

The Spider Strain

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by Johnston McCulley

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Chapter 1

Love, and Mystery

IT WAS not the first time that John Warwick had felt very thankful that his training as a member of society, and in the world at large, had been such that it enabled him successfully to talk about one thing and think of something else entirely different at the same time.

He managed to maintain the conversation with the charming young woman at his side, and while he did so, he considered that there was something taking place in which he was greatly interested, and sensed that there would be something in the nature of a climax soon.

John Warwick guided his powerful roadster along the pretty highways on the bank of the river, beneath overhanging boughs of trees dressed in their autumn foliage.

Now he allowed the great engine to drive the car at a rate of speed that almost took one's breath away—and now he throttled it down until the car crept, purring, along the highway, seeming to rest before another burst of speed.

He was driving in that fashion for a purpose. Silvia Rodney, the young woman who sat at his side, believed that it was because Warwick was nervous, and she smiled happily, for Warwick's manner led her to believe that he was about to address her on a subject a young woman always likes to hear discussed by a man she more than admires.

Warwick's real purpose, however, was to discover just why he was being followed, and by whom. He had known for the past two hours that he was being followed by somebody. He was aware that he was being watched closely as he ate luncheon with Silvia Rodney at a little inn far up the river, but he had been unable to locate the person who had him under surveillance. And John Warwick had a perfect right to feel a bit nervous about it.

Known to the world at large as the one remaining member of an old and respected family of culture and wealth, the truth of the matter was that John Warwick was a criminal of a sort, a clever member of the band controlled and

commanded by The Spider, a supercriminal who had been the despair of the police of Europe in days gone by, and who still was active, though not to such a great extent.

Ruined by men who had called themselves his friends, John Warwick had joined The Spider's band at the supercriminal's suggestion, and had become a valuable man to the master crook. He maintained his position in society, for there he was of the greatest value to The Spider. He would be of value only as long as he remained free from suspicion. His successful work had antagonized criminals who were fighting The Spider, and Warwick knew that they would expose him if they ever got the opportunity.

Knowing that he was being followed and watched, John Warwick speculated as to the identity of the person or persons doing it. Were they officers of the law who had grown suspicious of him? Had he made some fatal slip that had put them on the right track? Or were they criminals antagonistic to The Spider and his band?

Warwick did not betray his nervousness and anxiety to the girl at his side, and nobody could have told from his manner that he was thinking of annoyance or trouble. He indulged in his usual brand of small talk, spoke of things to be seen along the road, chatted of the beauties of the scenery, gave the impression that he was a bit bored by it all—and, in reality, was very much alert.

“Great old season, autumn—what?” Warwick said now, glancing at Silvia.

“It is, indeed, John,” the girl replied.

“True to all the forms of life—and all that sort of thing,” he went on. “I always did admire a man or woman in the autumn of their existence—mellow with age, rich in experience, wise to the ways of the wicked world, and all that sort of silly rot! Live and learn—what? Quite so! A man gets really fit to live about the time he has to die. My word!”

“John Warwick, you are speaking like an old man, and you certainly are not one!”

“Thirty-four, dear lady!”

“I am twenty-six myself.”

“Refuse to believe it!” Warwick declared. “Must be spoofing me, what? Don’t look a day more than eighteen!”

“John Warwick, you are trying to flatter me!”

“My word! Couldn’t be done, dear young lady! Not the proper sort of words in the old dictionary—none nearly strong enough. Webster chap should have met a girl like you—would have invented a lot more good adjectives!”

“John Warwick! I’ll be angry in a moment!”

“Angry? My word!” Warwick gasped. “I always had a suspicion that girls liked to hear men say that sort of thing.”

“But I am not a silly girl!” Silvia Rodney declared, pouting a bit—and she turned half away from him and looked at the river sparkling in the bright sunshine.

John Warwick managed to glance at her from the corners of his eyes—and sighed.

Silvia Rodney was the niece of The Spider. When Warwick first joined the supercriminal’s band, he had made a pretense of paying a great deal of attention to her—it gave him an excuse for visiting so much at the mansion on American Boulevard where The Spider had his home and headquarters. This acquaintance had developed into love with a speed that was truly amazing. John Warwick, a man of society, hunter of big game, world roamer in days gone by, the man many women had sought for husband and could not capture, had fallen in love with the sweet, unassuming girl—and had been forced through circumstances to hold his tongue.

For from Silvia Rodney had been kept the knowledge of her uncle’s true character. She had been taught to believe that he was the representative of a certain European power, and that he was working in the interests of humanity.

John Warwick was too honest to speak to her of love without telling her that he was a criminal of a sort—and The Spider had forbidden him doing that. He knew that Silvia Rodney returned his love, and was wondering why he did not ask her to become his wife.

