ignored this last. “He made Snowball dive down and look for his package. He didn’t find it. The man was angry. His face got blacker than ever, and how his eyes snapped! An ugly red scar showed on his chin. Then I laughed, and he chased me.

“I dropped into the water and came up where there is a hole like a sea grotto. I watched him until he went away. He never came back. So now this is mine!” Pride of ownership was in her voice.

“But ought you not to open the package? It may have been stolen. It may contain valuables, watches, diamonds, pearls.” Florence was thinking of the lost necklace.

“Ought!” Meg’s face was twisted into a contemptuous frown. “Ought! That’s a landlubber’s word. You never hear it on a ship. Many things *must* be done—hatch battened down, boilers stoked, bells rung. Lots of things *must* be done. But nothing merely *ought* to be done. No! No! I want to save it for my birthday. And I shall!”

At that she snapped the cabinet door shut, then led the way out of her stateroom.

Ten minutes later Florence was on the dark winding path on her way home.

“What an unusual child!” she thought. And again, “I wonder who that man could

be? What does that packet contain?”

CHAPTER XXV
THE BEARDED STRANGER

Though that which happened to Jeanne on this very night could scarcely be called an adventure, it did serve to relieve the feeling of depression which had settled upon her like a cloud after that dramatic but quite terrible moment when the irate director had driven her from the stage. It did more than this; it gave her a deeper understanding of that mystery of mysteries men call life.

Between acts she stood contemplating her carefully creased trousers and the tips of her shiny, patent leather shoes. Suddenly she became conscious that someone was near, someone interested in her. A sort of sixth sense, a gypsy sense, told her that eyes were upon her.

As her own eyes swept about a wide circle, they took in the bearded man with large, luminous eyes. He was standing quite near. With sudden impulse, she sprang toward him.

“Please tell me.” Her voice was eager. “Why did you say all this was ‘a form of life’?”

“That question,” the man spoke slowly, “can best be answered by seeing something other than this. Would you care to go a little way with me?”

Jeanne gave him a quick look. She was a person of experience, this little French girl. “He can be trusted,” her heart assured her.

“But I am working.” Her spirits dropped.

“There are extra ushers.”

“Yes—yes.”

“I will have one called.”

“This man has influence here,” Jeanne thought a moment later, as, side by side, they left the building. “Who can he be?” Her interest increased tenfold.

“We will go this way.”

They turned west, went over the bridge, crossed the street to the south, then turned west again.

“Oh, but this—this is rather terrible!” Jeanne protested. Scarcely five minutes had passed. They had left the glitter and glory of jewels, rich silks and costly furs behind. Now they were passing through throngs of men. Roughly clad men they were, many in rags. Their faces were rough and seamed, their hands knotted and blue with cold. Jeanne drew her long coat tightly about her.

“No one will harm you.” Her strange companion took her arm.

The street setting was as drab as were those who wandered there: cheap movies displaying gaudy posters, cheaper restaurants where one might purchase a plate of beans and a cup of coffee for a dime. The wind was rising. Picking up scraps of paper and bits of straw, it sent them in an eddy, whirling them round and round. Like dead souls in some lost world, these bits appeared to find no place to rest.

“See!” said her companion. “They are like the men who wander here; they have no resting place.”

Jeanne shuddered.

But suddenly her attention was arrested by a falling object that was neither paper nor straw, but a pigeon.

One glance assured her that this was a young bird, fully grown and feathered, who had not yet learned to fly. He fluttered hopelessly on the sidewalk.

“A beautiful bird,” was her thought. “Such lovely plumage!”

A passer-by with an ugly, twisted face leered up at her as he said:

“There’s something to eat.”

“Some—”

Jeanne did not finish. To her utter astonishment she saw that a very short man in a long greasy coat had captured the pigeon, tucked it under his coat and was making off.

“He—he won’t eat it?” she gasped.

“Come. We will follow.” Her companion hurried her along.

The short man, with the bird still under his arm, had turned south into a dark and deserted street. Jeanne shuddered and wished to turn back. Then she thought of the pigeon. “He is beautiful even now,” she whispered. “What must he be when he gets his second plumage? How proudly he will strut upon the roof-tops.

“Tell me truly,” she said to her companion, “he would not eat him?”

There came no answer.

Having traveled two blocks south, they crossed the street to find themselves facing a vacant lot. There, amid piles of broken bricks and rusty heaps of sheet-iron, many camp fires burned. Moving about from fire to fire, or sitting huddled about them, were men. These were more ragged and forlorn, if that were possible, than those she had seen upon the street.

Then, with the force of a bullet, truth entered the very heart of her being. These men were derelicts. These piles of broken bricks and rusting iron were their homes; these camp fires their kitchens. Soon the young pigeon would be simmering in a great tin can filled with water.

“Wait!” she cried, leaping forward and seizing the short man by the arm. “Don’t —don’t cook him! I will pay you for him. Here! Here is a dollar. Is that enough? If not, I have another.”

Blinking back at her in surprise, taking in her long coat, her jaunty cap, the man stared at her in silence. Then, as the bearded man hurried up, he blinked at him

in turn.

“I didn’t mean to eat him,” he protested. “Honest I didn’t. But if you want him —” he eyed the dollar bill eagerly “—if you want him, here he is.”

Thrusting the pigeon into Jeanne’s hands, he seized the bill and muttered:

“A dollar—a dollar, a whole cartwheel, one big iron man! I didn’t know there was one left in the world!” He seemed about to shed tears.

As he turned his face up to Jeanne’s she noticed that he had but one eye.

“What’s your name?” the bearded one asked.

“Mostly they call me the one-eyed shrimp.”

Pocketing the money, he walked away.

“This, too,” said the bearded one solemnly, “is a form of life.”

“But why such cruel, cruel contrasts?” In her mind’s eye Jeanne was seeing jewels, silks and furs. There were tears in her voice.

“To that question no answer has been found,” the bearded man answered solemnly. “The world is very old. It has always been so. Perhaps it is necessary. It gives contrast. Lights and shadows. We must have them or nothing could be seen.

“I am a sculptor, a very poor one, but one nevertheless. Perhaps you may visit my studio. There you will find things I have done in lovely white marble, yet the beauty of the marble can only be brought out by shadows.

“Come! You are cold.” He turned Jeanne about. “We will go back to the Opera House. Always we must be going back.”

Strange as it may seem, Jeanne did not wish to return. That magnificent palace of art and song had suddenly become abhorrent to her.

“The contrasts,” she murmured, “they are too great!”

“Yes. There you have discovered a great truth. Come to my studio some day. I

will show you more.” The bearded one pressed a card into her hand. Without looking at it, she thrust it deep into her trousers pocket.

In silence they returned to the Opera House. Once inside, Jeanne experienced a miracle. The dark, cold, bitter world outside had vanished. In her mind, for the moment, not a trace of it remained. For her, now, there was only light and life, melody, color—romance in fact, and opera at its best.

CHAPTER XXVI
AN EXCITING MESSAGE

Petite Jeanne was a sun-worshipper and a fire-worshipper of the best sort. She worshipped the One Who created fire and Who sends us light to dispel the gloom of night. The day following her unusual experiences in the lower regions of the Opera House found her curled up in a big chair. The chair stood before a large window of their living room. Here she was completely flooded with light. On bright days, for a space of two hours, the sunlight always succeeded in finding its way through the labyrinth of chimneys and skyscrapers, to fall like a benediction upon this blonde-haired girl. And Jeanne rejoiced in it as a kitten does the warm spot before the hearth.

“It’s God looking down upon His world,” she murmured now.

“Jeanne,” Florence stood in the door of her room, “did that man, the dark-faced one with the evil eye, did he have a scar on his chin?”

“Y-e-s. Let me see.” She closed her eyes to invite a picture. It came. “Yes, now I see him as I did only yesterday. Yes, there was a scar.”

“You saw him yesterday?”

Reluctantly Jeanne turned her face from the sunlight. “I’ll tell you about it. It was exciting, and—and a bit terrible. What can he want?”

She told Florence about the previous day’s adventure. “But why did you ask about the scar?” It was her turn to ask questions.

“I was out at the island last night. You’d never dream of the discovery I made there. But then, you’ve never seen Aunt Bobby—probably not so much as heard

of her.”

Florence had described her experiences up to the time when Meg invited her to inspect her stateroom, when the phone rang.

“I’ll answer it.” Florence took down the receiver.

“It’s for you,” she said, half a minute later.

With a deep sigh Jeanne deserted her spot in the sun.

For all that, her face was flushed with excitement when she put the receiver down.

“It’s the little old lady of the cameo.”

In her excitement she found herself talking in a hoarse whisper. “She has persuaded Hop Long Lee, the rich Chinaman, to let us see the magic curtain. Better still, his people will stage a little play for us. They will use the magic curtain.”

“When?”

“Next Friday, at midnight.”

“Midnight? What an hour!”

“Night is best. And what other hour could one be sure of? There is Marjory Dean. She must see it. And we must find Angelo.”

“Angelo? Have you seen him?”

“Not for months. He went to New York to make his fortune.”

Angelo, as you will recall, was the youthful dreamer who had created a fascinating light opera role for Jeanne.

“But only two days ago,” Jeanne went on, “I heard that he had been seen here in the city.”

“Here? Why does he not give us a ring?”

“Who knows?” Jeanne shrugged. “For all that, I will find him. He must come.

“And to think!” She did a wild fling across the room. “We are to see the magic curtain. We will weave an opera about it. The opera shall be played on that so grand stage.”

“By whom?”

Jeanne did not hesitate. “By Marjory Dean! She will have the leading role. I shall insist. And why not? Would she not do so much for me? Truly. And more, much more!

“As for me!” Again she settled herself in the spot of sunlight. “My time will come.”

She might have added, “Sooner than you could dream of.” She did not.

CHAPTER XXVII
DREAMING

Angelo must be found. It was he who had written the successful light opera, *The Gypsy God of Fire*. No other could write as he—or so Jeanne thought. Yes, he must be found, and that without delay. Friday midnight would be here before anyone could dream three dreams.

And where was one to look for him save in his old haunts? “His garret studio and at night,” Jeanne said to Florence, next morning. “To-morrow we will go.”

“But to-morrow I cannot go. My work keeps me out late.”

“Ah, well, then I shall go alone.”

“Are you not afraid to be on the streets at night?”

“As Pierre I am afraid. But I shall be Petite Jeanne. As Jeanne I shall be safe enough.”

Knowing the futility of an argument with this strange child of France, Florence smiled and went on her way.

That is how it came about that Jeanne found herself at a late hour climbing the stairway that led to the garret studio that once had witnessed so much lightness and gaiety.

She had expected to find changes. Times were hard. It had come to her, in indirect ways, that her good friend had met with little success in New York. But she was scarcely prepared for that which met her gaze as the door was thrown open by Angelo himself.

Advancing into the center of the room, she found bare floors where there had been bright, rich, Oriental rugs. The unique stage, with all its settings of blue, green, red and gold, was bare.

“Yes,” Angelo spoke slowly, meditatively, as if answering her mood, “they took my things, one at a time. Fair enough, too. I owed money. I could not pay. The piano went first, my old, old friend. A battered friend it was, but its tones were true.

“And what grand times we had around that piano! Remember?”

“I remember.” Jeanne’s tone was low.

“But don’t be sad about it.” Angelo was actually smiling. “They took the piano, the rugs, the desk where I composed your light opera.

“Ah, yes; but after all, these are but the symbols of life. They are not life itself. They could not carry away the memory of those days, those good brave days when we were sometimes rich and sometimes very, very poor. The memories of those days will be with us forever. And of such memories as these life, the best of life, is made.”

After some brief, commonplace remarks, came a moment of silence.

“If you’ll excuse me,” Swen, Angelo’s friend, said, “I will go out to search for a bit of cheer.”

“Yes, yes. He will bring us cheer. Then he will sing us a song.” Jeanne made a brave attempt at being merry.

When Swen was gone, Angelo motioned her to a place before the fire.

“We will not despair. ‘Hope springs eternal in the human breast.’ The beautiful spring-time of life will bloom again.

“And see,” he exclaimed, enthusiastic as a boy, “we still have the fireplace! They could not take that. And there is always wood to be had. I found this on the beach. It was washed up high in the storm at a spot where children romp all summer long. Driftwood. Some from a broken ship and some from who knows where?

“See how it burns. The flame! The flame!” He was all but chanting now. “What colors there are! Can you see them? There is red and orange, pink, purple, blue. All like a miniature magic curtain.”

“Yes, like a magic curtain,” Jeanne murmured.

Then suddenly she awoke from the entrancing spell this remarkable youth had woven.

“Ah, yes, but those brave days will return for you!” she cried, springing to her feet and leaping away in a wild dance. “The magic curtain, it will bring them back to you!”

His fine eyes shone as he rose to admire the grace of her rhythmic dance. “Now you are dreaming.”

“Dreaming?” She stopped dead still. “Perhaps. But my dreams will come true. Allow me to congratulate you. You are about to become famous. You will write a grand opera.”

“Ah! The gypsy fortune teller speaks.” He still smiled. Nevertheless he held her hand in a warm clasp.

“Yes,” she agreed, “I am a gypsy, a fortune teller. Well, perhaps. But, for all that, I only speak of things I have seen. Listen, my good friend!” Her tone was impressive. “I have seen that which will form the background for an Oriental opera. Not a long opera, one act perhaps; but an opera, vivid and living, all the same. And you, my friend, shall write it.”

“You talk in riddles.” He drew her to a seat beside him. “Explain, my beautiful gypsy.”

“This much I shall tell you, not more. I have seen a magic curtain that burns but is not consumed. Friday at midnight you shall see it for yourself. And about it you shall weave a story more fantastic than any you have yet dreamed.”