Warwick had been a ruined man when he had joined The Spider's band. But, because of his excellent work, he had gathered a small fortune again; and The Spider, by way of reward, also had engineered a campaign on the Stock Exchange that had netted Warwick almost a quarter of a million dollars.

Warwick was all right financially now, yet he remained true to The Spider, not through fear of what might happen to him if he left the supercriminal's band, but out of gratitude to The Spider for his help.

There were times when John Warwick wished that he might marry Silvia Rodney and cease his nefarious work. It had not been so very nefarious at that. The Spider and his followers committed thefts, but generally on the side of right. Ill-gotten gains were what they generally took from their victims; and now and then The Spider contracted to obtain and return something that had been procured by improper means from its rightful owner. There were worse criminals than The Spider and his people, but nevertheless, what they did was outside the law.

Warwick stopped the roadster in a grove beside the highway and helped Silvia Rodney out.

"Dear young lady," he said, "we will walk about one hundred feet through these woods and come to a high place overlooking a bend in the river. It is the most beautiful spot in the entire state, especially at this time of the year."

Warwick led the way through the brush, and finally they emerged on the top of a giant rock at the river's edge. Silvia gave a little cry of delight at the scene that unfolded before them.

A great river was at their feet, curving into the distance, and the woods on both shores were dressed in red and brown and gold. In the far distance, they could see the city.

They sat down on a fallen log to watch the scene—and John Warwick sighed again.

"Why—why not say it, John?" Silvia Rodney whispered to him, after a time.

"Pardon?"

“Must I say it?” she asked.

“My word! Whatever can you mean?”

“John Warwick, there seems to be some deep and dark mystery about you,” the girl said. “Perhaps it is forward of me to speak in this way, but I flatter myself that I am a modern young woman, not bound by every silly and narrow-minded convention—and I always like to have mysteries solved. John Warwick, you have been in—in love with me for a year!”

“Certainly, my dear little lady!” Warwick replied. “What man would not be?”

“John Warwick, I want you to know that I am speaking seriously. A woman always can tell when a man really is in love with her. And—and I should think—that a big, wise man—could tell when a girl—was really in love with him.”

“My word!”

“And you know that I—well, that I am!” she gasped. “And yet you—you never speak of it. I suppose that it must be because I am not good enough for you.”

“Oh, my word! You’re a great girl—and I’m a regular rotter, really.”

“I know better than that—you are nothing of the sort!” she declared. “And I’ll not have you defaming yourself in that way! Perhaps it isn’t at all nice for me to speak in this way, but I must have an explanation, John. I—I cannot go on in this way! Is it that you don’t—want me?”

“Oh, my dear girl!”

John Warwick turned away from her and looked up the broad river. He had faced charging elephants and infuriated tigers, he had been in many a close corner during his work for The Spider, but never in his life before had he faced an ordeal such as this. The charming girl who sat at his side was more formidable, in her way, than a jungle filled with wild beasts.

“What is it, John?” she asked now. “Is it something that you cannot tell me?”

“I—I am not good enough!” he replied.

“John Warwick, I have been investigating you a bit. Alice Norton has spoken to me about you a hundred times, and she has known you from boyhood. You have been a good, clean man, John. You were a bit wild in college, and just after you graduated, but your wildness consisted mostly of globe-trotting and hunting lions, and things like that.”

“I suppose so,” Warwick sighed.

“There is nothing in your past life that would keep a nice girl from becoming your wife.”

“My word! Regular paragon—what? Example to be held up to erring youth, and all that sort of thing!”

“Now you are trying to make me laugh and change the subject. And I refuse to do anything of the sort, John Warwick! We are going to have an explanation here this afternoon—or I never shall go riding with you again, or talk to you when you visit my uncle.”

“Oh, I say! Condemn a chap, and all that?”

“I mean it, John!”

Warwick looked up the river again—and saw nothing. He was feeling very uncomfortable, to say the least. He was remembering his promise to The Spider, and he did not want to lose the sweet companionship of the girl at his side.

Silvia Rodney touched him on the arm. “Silly man!” she said.

“Beg pardon?”

“I think that I understand, John. You have wanted to speak to me for some time—I could tell. And you have not, because—well, because of my uncle, I suppose.”

“But what could your jolly old uncle have to do with it?” John Warwick asked. “You mean that I am afraid he wouldn’t give you to me, if I were to ask him?”

“I suppose you think that I am a silly girl who is blind and deaf and dumb,” she said. “My uncle seems to think so, too. Why, John, I have known the truth for

two years, at least, but never have let my uncle find out. I felt a bit badly about it at first—and then I discovered that my uncle isn't so very bad after all. He was bad in his youth, but now he and his men and women are working more in the interests of right than anything else. I know that my uncle is The Spider, the supercriminal!"

"My word!"

"It is the blood that flows through his veins," she went on. "His father was a famous criminal. My own father was associated with my uncle for some time before his death. I am resigned to those facts now, John."