“And you shall be the leading lady!” He had caught the spirit of the hour. “That shall be glory. Glory for me.”

“Ah, no, my friend.” Petite Jeanne’s head drooped a little. “I am not known to

grand opera. But you shall have a leading lady, such a grand lady! Marjory Dean! What do you say to that?”

“You are right.” Angelo’s tone was solemn. “She is very grand, marvelous indeed. But, after all, we work best, we write best, we do all things best for those who love us a little.”

“Ah, you would say that!” Jeanne seized him by the shoulder and gave him a gentle shake.

“But see!” she cried when she had regained her composure. “Marjory Dean, too, is to see the magic curtain. To-morrow at midnight, you shall see her. And then I am sure she will love you more than a little. Then all will be more than well.

“And now see! Here is Swen. He is bringing hot coffee and sweet rolls stuffed, I am sure, with pineapple and fresh cocoanut. On with the feast!”

Angelo produced two ancient plates and three large cups devoid of handles. They settled themselves comfortably before the hearth to enjoy such a communion of good spirits as had never been granted them in those balmy days when purses were lined with gold.

“What is poverty when one has friends?” Angelo demanded joyously, as at last he assisted Jeanne to her feet.

“What, indeed?” Jeanne agreed heartily.

“Friday at midnight,” Angelo said solemnly, as a moment later Jeanne stood at the doorway.

“As the clock strikes the hour,” she breathed. Then she was gone.

CHAPTER XXVIII
FLORENCE CRASHES IN

At that moment Florence was involved in an affair which threatened to bring her brief career to a tragic end.

It had begun innocently enough. The back of a man's head, seen in a crowd, had interested her. She had made a study of men's heads. "There's as much character to be read in the back of one's head as in one's face," a psychologist had said to her. Doubting his statement, she had taken up this study to disprove his theory. She had ended by believing. For truly one may read in the carriage of the head stubbornness, indecision, mental and physical weakness; yes, and a capacity for crime.

It was this last, revealed in the neck of the man in the throng, that had set her on his trail.

She had not long to wait for confirmation. At a turn in the street the man offered her a side view. At once she caught her breath. This man was dark of visage. He had an ugly red scar on his chin.

"Jeanne's shadow!" she whispered to herself. "And such a shadow!" She shuddered at the very thought.

For this young man was not unknown to her. Not ten days before, in a crowded police court he had been pointed out to her as one of the most dangerous of criminals. He was not, at this time, in custody. Just why he was there she had not been told. Though suspected of many crimes, he had been detected in none of them.

"And it is he who has been dogging Jeanne's footsteps!" she muttered. "I must

warn her.

“He, too, it was, who sank the package in Snowball’s net. Meg’s birthday present.” She smiled. Then she frowned. “I must warn her. It may be a bomb. Stranger discoveries have been made.”

For a moment she considered another theory regarding the package. A moment only—then all this was driven from her mind. Drama was in the making, real drama from life. The evil-eyed one had paused before a doorway. He had remained poised there for a moment like a bird of prey: then the prey appeared, or so it seemed to Florence.

A short, foreign-appearing man with a military bearing all but came to a position of salute before the dark one of the evil eye. That one essayed a smile which, to the girl, seemed the grin of a wolf.

The short man appeared not to notice. He uttered a few words, waved his hands excitedly, then turned as if expecting to be led away.

“A Frenchman,” Florence thought. “Who else would wave his arms so wildly?”

Then a thought struck her all of a heap. “This is Jeanne’s little Frenchman, the one who bears a message for her, who has come all the way from France to deliver it.”

At once she became wildly excited. She had notions about that message. Strangely fantastic notions they were; this she was obliged to admit. But they very nearly drove her to committing a strange act. In a moment more she would have dashed up to the little Frenchman. She would undoubtedly have seized him by the arm and exclaimed:

“You are looking for Petite Jeanne. Come! I will lead you to her!”

This did not happen. There was a moment of indecision. Then, before her very eyes, the dark one, after casting a suspicious glance her way, bundled his prey into a waiting taxi and whisked him away.

“Gone!” Consternation seized her. But, suddenly, her mind cleared.

“What was that number?” She racked her brain. Tom Howe, the young detective

who had pointed out the dark-faced one, had given her the street number believed to be his hangout.

“One, three,” she said aloud. “One, three, six, four, Burgoyne Place. That was it!

“Oh, taxi! Taxi!” She went dashing away after a vacant car.

Having overtaken the cab, she gave the driver hasty instructions, and then settled back against the cushions.

Her head was in a whirl. What was it she planned to do? To follow a dangerous criminal? Alone? To frustrate his plans single-handed? The thing seemed tremendous, preposterous.

“Probably not going to his haunt at all. May not be his haunt.”

Pressing her hands against her temples, she closed her eyes. For a space of several moments she bumped along.

Then she straightened up. The cab had ceased its bumping. They were rolling along on smooth paving. This was not to be expected.

“Driver! Driver!” she exclaimed, sliding the glass window to one side with a bang. “Where are we?”

“Kinzie and Carpen.”

“Oh, oh!” She could have wept. “You’re going north. The address I gave you is south.”

“It can’t be, Miss.”

“It is!”

“Then I’m wrong.”

“Of course! Turn about and go south to 2200. Then I’ll tell you the way.”

Once again they glided and jolted along. In the end they pulled up before a stone building. A two-story structure that might once have been a mansion, it stood between two towering warehouses.

“That’s the place. There’s the number.”

She hesitated. Should she ask the driver to remain? “No, they’ll see him and make a run for it.” She had thought of a better way. She paid him and as if frightened by his surroundings he sped away.

“Not a moment to lose!” she whispered. Some sixth sense seemed to tell her that this was the place—that the dark one and his victim were inside.

Speeding to a corner where a boy cried his papers, she thrust half a dollar into his hand, and whispered a command:

“Bring a policeman to that house!” She poked a thumb over her shoulder.

“You’ll need three of ’em!” the boy muttered, as he hurried away. She did not hear. She was speeding back.

“Now!” she breathed, squaring her shoulders.

Up the stone steps, a thrust at the doorbell. Ten seconds. No answer. A vigorous thump. A kick. Still no response.

Examining the door, she found it to be a double one.

“Rusty catches. Easy!

“But then?”

She did not stand on ceremony. Stepping back a pace, she threw her sturdy form against the door. It gave way, letting her into a hallway. To the right of the hallway was a door.

A man was in the act of springing at her when someone from behind exclaimed:

“Wait! It’s a frail!”

The words appeared to upset the other’s plans, or at least to halt them for a second.

During that second the girl plunged head foremost. Striking him amidships, she capsized him and took all the wind from his sail in one and the same instant.

She regained her balance just in time to see a long, blue gun being leveled at her. It was in the hand of the evil-eyed one.

Not for naught had she labored in the gymnasium. Before the gun flashed, it went whirling through space, crashed a window and was gone.

As for the evil-eyed one, he too vanished. At the same moment three stolid policemen came stamping in. The newsboy had done yeoman duty.

The offender who had been overturned by Florence was duly mopped up. The evil-eyed one was sought in vain. Groaning in a corner was the short Frenchman.

His arms were bound behind him in a curious fashion; in fact they were so bound by ropes and a stick that his arms might have been twisted from their sockets, and this by a few simple turns of that stick.

“Kidnappin’ an’ torture!” said one of the police, standing the captured offender on his feet. “You’ll get yours, Mike.”

“It was Blackie’s idea,” grumbled the man.

“And where’s Blackie?”

The man shrugged.

“Left you to hold the bag. That’s him. Anyway, now we got it on him, we’ll mop him up! Blamed if we don’t! Tim, untie that man.” He nodded toward the little Frenchman.

“Now then,” the police sergeant commanded, “tell us why you let ’em take you in.”

“They—they told me they would take me to a person known as Petite Jeanne.”

“Pet—Petite Jeanne!” Florence could have shouted for joy. “And have you money for her, a great deal of money?”

“No, Miss.” The little man stared at her.

Florence wilted. Her pet dream had proven only an illusion. “At any rate,” she

managed to say after a time, “when the police are through with you I’ll take you to her lodgings. I am her friend and pal.”

The little man looked at her distrustfully. He had put his confidence in two American citizens that day, and with dire results.

“We’ll see about that later.” The police sergeant scowled.

“I think—” His scowl had turned to a smile when, a few moments later, after completing his investigation and interrogating Florence, he turned to the Frenchman. “I think—at least it’s my opinion—that you’ll be safe enough in this young lady’s company.

“If she’d go to the trouble of hirin’ a taxi and followin’ you, then breakin’ down a door and riskin’ her life to rescue you from a bloody pair of kidnappers and murderers, she’s not goin’ to take you far from where you want to go.”

“I am overcome!” The Frenchman bowed low. “I shall accompany her with the greatest assurance.”

So, side by side, the curious little Frenchman and the girl marched away.

“But, Mademoiselle!” The Frenchman seemed dazed. “Why all this late unpleasantness?”

“Those two!” Florence threw out her arms. “They’d have tortured you to death. They thought, as I did, that you were in possession of money, a great deal of money.”

“In France,” the man exclaimed in evident disgust, “we execute such men!”

“In America,” Florence replied quietly, “we mostly don’t. And what a pity!

“The elevated is only three blocks away.” She took up a brisk stride. “We’ll take it. I hate taxis. Drivers never know where you want to go. Outside the Loop, they’re lost like babes in the wood.”

A taxi might indeed have lost both Florence and the polite little Frenchman. Under Florence’s plan only the Frenchman was lost. And this, to her, was just as bad, for she *did* want Petite Jeanne to meet this man and receive the message

from him, even though the message was not to be delivered in the form of bank notes.

It was the little man's extreme politeness that proved his undoing. In the Loop they were obliged to change trains. Florence had waited for the right train, and then had invited him to go before her, when, with a lift of his hat, he said, bowing:

"After you, my dear Mademoiselle!"

This was all well enough. But there were other Madams and Mademoiselles boarding that train.

Again and yet again the little man bowed low. When at last the gates banged and the train rattled on its way, Florence found to her consternation that she was alone.

"We left him there bowing!" There was a certain humor in the situation. But she was disappointed and alarmed.

Speeding across the bridge at the next station, she boarded a second train and went rattling back. Arrived at her former station, she found no trace of the man.

"He took another train. It's no use." Her shoulders drooped. "All that and nothing for it."

Her dejection lasted but for a moment.

"To-morrow," she murmured. "It is not far away. And on the morrow there is ever something new."

CHAPTER XXIX
IT HAPPENED AT MIDNIGHT

Midnight. The lights of Chinatown were dim as four figures made their way to a door marked: “For Members Only.”

Jeanne, the foremost of these figures, knew that door. She had entered it before. Yet, as her hand touched the heavy handle, she was halted by a sudden fear. Her face blanched.

Close at her side Marjory Dean, artist and supreme interpreter of life as she was, understood instantly.

“Come, child. Don’t be afraid. They are a simple people, these Orientals.”

“Yes. Yes, I know.” The girl took a tight grip on herself and pressed on through the door. Marjory Dean, Angelo and Swen followed.

At the top of the second stair they were halted by a dark shadow-like figure.

“What you want?”

“Hop Long Lee.”

“You come.”

The man, whose footsteps made not the slightest sound, led the way.

“Midnight,” Jeanne whispered to herself. “Why did I say midnight?” It was always so. Ever she was desiring mystery, enchantment at unheard-of hours. Always, when the hour came she was ready to turn back.

“The magic curtain.” She started. A second dark figure was beside her. “You wished to see?”

“Y-yes.”

“You shall see. I am Hop Long Lee.

“And these are your friends? Ah, yes! Come! You will see!” His hand touched Jeanne’s. She started back. It was cold, like marble.

They followed in silence. They trod inch-thick rugs. There came no sound save the tok-tok-tok of some great, slow clock off there somewhere in the dark.

“I am not afraid,” Jeanne told herself. “I am not going to be afraid. I have seen all this before.”

Yet, when she had descended the narrow, winding stairs, when a small, Oriental rug was offered her in lieu of a chair, her limbs gave way beneath her and she dropped, limp as a rag, to the comforting softness of the rug.

That which followed will remain painted on the walls of never-to-be-forgotten memories.

Figures, dark, creeping figures, appeared in this dimly lighted room.

Once again the curtain, a red and glowing thing, crept across the stage. She gripped Marjory Dean’s hand hard.

Some figures appeared before the curtain. Grotesque figures. They danced as she had imagined only gnomes and elves might dance. A vast, many-colored dragon crept from the darkness. With a mighty lashing of tail, he swallowed the dancers, then disappeared into the darkness from which he had come.

“Oh!” Jeanne breathed. Even Marjory Dean, who had witnessed many forms of magic, was staring straight ahead.

A single figure appeared on the stage, one all in white. The figure wore a long, flowing robe. The face was white.

From somewhere strange music began to whisper. It was like wind sighing in the

trees, the trees in the graveyard at midnight. And this was midnight.

Next instant Jeanne leaped straight into the air. Someone had struck a gong, an Oriental gong.

Mortified beyond belief, she settled back in her place.

And now the magic curtain, like some wall of fire, burned a fiercer red. From the shadows the dragon thrust out his head once more.

The white-faced figure ceased dancing. The wind in the trees sang on. The figure, appearing to see the dragon, drew back in trembling fright.

He approached the fiery curtain, yet his back was ever toward it. There was yet a space between the two sections of the curtain. The figure, darting toward this gap, was caught in the flames.

“Oh!” Jeanne breathed. “He will die in flames!”

Marjory Dean pressed her hand hard.

Of a sudden the floor beneath the white figure opened and swallowed him up.