"My word!"

"And you are not so very bad, you see. What have you done recently? You recovered an idol that had been taken from India. Uncle received money for that, of course, and so did you, yet it was honest in a way to have the idol returned. Then you recovered a famous painting that had been stolen, and so it found its way back to its original owner. You committed burglary to get it, and yet it was honest, in a way. So, you see, things are not so very bad."

"My word!" Warwick gasped again.

"And so, John, if that was the reason why you did not speak—"

"But I am a crook!" he protested. "Can I ask a sweet girl to become my wife when I am a criminal, when I am liable to arrest and incarceration at any moment?"

"John, if the girl loved you, she would be willing to run that risk."

"My dear lady! Since I have been working for your uncle, he has aided me in building up my shattered fortunes. I could maintain my place in society now and have a wife at my side. And I do want you, dear girl! But I cannot have you—unless The Spider releases me. If he would do that—"

"I feel sure that he will, John. He loves me, you know, and will do anything for my happiness."

"We shall ask him," Warwick said.

“You let me ask him, John. Let me tell him everything. I feel sure that it will be all right.”

“You’ll marry me, if The Spider releases me?”

“Of course!” she said. “So we—we are engaged, now?”

“I suppose so—provisionally.”

“Well—” John Warwick faced her again, and saw her smile and her trembling lips. He took her into his arms quickly, and kissed her. “Let us hope and pray that The Spider will be merciful!” he said.

They got up and started walking back through the woods toward the roadster. Suddenly, Warwick remembered! During his conversation with Silvia, he had forgotten about his belief that he was being followed and watched.

Now he was doubly alert as they walked back through the brush. He glanced around the grove as he helped the radiant Silvia into the roadster, but he saw nothing suspicious. He started the car, turned it into the road beside the river, and drove it toward the distant city.

Once more he maintained a conversation, a more animated one this time, but he was busy thinking and planning. He was driving at a good rate of speed when they went around a sharp curve in the road; then he stopped the car suddenly, backed it up, and waited.

Presently another car shot around the curve—a roadster as big and powerful as Warwick’s. Only one man was in it. His faced flushed as he caught sight of Warwick and realized that he had been caught. He bent his head and drove on furiously.

“What is it?” Silvia had asked.

“Had an idea that chap was following us,” Warwick explained, “I’ve been feeling it for a couple of hours. Thought I’d catch him by stopping quickly and letting him drive past.”

“Who was it, John?”

“I have not the slightest idea my dear,” Warwick replied. “But I’ll jolly well find out, you may be sure! Can’t be having unknown fellows following me around, what? My word, no!”

Chapter 2

Under Orders

ONE hour later, John Warwick was pacing the floor of the big living room in the residence of The Spider on American Boulevard.

Silvia Rodney was closeted with her uncle in his den on the upper floor of the house. Warwick was nervous. He dreaded his coming interview with the supercriminal, which he knew he would be forced to hold as soon as Silvia came down the stairs.

“Feel like an ass, what?” Warwick told himself. “Might be a silly college youth, and all that sort of thing! Peculiar how some things work out in this old world! Never seem to know what is going to happen next. My word!”

He paced the floor for nearly another half an hour, consuming cigarette after cigarette; and then a radiant Silvia came down the stairs and rushed into his arms.

“Everything is all right, John,” she said. “And you are to go up immediately and see him.”

“Think I’d better take a gun along?” Warwick asked.

“Nonsense!”

“Your jolly old uncle might turn violent, you know—me capturing his pet and only niece, and all that sort of thing. Might decide to have revenge, or something like that.”

“I don’t think you need fear him, John.”

“Well, I’ll toddle up the stairs and have the dreaded ordeal over with, at any rate. No particular use in postponing it, what?”

Warwick hurried up the stairs and knocked at the door of The Spider’s den. A gruff voice bade him enter. Warwick did so and closed and bolted the door

behind him, as was customary when holding a conference with the supercriminal in his office.

The Spider sat in the usual place behind his big mahogany desk, in his invalid's chair, his fat hands spread out before him, his flabby cheeks shaking, and his little, pig-like eyes glittering in a peculiar fashion.

“Sit down!” the supercriminal commanded; and once more he spoke in a gruff voice.

John Warwick sat down, and the Spider looked at him until Warwick began to feel uncomfortable.

“Say it, jolly old sir, and get it out of your system!” Warwick suggested finally.

“There doesn't seem to be much for me to say, Warwick. I want to secure the happiness of my niece, of course. It was a great shock to me to learn that she was aware of the nature of my business. I had believed that she was ignorant of it.”

“Deuce of a shock to me, too, sir,” John Warwick admitted. “I had no idea that she had guessed the truth.”

“Perhaps it is for the best that things have worked out in this manner,” The Spider went on. “She tells me that you will not marry while you are continuing your career of crime.”