Jeanne looked for the dragon. It was gone. The fiery red of the curtain was turning to an orange glow.

“Come. You have seen.” It was Hop Long Lee who spoke. Once again his marble-cold hand touched Jeanne’s hand.

Ten minutes later the four figures were once more in the street.

“Midnight in an Oriental garden,” Angelo breathed.

“That,” breathed Marjory Dean, “is drama, Oriental drama. Give it a human touch and it could be made supreme.”

“You—you think it could be made into a thing of beauty?”

“Surely. Most certainly, my child. Nothing could be more unique.”

“Come,” whispered Jeanne happily. “Come with me. The night is young. The

day is for sleep. Come. We will have coffee by my fire. Then we will talk, talk of all this. We will create an opera in a night. Is it not so?”

And it was so.

A weird bit of opera it was that they produced that night. Even the atmosphere in which they worked was fantastic. Candle light, a flickering fire that now and then leaped into sudden conflagration, mellow-toned gongs provided by the little lady of the cameo; such were the elements that added to the fantastic reality of the unreal.

In this one-act drama the giant paper dragon remained. The flaming curtain, the setting for some weird Buddhist ceremony, was to furnish the motif. A flesh and blood person, whose part was to be played by Marjory Dean, replaced the thing of white cloth and paper that had danced a weird dance, and became entangled in the fiery curtain. Oriental mystery, the deep hatred of some types of yellow men for the white race, these entered into the story.

In the plot the hero (Marjory Dean), a white boy, son of a rich trader, caught by the lure of mystery, adventure and tales of the magic curtain, volunteers to take the place of a rich Chinese youth who is to endure the trial by fire.

A very ugly old Chinaman, who holds the white boy in high regard, learning of his plans and realizing his peril, prepares the trap-door in the floor beneath the magic curtain.

When the hour comes for the trial by fire, the white boy, being ignorant of the secrets that will save him, appears doomed as the flames of the curtain surround him, consuming the very mask from his face and leaving him there, his identity revealed in stark reality.

Then as the rich Chinaman, who has planned the trial, realizes the catastrophe that must befall his people if the rich youth is burned to death, prepares to cast himself into the flames, the floor opens to swallow the boy up, and the curtain fades.

There is not space here to tell of the motives of love, hate, pride and patriotism that lay back of this bit of drama. Enough that when it was done Marjory Dean pronounced it the most perfect bit of opera yet produced in America.

“And you will be our diva?” Jeanne was all eagerness.

“I shall be proud to.”

“Then,” Angelo’s eyes shone, “then we are indeed rich once more.”

“Yes. Your beautiful rugs, your desk, your ancient friend the piano, they shall all come back to you.” In her joy Jeanne could have embraced him. As it was she wrung his hand in parting, and thanked him over and over for his part in this bit of work and adventure.

“The music,” she whispered to Swen, “you will do it?”

“It is as well as done. The wind whispering in the graveyard pines at midnight. This is done by reeds and strings. And there are the gongs, the deep melodious gongs of China. What more could one ask?”

What more, indeed?

“And now,” said Florence, after she had, some hours later, listened to Jeanne’s recital of that night’s affairs, “now that it is all over, what is there in it all for you?”

“For me?” Jeanne spread her hands wide. “Nothing. Nothing at all.”

“Then why—?”

“Only this,” Jeanne interrupted her, “you said once that one found the best joy in life by helping others. Well then,” she laughed a little laugh, “I have helped a little.

“And you shall see, my time will come.”

Was she right? Does one sometimes serve himself best by serving others? We shall see.

CHAPTER XXX
A SURPRISE PARTY

Time marched on, as time has a way of doing. A week passed, another and yet another. Each night of opera found Jeanne, still masquerading as Pierre, at her post among the boxes. Never forgetting that a priceless necklace had been stolen from those boxes and that she had run away, ever conscious of the searching eyes of Jaeger and of the inscrutable shadow that was the lady in black, Jeanne performed her tasks as one who walks beneath a shadow that in a moment may be turned into impenetrable darkness.

For all this, she still thrilled to the color, the music, the drama, which is Grand Opera.

“Some day,” she had a way of whispering to herself, “some happy day!” Yet that day seemed indistinct and far away.

The dark-faced menace to her happiness, he of the evil eye, appeared to have vanished. Perhaps he was in jail. Who could tell?

The little Frenchman with the message, too, had vanished. Why had he never returned to ask Pierre, the usher in the boxes, the correct address of Petite Jeanne? Beyond doubt he believed himself the victim of a practical joke. “This boy Pierre knows nothing regarding the whereabouts of that person named Petite Jeanne.” Thus he must have reasoned. At any rate the message was not delivered. If Jeanne had lost a relative by death, if she had inherited a fortune or was wanted for some misdemeanor committed in France, she remained blissfully ignorant of it all.

Three times Rosemary Robinson had invited her to visit her at her home. Three times, as Pierre, politely but firmly, she had refused. “This affair,” she told

herself, “has gone far enough. Before our friendship ripens or is blighted altogether, I must reveal to her my identity. And that I am not yet willing to do. It might rob me of my place in this great palace of art.”

Thanks to Marjory Dean, the little French girl’s training in Grand Opera proceeded day by day. Without assigning a definite reason for it, the prima donna had insisted upon giving her hours of training each week in the role of the juggler.

More than this, she had all but compelled Jeanne to become her understudy in the forthcoming one-act opera to be known as “The Magic Curtain.”

At an opportune moment Marjory Dean had introduced the manager of the opera to all the fantastic witchery of this new opera. He had been taken by it.

At once he had agreed that when the “Juggler” was played, this new opera should be presented to the public.

So Jeanne lived in a world of dreams, dreams that she felt could never come true. “But I am learning,” she would whisper to herself, “learning of art and life. What more could one ask?”

Then came a curious invitation. She was to visit the studios of Fernando Tiffin. The invitation came through Marjory Dean. Strangest of all, she was to appear as Pierre.

“Why Pierre?” she pondered.

“Yes, why?” Florence echoed. “But, after all, such an invitation! Fernando Tiffin is the greatest sculptor in America. Have you seen the fountain by the Art Museum?”

“Where the pigeons are always bathing?”

“Yes.”

“It is beautiful.”

“He created that statue, and many others.”

“That reminds me,” Jeanne sought out her dress suit and began searching its pockets, “an artist, an interesting man with a beard, gave me his card. He told me to visit his studio. He was going to tell me more about lights and shadows.”

“Lights and shadows?”

“Yes. How they are like life. But now I have lost his card.”

* * * * * * * *

Florence returned to the island. There she sat long in the sunshine by the rocky shore, talking with Aunt Bobby. She found the good lady greatly perplexed.

“They’ve served notice,” Aunt Bobby sighed, “the park folks have. All that is to come down.” She waved an arm toward the cottonwood thicket and the “Cathedral.” “A big building is going up. Steam shovels are working over on the west side now. Any day, now, we’ll have to pack up, Meg and me.