“Certainly not, sir—never think of it!” Warwick declared. “It wouldn't be fair to her.” “I'm glad you look at it in that way. You have your fortune back now, of course, and can give her a good home. You need play criminal no longer—for you are playing at it! You are not a criminal at heart. I suppose that I shall have to release you as a member of my band, Warwick. All that you know, you will have to keep secret, of course, but I feel that I can trust you to do that. So I am going to give you your release, Warwick.”

“Thank you, jolly old sir!”

“After you have attended to a couple more matters for me,” The Spider added.

“Oh, I see! Something already planned—what?”

“Yes—two things. As soon as they are accomplished, you are to be a free man, and then you can marry Silvia and settle down as a respectable citizen.”

“The old world isn’t such a bad place after all—what?” Warwick said. “Man gets his reward in time, and all that sort of silly rot! Feel like a new man already! My word!”

“Don’t be hasty, Warwick! These two things that I have mentioned are far from being trivial.”

“Oh, I gathered that much!”

“You may begin work on the first just as soon as you please and do it in your own way.”

“Orders, old sir and employer?”

“Exactly. I presume that you are acquainted with Mrs. Burton Barker?”

“I am,” Warwick replied grimly. “Her husband was one of the group of men that robbed me of my fortune.”

“Then this work should be a pleasure for you,” said The Spider. “You may have observed that Mrs. Burton Barker wears a peculiar locket on a long gold chain.”

“I have noticed it often, old sir and employer. No matter how she may be dressed, she always wears the silly thing. She’s always twining the chain around her fingers and playing with it. I’ve wondered many times why she persists in wearing it when Barker could buy her all sorts of jewels, if she wished them.”

“That locket happens to be an important bit of merchandise,” the supercriminal said.

“I am to get the locket?”

“You are.”

“As soon as possible?”

“Yes,” The Spider replied. “And the sooner you can get it, so much the better!”

“It seems like a silly thing to steal!” Warwick declared. “You could buy all you wanted for about fifty dollars each.”

“You couldn’t purchase that particular locket at any price, and there is not another in all the world exactly like it!” declared the supercriminal.

“Some sort of history connected with the foolish thing?” Warwick wanted to know.

“Something like that, Warwick. You just get that locket as soon as you can and leave the rest to me. There will be ten thousand dollars in it for you—if you succeed.”

“If I succeed!” Warwick gasped. “My word! Always succeed, don’t I? Couldn’t afford to fail—simply couldn’t—when I am so nearly done working for you, could I? Fall down at the last moment, and all that sort of thing? Certainly not! My word, no!”

“Getting possession of that locket might not be as easy as it sounds,” The Spider warned him.

“How is that, old sir?”

“It happens that there are some other persons very anxious to get their hands on it.”

“Ah, I see!”

“And they are so anxious that they will go to about any length to get it, Warwick. You will have strong competition, in other words. This will amount to more than merely snipping a locket from a chain worn by a woman.”

“What is the silly old locket, anyway?” Warwick wanted to know.

“I may tell you about that later,” The Spider returned. “You’ll have enough on your mind in planning to get it and outwit the others at the same time.”

“And the others—”

“I can tell you absolutely nothing about them, Warwick. Another man is after

that locket of Mrs. Burton Barker's, but he will not make an attempt to get it himself. He has assistants, however, and I do not know them. You'll have to be alert, on guard, and find out things for yourself."

"My word! Deep and dark mystery—what? And all over a silly bit of a locket that—"

"Allow me to tell you that it is not a silly locket, Warwick! It is a very important locket, and we must have it. Do you understand? We must get it!"

"Very well, old sir. I'll get the thing. I'm going to some sort of an affair at Burton Barker's place this very evening—going to take Silvia with me."

"Be careful, Warwick!"

"Invitations are already accepted, old sir and employer—and it'd look rather peculiar if she did not go. I always do my work best when everything appears natural—understand? Somebody might get suspicious if everything did not."

"But, Silvia—"

"She'll be in the way—bother me, you mean? Bless you—no! She probably will dance with a lot of chaps and give me time to do my work. I'll be more careful, too, if she is there—be afraid of making some silly mistake and wrecking our happiness. By the way, do these—er—other chaps of whom you spoke know that I am going after that locket?"

"They know that I am after it, and that you are one of my trusted men," The Spider replied. "And so, naturally, they will think that you are on the job when they see you at the Barker place."

"Suppose they will be there, too? Are they the sort that could go to a place like that?" Warwick asked.

"I haven't the slightest idea, Warwick."

"I'd better lose no time then, what? I'll get to work as soon as possible—nab the silly thing before anybody else can!"

"That would be best, I think. Do you want any help?"

“I fancy not,” Warwick replied. “I’d probably work much better alone in such a case. I may use Togo, if it proves necessary. He is worth a dozen ordinary men.”