“And where’ll we go? Back to the ships, I suppose. I hate it for Meg. She ought to have more schoolin’. But poor folks can’t pick and choose.”

“There will be a way out,” Florence consoled her. But would there? Who could tell?

She hunted up Meg and advised her to look into that mysterious package. “It may be a bomb.”

“If it is, it won’t go off by itself.”

“It may be a gun.”

“Don’t need a gun. Got two of ’em. Good ones.”

“It may be stolen treasure.”

“Well, I didn’t steal it!” Meg turned flashing eyes upon her. And there for a time the matter ended.

* * * * * * * *

Jeanne attended the great sculptor’s party. Since she had not been invited to

accompany Marjory Dean, she went alone. What did it matter? Miss Dean was to be there. That was enough.

She arrived at three o'clock in the afternoon. A servant answered the bell. She was ushered at once into a vast place with a very high ceiling. All about her were statues and plaster-of-paris reproductions of masterpieces.

Scarcely had she time to glance about her when she heard a voice, saw a face and knew she had found an old friend—the artist who had spoken so interestingly of life, he of the beard, was before her.

"So this is where you work?" She was overjoyed. "And does the great Fernando Tiffin do his work here, too?"

"I am Fernando Tiffin."

"Oh!" Jeanne swayed a little.

"You see," the other smiled, putting out a hand to steady her, "I, too, like to study life among those who do not know me; to masquerade a little."

"Masquerade!" Jeanne started. Did he, then, see through her own pretenses? She flushed.

"But no!" She fortified herself. "How could he know?"

"You promised to tell me more about life." She hurried to change the subject.

"Ah, yes. How fine! There is yet time.

"You see." He threw a switch. The place was flooded with light. "The thing that stands before you, the 'Fairy and the Child,' it is called. It is a reproduction of a great masterpiece: a perfect reproduction, yet in this light it is nothing; a blare of white, that is all.

"But see!" He touched one button, then another, and, behold, the statue stood before them a thing of exquisite beauty!

"You see?" he smiled. "Now there are shadows, perfect shadows, just enough, and just enough light.

“Life is like that. There must be shadows. Without shadows we could not be conscious of light. But when the lights are too bright, the shadows too deep, then all is wrong.

“Your bright lights of life at the Opera House, the sable coats, the silks and jewels, they are a form of life. But there the lights are too strong. They blind the eyes, hide the true beauty that may be beneath it all.

“But out there on that vacant lot, in the cold and dark—you have not forgotten?”

“I shall never forget.” Jeanne’s voice was low.

“There the shadows were too deep. It was like this.” He touched still another button. The beauty of the statue was once more lost, this time in a maze of shadows too deep and strong.

“You see.” His voice was gentle.

“I see.”

“But here are more guests arriving. You may not be aware of it, but this is to be an afternoon of opera, not of art.”

Soon enough Jeanne was to know this, for, little as she had dreamed it, hers on that occasion was to be the stellar role.

It was Marjory Dean who had entered. With her was the entire cast of “The Magic Curtain.”

“He has asked that we conduct a dress rehearsal here for the benefit of a few choice friends,” Miss Dean whispered in Jeanne’s ear, as soon as she could draw her aside.

“A strange request, I’ll grant you,” she answered Jeanne’s puzzled look. “Not half so strange as this, however. He wishes you to take the stellar role.”

“But, Miss Dean!”

“It is his party. His word is law in many places. You will do your best for me.” She pressed Jeanne’s hand hard.

Jeanne did her best. And undoubtedly, despite the lack of a truly magic curtain, despite the limitations of the improvised stage, the audience was visibly impressed.

At the end, as Jeanne sank from sight beneath the stage, the great sculptor leaned over to whisper in Marjory Dean’s ear:

“She will do it!”

“What did I tell you? To be sure she will!”

The operatic portion of the program at an end, the guests were treated to a brief lecture on the art of sculpture. Tea was served. The guests departed. Through it all Jeanne walked about in a daze. “It is as if I had been invited to my own wedding and did not so much as know I was married,” she said to Florence, later in the day.

Florence smiled and made no reply. There was more to come, much more. Florence believed that. But Jeanne had not so much as guessed.

CHAPTER XXXI
FLORENCE MEETS THE LADY IN BLACK

The great hour came at last. “To-night,” Jeanne had whispered, “‘The Magic Curtain’ will unfold before thousands! Will it be a success?”

The very thought that it might prove a failure turned her cold. The happiness of her good friends, Angelo, Swen and Marjory Dean was at stake. And to Jeanne the happiness of those she respected and loved was more dear than her own.

Night came quite suddenly on that eventful day. Great dark clouds, sweeping in from the lake, drew the curtain of night.

Jeanne found herself at her place among the boxes a full hour before the time required. This was not of her own planning. There was a mystery about this; a voice had called her on the telephone requesting her to arrive early.

“Now I am here,” she murmured, “and the place is half dark. Who can have requested it? What could have been the reason?”

Still another mystery. Florence was with her. And she was to remain. A place had been provided for her in the box usually occupied by Rosemary Robinson and her family.

“Of course,” she had said to Florence, “they know that we had something to do with the discovery of the magic curtain. It is, perhaps, because of this that you are here.”

Florence had smiled, but had made no reply.

At this hour the great auditorium was silent, deserted. Only from behind the

drawn stage curtain came a faint murmur, telling of last minute preparations.

"'The Magic Curtain.'" Jeanne whispered. The words still thrilled her. "It will be witnessed to-night by thousands. What will be the verdict? To-morrow Angelo and Swen, my friends of our 'Golden Circle,' will be rich or very, very poor."

"The Magic Curtain." Surely it had been given a generous amount of publicity. Catching a note of the unusual, the mysterious, the uncanny in this production, the reporters had made the most of it. An entire page of the Sunday supplement had been devoted to it. A crude drawing of the curtains, pictures of Hop Long Lee, of Angelo, Swen, Marjory Dean, and even Jeanne were there. And with these a most lurid story purporting to be the history of this curtain of fire as it had existed through the ages in some little known Buddhist temple. The very names of those who, wrapped in its consuming folds, had perished, were given in detail. Jeanne had read, had shuddered, then had tried to laugh it off as a reporter's tale. In this she did not quite succeed. For her the magic curtain contained more than a suggestion of terror.

She was thinking of all this when an attendant, hurrying up the orchestra aisle, paused beneath her and called her name, the only name by which she was known at the Opera House:

"Pierre! Oh, Pierre!"

"Here. Here I am."

Without knowing why, she thrilled to her very finger tips. "Is it for this that I am here?" she asked herself.

"Hurry down!" came from below. "The director wishes to speak to you."

"The director!" The blood froze in her veins. So this was the end! Her masquerade had been discovered. She was to be thrown out of the Opera House.

"And on this night of all nights!" She was ready to weep.

It was a very meek Pierre who at last stood before the great director.

"Are you Pierre?" His tone was not harsh. She began to hope a little.

“I am Pierre.”

“This man—” The director turned to one in the shadows. Jeanne caught her breath. It was the great sculptor, Fernando Tiffin.

“This man,” the director repeated, after she had recovered from her surprise, “tells me that you know the score of this new opera, ‘The Magic Curtain.’”

“Y-yes. Yes, I do.” What was this? Her heart throbbed painfully.

“And that of the ‘Juggler of Notre Dame.’”

“I—I do.” This time more boldly.

“Surely this can be no crime,” she told herself.

“This has happened,” the director spoke out abruptly, “Miss Dean is at the Robinson home. She has fallen from a horse. She will not be able to appear to-night. Fernando Tiffin tells me that you are prepared to assume the leading role in these two short operas. I say it is quite impossible. You are to be the judge.”

Staggered by this load that had been so suddenly cast upon her slender shoulders, the little French girl seemed about to sink to the floor. Fortunately at that instant her eyes caught the calm, reassuring gaze of the great sculptor. “I have said you are able.” She read this meaning there.

“Yes.” Her shoulders were square now. “I am able.”

“Then,” said the director, “you shall try.”

Ninety minutes later by the clock, she found herself waiting her cue, the cue that was to bid her come dancing forth upon a great stage, the greatest in the world. And looking down upon her, quick to applaud or to blame, were the city’s thousands.

In the meantime, in her seat among the boxes, Florence had met with an unusual experience. A mysterious figure had suddenly revealed herself as one of Petite Jeanne’s old friends. At the same time she had half unfolded some month-old mysteries.

Petite Jeanne had hardly disappeared through the door leading to the stage when two whispered words came from behind Florence's back:

"Remember me?"

With a start, the girl turned about to find herself looking into the face of a tall woman garbed in black.

Reading uncertainty in her eyes, the woman whispered: "Cedar Point. Gamblers' Island. Three rubies."

"The 'lady cop'!" Florence sprang to her feet. She was looking at an old friend. Many of her most thrilling adventures had been encountered in the presence of this lady of the police.

"So it was you!" she exclaimed in a low whisper. "You are Jeanne's lady in black?"

"I am the lady in black."

"And she never recognized you?"

"I arranged it so she would not. She never saw my face. I have been a guardian of her trail on many an occasion.

"And now!" Her figure grew tense, like that of a springing tiger. "Now I am about to come to the end of a great mystery. You can help me. That is why I arranged that you should be here."

"I?" Florence showed her astonishment.

"Sit down."

The girl obeyed.

"Some weeks ago a priceless necklace was stolen from this very box. You recall that?"

"How could I forget?" Florence sat up, all attention.

"Of course. Petite Jeanne, she is your best friend.

“She cast suspicion upon herself by deserting her post here; running away. Had it not been for me, she would have gone to jail. I had seen through her masquerade at once. ‘This,’ I said to myself, ‘is Petite Jeanne. She would not steal a dime.’ I convinced others. They spared her.

“Then,” she paused for a space of seconds, “it was up to me to find the pearls and the thief. I think I have accomplished this; at least I have found the pearls. As I said, you can help me. You know the people living on that curious man-made island?”

“I—” Florence was thunderstruck.

Aunt Bobby! Meg! How could they be implicated? All this she said to herself and was fearful.

Then, like a bolt from the blue came a picture of Meg’s birthday package.

“You know those people?” the “lady cop” insisted.

“I—why, yes, I do.”

“You will go there with me after the opera?”

“At night?”

“There is need for haste. We will go in Robinson’s big car. Jaeger will go, and Rosemary. Perhaps Jeanne, too. You will be ready? That is all for now.

“Only this: I think Jeanne is to have the stellar role to-night.”

“Jeanne! The stellar role? How could that be?”

“I think it has been arranged.”

“Arranged?”

There came no answer. The lady in black was gone.

CHAPTER XXXII
SPARKLING TREASURE

The strangest moment in the little French girl's career was that in which, as the juggler, she tripped out upon the Opera House stage. More than three thousand people had assembled in this great auditorium to see and hear their favorite, the city's darling, Marjory Dean, perform in her most famous role. She was not here. They would know this at once. What would the answer be?

The answer, after perfunctory applause, was a deep hush of silence. It was as if the audience had said: "Marjory Dean is not here. Ah, well, let us see what this child can do."

Only her tireless work under Miss Dean's direction saved Jeanne from utter collapse. Used as she was to the smiling faces and boisterous applause of the good old light opera days, this silence seemed appalling. As it was, she played her part with a perfection that was art, devoid of buoyancy. This, at first. But as the act progressed she took a tight grip on herself and throwing herself into the part, seemed to shout at the dead audience: "You shall look! You shall hear! You must applaud!"

For all this, when the curtain was run down upon the scene, the applause, as before, lacked enthusiasm. She answered but one curtain call, then crept away alone to clench her small hands hard in an endeavor to keep back the tears and to pray as she had never prayed before, that Marjory Dean might arrive prepared to play her part before the curtain went up on the second act.

But now a strange thing was happening. From one corner of the house there came a low whisper and a murmur. It grew and grew; it spread and spread until, like a fire sweeping the dead grass of the prairies, it had passed to the darkest

nook of the vast auditorium.

Curiously enough, a name was on every lip;

“Petite Jeanne!”

Someone, a fan of other days, had penetrated the girl’s mask and had seen there the light opera favorite of a year before. A thousand people in that audience had known and loved her in those good dead days that were gone.

When Jeanne, having waited and hoped in vain for the appearance of her friend and benefactor, summoned all the courage she possessed, and once more stepped upon the stage, she was greeted by such a round of applause as she had never before experienced—not even in the good old days of yesteryear.

This vast audience had suddenly taken her to its heart. How had this come about? Ah, well, what did it matter? They were hers, hers for one short hour. She must make the most of this golden opportunity.

That which followed, the completing of the “Juggler,” the opening of “The Magic Curtain,” the complete triumph of this new American opera, will always remain to Jeanne a beautiful dream. She walked and danced, she sang and bowed as one in a dream.

The great moment of all came when, after answering the fifth curtain call with her name, “Petite Jeanne! Petite Jeanne!” echoing to the vaulted ceiling, she left the stage to walk square into the arms of Marjory Dean.

“Why, I thought—” She paused, too astounded for words.

“You thought I had fallen from a horse. So I did—a leather horse with iron legs. It was in a gymnasium. Rosemary pushed me off. Truly it did not hurt at all.”

“A frame-up!” Jeanne stared.

“Yes, a frame-up for a good cause. ‘The Magic Curtain’ was yours, not mine. You discovered it. It was through your effort that this little opera was perfected. It was yours, not mine. Your golden hour.”

“My golden hour!” the little French girl repeated dreamily. “But not ever again.

Not until I have sung and sung, and studied and studied shall I appear again on such a stage!”

“Child, you have the wisdom of the gods.”