“Very well; have it your own way and use your own methods,” the supercriminal told him. “All I’m interested in is the proper result. I want that locket, Warwick. I must have it—and I don’t want you to fail!”

“My word! You speak as though I always had failed!” Warwick complained. “Never failed yet, have I?”

“There is a first time for everything, Warwick,” said the supercriminal, “and I am not eager for this to be your first failure. Keep your eyes open for the others. I am sorry that I can give you no definite information concerning them.”

“Then I suppose I’ll have to be suspicious of everybody—what?” Warwick said. “I’d better toddle along now, old and respected sir! I have to see Silvia again, hurry home, dress—all that sort of silly rot. ‘Bye!’”

“Good luck, Warwick!”

“Thanks, old sir and employer! I fancy that this will not be a very difficult job. Getting a silly locket that hangs on the end of a chain—my word!”

“Ten thousand in it for you, Warwick. That will pay for a honeymoon.”

“Not for the sort that Silvia and I intend having, but it will help some,” Warwick replied “‘Bye!’”

Warwick left the den of The Spider, and hurried down the stairs to where Silvia was waiting for him.

“Everything is jolly well all right, dear girl,” he reported “I have a couple more tasks to perform for your uncle and then I am to be—er—free. Understand? And then—!”

“You’ll be careful, John?”

“Of course! My word! Be jolly well careful when a mistake would mean my losing you! We are going to Mrs. Burton Barker’s place tonight, remember!”

“Will you have work to do there, John?”

“Now, now! Little girls should not ask too many questions, you know!”

“But I am interested!” Silvia declared. “And perhaps I might be able to help you!”

“Heaven forbid!” Warwick exclaimed fervently. “Allow you to run into danger—what? My word!”

“Oh, perhaps you think that I am not clever enough to help you,” she accused. “Please remember, sir, that The Spider is my uncle, and some of the same strain of blood that is in his veins flows through mine!”

“Why, my dear girl!”

“And I’d like to help you,” she coaxed.

“But I don’t fancy that you can in this—er—particular case,” Warwick told her. “Perhaps you may in the other—the last one—we’ll see about it later. We can’t afford to take any unnecessary risks, you know. I’ll tell you a bit more about it tonight. Have to toddle along now—dinner, dress, all that sort of thing. ‘Bye!’”

Warwick kissed her again, and then he hurried out to the curb. But he shivered as he sprang into his roadster.

“Just fancy a girl as sweet as Silvia running the danger of arrest to help me steal a silly locket,” he mused as he drove rapidly up the boulevard. “My word! It isn’t being done! Not the proper sort of thing at all—what?”

Chapter 3

Togo Shows Emotion

TOGO was the peer of all Japanese valets, as John Warwick often had said—and yet he was more than that. Though the world in general did not suspect, Togo himself was a valued member of The Spider’s band, and had been for years before John Warwick was induced to join it.

Togo had worked for the supercriminal in the old days in Paris, and he knew many things about the band that even John Warwick did not know. The deeds of The Spider and his men and women were mild now to what they had been in those days before an accident made a cripple of the supercriminal and prevented his active physical participation in the band’s doings. Though he could not get about except in an invalid’s chair, yet The Spider remained the brains of the band.

Warwick and some of the others knew that in the den of the house on American Boulevard there were great filing cases that held many interesting documents. Some of these related to criminals, some were of such a nature that they could have been used against prominent men, and others were documents regarding police officers and detectives.

Whereas any well-regulated police department kept a rogues’ gallery of crooks, The Spider maintained his rogues’ gallery of peace officers, knew their peculiarities, their weak spots, and their strong points. But only Togo and few of the old-timers knew of other things that were in those secret archives—things that related to days gone by, little accounts that the supercriminal sought to settle from time to time, in some as the creditor and in some as a debtor.

Togo was also sincerely attached to John Warwick. Several times, he had given Warwick valuable aid, and on one occasion had saved him from exposure and arrest. When Warwick returned to his rooms this day, Togo opened the door for him, stepped back, and bowed, flashing his teeth in a smile.

“Honorable Togo, I am a bit late,” Warwick said. “Kindly have dinner sent up from the restaurant downstairs just as soon as possible. There is a little social affair this evening at the home of Mrs. Burton Barker, and I am obliged to

attend. Beastly bore, I suppose, and all that—but it happens to be necessary.”

“Yes, sar!” Togo said.

“Togo, I was driving with Miss Silvia Rodney this afternoon, and chap betrayed particular interest in me.”

“Sar?”

“He appeared rather anxious and eager to know all about my comings and goings, and all that sort of thing. I maneuvered to get a glimpse of him, finally. My word! Very common-looking chap at that—very common indeed!”

“Policeman, sar?”

“If he is, he is a new one on me, Togo, old top. I fancy that he is no policeman, or anything of that sort. I have a faint idea that the chap is one of those criminal fellows. The sort that always are poking their noses into the business of other folk—you know!”

“Yes, sar!”

“It might be well, old boy, if you kept your eyes and ears open a bit around here, what? We’ve been bothered before now by fellows who were inclined to cause us a bit of annoyance, haven’t we? Getting rather sick of it!”

“I understand, sar.”

“If anybody should come prowling about—”

“I shall attend to him, sar!” Togo promised.

“There you are—always bloodthirsty! My word! Assassinate the whole world if you could, what?”

“Only if the world was against you, sar!”

“Um! Thanks!” Warwick said. “Faithful chap, and all that! Well, keep eyes and ears open, old boy. And toddle right along now and order that dinner!”

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Half an hour later, Warwick was eating dinner in the living room of his suite, Togo serving it. When he came to coffee, Warwick leaned back in his chair, puffed at a cigarette, and regarded Togo carefully.

“I’ve a bit of news for you, old top—astonishing news,” he said, presently. “You are as much a comrade in arms as a valet, and so you should know.”

“Thank you, sar!”

“You know our flabby-cheeked friend with whom we are associated now and then in a little enterprise? Quite so! Well, I have to tell you, honorable Japanese, that before very long I shall be leaving his band.”

“Sar?” Togo cried.

A swift change came over Togo’s face. For a moment the Japanese, who seldom showed emotion, revealed his feelings, and in no uncertain manner.

“Oh, everything will be quite regular, honorable Togo!” Warwick assured him. “I am not turning traitor, or bolting, or anything like that. My word, no! I’m thinking of getting married, old boy—understand?”

Togo grinned.

“I see that you do understand,” John Warwick continued. “And a married man should not be doing things that might get him into trouble with the police, should he? So there you are! Our friend, whose name need not be mentioned here at this moment, has agreed to—er—release me after I accomplish two certain things. You gather that all in, honorable Togo?”

“Yes, sar!”

“Excellent! Your own future is provided for, of course. I’ll need you with me as much as before, and all that. It’s up to you to say whether you remain with me or go back to where you can—er—be more active in the service of our flabby-cheeked friend.”

“I shall be glad to remain, sar,” Togo replied.

“Good! I have to accomplish the first task of the two tonight, if I can, at the

residence of Mrs. Button Barker.”

“I am to help, sar?” Togo asked eagerly.

“Um! I fail to see at this moment just how you can help, old top. Sorry! Like to have you in those last two little games if I could, and all that. But this is a strictly society affair, you know—dress-suit stuff.”

“I understand, sar.”

“I’ve got to get a little locket—”

“A locket, sar?” Togo cried.

“My word! Whatever is the matter with you? Why shriek at me in that fashion?” Warwick demanded, putting down the coffee cup. “Are you beside yourself—what?”

“Your pardon, sar!”

“But I fail to understand, confound it! Never knew you to act so in the world! Have you been drinking?”

“No, sar!”

“Explain, then!”

“I—I was startled, sar.”

“I should think you were! And you certainly startled me! Almost made me choke, confound it!” Warwick exclaimed. “What do you mean by such a thing?”

“You mentioned a locket, sar. I—I was wondering if it could be the locket.”

“Honorable Japanese, it is merely a silly locket that a foolish woman wears on the end of a long, ridiculous chain. Why our flabby-cheeked friend wants it is more than I know—and I suppose that it is none of my business. He didn’t happen to take me into his full confidence this time, confound it!”

“Then it must be the locket,” Togo said.

“What locket?” Warwick demanded. “Am I always to be surrounded by riddles? My word! It’s enough to make a man take to drink, and all that sort of thing!”

“I—I cannot tell you, sar, if The Spider will not,” Togo said. “I am sure you will pardon me, sar.”

“My word! What mystery is this? I had thought that it was just a silly locket that somebody wanted badly enough to pay for. Other chaps are after the thing, too, it appears. Jolly old Spider told me to watch out for them!”

“Then it must be the locket I mean,” Togo said. “You must be very careful, sar.”

“Do I happen to have a reputation for being reckless?” Warwick demanded. “My word! A man would think that I was about to abduct the sultan of Turkey, or some little thing like that.”

“It seems to be only a very simple thing, sar, but, believe me, it is not!” Togo told him.

“How on Earth does it happen that a woman like Mrs. Burton Barker is wearing a locket there could be so much fuss about? Why, the woman has had the thing for years! It seems to be a sort of pet of hers. Everybody wonders why she wears the thing. Impression is abroad that she is superstitious, and all that, and thinks the fool locket brings her good luck. Can’t fathom this thing at all!”

“I—I certainly wish that I could tell you, sar, but I dare not without the permission of the master,” Togo declared. “But I beg of you to be most careful, sar, and to watch out for those others you have mentioned.”