“But the director!” Jeanne’s mood changed. “Does he not hate you?”

“Quite the contrary. He loves me. Why should he not? I have found him a fresh little American opera and a future star. His vast audience has gone away happy. What more could he ask?”

What more, indeed?

But what is this? Florence is at Jeanne’s side. What is she saying? “They think they have discovered the whereabouts of Rosemary’s pearls. On the island.” Would she go with them? Most certainly, and at once. But alas, she has no clothes save those of Pierre, the usher of the boxes. Ah, well, they must do. She will be ready at once. Yes! Yes! At once! Right away!

They were all tumbling helter-skelter into the big town car, Jeanne, Florence, Rosemary, Jaeger, the “lady cop” and even Marjory Dean, when a dapper little man approached the car to ask for Petite Jeanne.

“She is here,” the “lady cop” informed him. Indeed she was, and wedged in so tight it was difficult to move.

“Ah! At last!” the little man sighed. “May I speak with her? It has been my privilege to bear a message from France.”

“A message!” Jeanne thrilled to the tips of her toes.

“I am afraid it is impossible.” The “lady cop’s” tone was business-like. “It is late. Our errand is of the greatest importance.”

“So, too, is my message. If you will permit, I shall accompany you.” Looking in the crowded car, he opened the driver’s door and, hearing no objections, took his place beside the chauffeur.

“And mystery still pursued her,” Florence whispered to herself, as she studied the back of the little Frenchman’s head.

Jeanne was crowded in between Rosemary and the “lady cop.” As Rosemary’s arm stole about her, still conscious of her dress suit and her masquerade, she moved uneasily.

“It’s all right, little French girl,” Rosemary whispered. “I have known all the time that you were Petite Jeanne and not Pierre.

“All the same,” she added, “I have enjoyed this little play at life quite as much as you.”

With a little sigh of relief Jeanne sank back among the cushions.

Down the boulevard they sped; across a rattling wooden bridge, then across the wind-blown, sandy island.

The car came to a stop at the entrance to the path that led to Aunt Bobby’s “Cathedral.”

“You would do well to let me go first,” Florence said to Jaeger and the “lady cop.” “Meg, the girl, has two fine revolvers. She can use them and will do so if she believes she is being attacked.”

Fortunately there was no trouble about securing an entrance. The strange pair had not yet retired. At the sound of Florence’s voice they threw wide the door. At sight of her numerous company, however, they appeared ready to slam it shut again.

“Just a little lark.” Florence reassured them. “We have come all the way from the opera to a ‘Cathedral.’”

“Well, come in then.” Aunt Bobby moved aside to let them pass.

“You see,” said Florence, when they had crowded into the small living room, “this lady here,” she nodded at the “lady cop,” “has a curious notion about that birthday package of yours, Meg. She believes it contains a pearl necklace of great value.”

“But I—” Meg’s face flushed.

“A reward of a thousand dollars has been offered for its return,” the “lady cop”

put in quickly. “If you have recovered it, that reward will be your own. Think what that will mean.”

“But I have waited all this time!” Meg protested. “And to-morrow is my birthday.”

Florence glanced hastily at her watch. She smiled. “Not to-morrow, but to-day.” She showed that it was fifteen minutes past twelve.

With her last objection overruled, Meg produced the mysterious package. At once a little circle of eager ones gathered about her.

With trembling hands, she untied the cord. She had all but unrolled the black wrapping when the package, slipping from her nerveless fingers, fell to the floor.

At once there came flashing back to them all manner of color: white, pink, red and green.

“Not pearls alone, but diamonds, rubies, sapphires!” the “lady cop” said, in an awed tone. “What a treasure!”

At the same time, with a little cry of joy, Rosemary bent over to seize her string of pearls and clasp them about her neck.

“A thousand dollars, Meg!” It was Aunt Bobby who spoke. “They said a thousand. That will settle all our troubles for many a day.”

“And there will be more, much more.” The “lady cop” began carefully gathering up the scattered jewels. “All these were stolen. There will be other rewards, and that which is never claimed may be sold.”

“That dark-faced one thought he had chosen a safe place to hide it!” Meg laughed.

“He was close pressed by the police,” the “lady cop” explained. “It was his one chance. And he lost; which was right enough.”

“And now,” came in a polite tone from the corner, “if I may have a word with Petite Jeanne?” It was the little Frenchman. “But where is she? I do not see her.”

“Meg,” said Jeanne imploringly, “have you a dress to loan me?”

“Sure have!”

They disappeared.

Five minutes later Jeanne reappeared in a blue calico dress.

“I am Petite Jeanne.” She bowed low to the little Frenchman.

“Ah, yes! So you are. Then it is my pleasure to announce that you are sole heir to a great castle in France. It is known as ‘*Le Neuf Chateau*.’ But it is truly very old and carries with it a broad estate.”

“A castle!” Jeanne seemed undecided whether to shout or weep. “A great castle for poor little me?”

“Ah, my child,” the Frenchman put in quickly, “it will not be necessary—it is quite unnecessary for you to reside there. Indeed, at this moment it is rented, for an unheard of rental, to a rich American who fancies castles and is fond of following the hounds.”

“Then,” exclaimed Jeanne, “I shall accept! I shall return to my beautiful Paris. And there, forever and ever, I shall study for the opera. Is it not so, Marjory Dean?

“And you, all of you, shall come to Paris as my guests.”

“Yes, yes, on some bright summer’s day,” the great prima donna agreed.

That night—or shall we say morning?—Petite Jeanne arranged “Pierre’s” carefully pressed dress suit upon a hanger and hung it deep in the shadows of her closet. “Good-bye Pierre,” she whispered. “You brought me fear and sorrow, hope, romance, a better understanding of life, and, after that, a brief moment of triumph. I wonder if it is to be farewell forever or only adieu for to-day.”

And now, my reader, it is time to draw the magic curtain. And what of that curtain? Up to this moment you know quite as much as I do. It was used in but one performance of the opera that bears its name. It was then withdrawn by its owner. Not, however, until a stage-property curtain, produced with the aid of tiny

copper wires, strips of asbestos and colored ribbons, had been created to take its place. The secret of the original magic curtain is still locked in the breast of its oriental creator.

The dark-faced one has not, so far as I know, been apprehended. Perhaps he fled to another city and has there met his just fate. Why he haunted the trail of the page of the opera, Pierre, is known to him alone, and the doer of dark deeds seldom talks.

And so the story ends. But what of the days that were to follow? Did that little company indeed journey all the way to Paris? And did they find mystery and great adventure in Jeanne's vast castle? Did Jeanne tire of studying opera "forever and ever" and did she return to America? Or did our old friend, Florence, forgetting her blonde companion of many mysteries, go forth with others to seek adventure? If you wish these questions answered you must read our next volume, which is to be known as: ***Hour of Enchantment***.

Transcriber's Note

- Obvious typographical errors were corrected without comment. Non-standard spellings and dialect were left unchanged.

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