“It seems to me that I have accomplished tasks far more difficult than this,” Warwick said. “Is the greatest diamond in the world concealed in the thing, or some silly rot like that?”

“I believe that the locket is not of very great value in itself, sar,” Togo replied.

“I fancy not, since I am to receive only ten thousand if I succeed in getting the thing. Sure you can’t tell me more about it?”

“I dare not, sar!”

“My word! How very disgusting! Never did like such mysteries—get on a man’s nerves, what?”

“If I only could help you, sar!” Togo exclaimed. “At least, sar, please allow me to be in the neighborhood of the Barker residence this evening. You may have need of me, sar. And, if you expect to be married soon, you will want nothing bad to happen.”

“I should think not!” Warwick said. “But, this is amazing! Thought it was just a silly locket!”

“It is called the Locket of Tragedy, sar!”

“My word!” Warwick exclaimed, staring at the valet. “What a perfectly silly name to give a locket—and a cheap one at that! Nothing very tragic about Mrs. Burton Barker, I’m sure. She is just a silly butterfly of a woman!”

“It is true that she may have that appearance, sar,” said Togo. “But, if you will pardon me, she is nothing of the sort. She is a dangerous woman, sar!”

“You know her?”

“I know of her, sar,” said Togo. “Be on your guard, sar, when you attempt this thing. She may be expecting somebody to make an attempt to get the locket. And if you are suspected—”

“I understand, honorable Togo. Thanks, too, for this surprising warning. I always considered the woman rather shallow myself. Sort of a little girl masquerading in a grown-up’s costume, what? I’ve known her for a score of years, since she was a girl—”

“Pardon, sar!” Togo interrupted. “But, during all those years, were there no times, when you were traveling, when you did not see her and heard nothing of her for years?”

“Of course! She was in school—and then she came out and spent the usual time abroad—”

“Ah!” Togo said significantly.

“So that is it, eh? She got mixed up with The Spider while abroad—what? Why, it can’t be possible! The girl had a mother who watched her like a hawk!”

“Nevertheless, sar, something happened at that time that influenced this woman’s whole life.”

“She never looked like a woman of tragedy to me!” Warwick declared. “Can’t imagine old Barker marrying a woman of that sort—his fancy always ran to the other kind.”

“Perhaps her husband knows nothing of it.”

“Of what?” Warwick asked.

“Of the locket and what it means,” Togo replied.

John Warwick got up and began pacing the room. Togo piled the dishes on the tray, carried them into the hall, and rang for the waiter in the restaurant below.

“Never heard of such a thing!” Warwick grumbled. “All this row about a locket and a foolish woman! I’ll bet there’s nothing to it after all! I’ll get the thing as quickly as I can and take it to The Spider. If I can’t get a locket from a woman like Mrs. Burton Barker, I must be getting old, slowing up—what? My word, yes!”

Warwick walked to a dark corner of the room, stepped to a window there, and looked down at the street. The lights were just being turned on. A stream of automobiles was passing, men of affairs going to their homes from their offices.

Warwick glanced across the street, where there was a drug store with windows brilliantly lighted. He stepped closer to the window—and looked again. Standing before one of the store windows and looking at the apartment house was the man who had followed Warwick in the roadster.

“He’s watching me rather closely—what?” Warwick told himself. “I’ll have to look into this matter, I’m afraid. Always did detest a mystery!”

He stepped to his desk, got an automatic pistol from one of the drawers, and slipped it into the pocket of his overcoat. He put into his coat pocket a tiny pair of pincers so sharp that they would cut through strands of any ordinary metal—

say, a gold chain. He called to Togo to order the chauffeur to have the limousine in front immediately and then put on his hat and coat—but not his gloves.

“You’ll be careful, sar?” Togo asked.

“Naturally!” Warwick replied. “Can’t understand this sudden idea that I may get reckless! Never knew me to be reckless before, did you? My word!”

“And I cannot help you, sar?” Togo implored.

“Oh, you may happen to be in the neighborhood, if that will appease you in the least,” Warwick answered. “Fail to see how you can be of help to me, though.”

“Thanks, sar!” Togo cried. “Perhaps I may be of service to you, sar! It will be a difficult task, I fear. It is not the easy one you seem to think, sar.”

“Nonsense!” Warwick exclaimed. “Upon my word, I never heard such utter rot before! I’ll have the silly old locket before midnight—make you a good wager on it! I never saw you quite like this before, honorable Japanese! Makes me wonder what the old world is coming to, you know. Nonsense! A man would think, from your actions and words, that I was going into a battle, or something like that!”

Togo’s answer rather startled him. “You are, sar!” Togo said.

Chapter 4

One Known Foe

JOHN WARWICK left the apartment house, stepped out into the street, and then walked briskly across it. He entered the drug store and purchased a package of cigarettes. There was no particular sense in that, since he had an ample supply in his rooms, and even some in his pocket, but it gave him a chance to pass within six feet of the man who had been watching him.

Warwick did not give him as much as a glance as he entered the store. The man moved down the street a dozen feet or so, and stood by the curb. Warwick walked from the drug store, stopped to light one of the cigarettes he had purchased, tossed away the burned match, and then whirled around and stepped up to the man at the curb.

“See here!” he exclaimed, in a low, tense voice. “I’d like very much to be informed just as to why you show such a remarkable and unusual interest in my affairs!”

“What’s that?” the other snarled.

“I fancy that you both heard and understood me,” Warwick said. “You followed me this afternoon, while I was out motoring, and now I find you loitering around the place where I live.”

“Well, what about it?”

“Why, I don’t fancy it at all!” Warwick told him. “I ought to have an explanation, and all that sort of thing. My word! A fellow hates to have somebody prowling around and watching him. It isn’t quite the thing, you know!”

“I’ve no doubt that you do object to being watched,” the other man said.

“Just what do you mean by that?” Warwick demanded.

“None of your business!”

“See here! I am in the habit of being addressed in a respectful manner, confound it!”

“Well, what are you going to do about it?” the other asked, sneering once more.

“Why, confound it, sir, I can break you in two with my bare hands!” Warwick declared. “Do you imagine that I am a weakling just because I happen to be wearing evening clothes? Keep a civil tongue in your head when you are speaking to me!”

“I didn’t say that I wanted to speak to you, did I? You began this conversation, didn’t you?”

“I did—and probably shall end it!” said Warwick. “Why have you been following me, and all that?”

“I didn’t say that I had been.”

“Ah! Trying to evade the question, are you? What? My word! Do you fancy that you can indulge in repartee with me? Answer me straight now!”

“Attend to your own business! I’m getting sick of your talk!” the other told him.

“I have half a notion to hand you over immediately to the police chaps!”

“You try it, and we’ll mix. I think you’re crazy, if anybody wants to know!”

Warwick suddenly stepped closer to the man and grinned at him. Warwick understood now. He could handle this man physically, and with ease and he knew that the other knew it. Why, then, did this man taunt him to combat?

To cause a row, probably, and make it necessary for Warwick to go to police headquarters and settle it, or make charges—to delay John Warwick, in fact, and prevent him getting to the residence of Mrs. Burton Barker on time. The fellow might even hope to mar Warwick’s face early in combat, in such a manner that Warwick would not be presentable and could not go to Mrs. Burton Barker’s at all.

So Warwick grinned, and stepped closer and spoke in a tone somewhat lower.

“Your work, sir, is as coarse as your manners,” he said. “You will observe that there is a patrolman just across the street. He is an old friend of mine. I give him a box of cigars now and then, and always speak to him when we pass in the street. If you start anything with me, sir, I shall knock you down, order him to take you to the station, simply announce that I shall appear in court in the morning—and go on my merry way. Your little plot would not work then, what? You’d fail and look jolly well silly, and all that sort of thing. Make a regular ass of yourself! My word!”

“You think you’re smart, don’t you?”

“Certainly not! Smart? Oh, I am a regular stupid ass!” Warwick said. “I don’t know much of anything—but I can see through your little game!”

“I guess there are a few things that you don’t know, all right!”

“Perhaps—and perhaps not!” Warwick told him. “But I do know this much—if I catch you prowling around me any more, I am going to handle you, and not in a delicate manner, either. And if you happen to have a couple of friends, I’ll handle them, too.”

“Quite a boy, ain’t you?” the other sneered.

“Enough of one to do that,” Warwick answered. “Going to tell me why you have been following me and prowling about?”

“Do you think that you can bluff me just because you happen to belong to The Spider’s gang?”

“Spider’s gang? My word! What on Earth are you talking about?” Warwick asked blankly.

“I suppose you’ve heard of The Spider!”

“Are you once of those nutty fellows, off your feed, bats in the belfry—all that sort of thing?” Warwick demanded. “I never heard such nonsense! Ought to be incarcerated and held for investigation! Liable to run amuck and slay women and children!”

“Oh, I guess we understand each other!” the other said. “That line of talk doesn’t

get any too far with me, you want to understand. I'm wise!"

"That is fortunate," Warwick observed. "There are but few wise men remaining on Earth, and we have desperate need of them all. I am under the impression that I have been wasting valuable time talking to a silly ass. Spider's gang! My word! Whatever can that mean? However, cease following me around. I can't have a lunatic trailing me all the time—frighten my friends to death!"

"It probably will frighten some of them, all right!"

"Now you are talking in riddles again!" Warwick declared. "I see that my limousine is waiting, and so I cannot waste any more time on you. Just a friendly tip, my man—if I find you annoying me again, I shall feel compelled to deal with you personally!"

John Warwick's voice lost its light tone and became menacing as he spoke, and his eyes narrowed and glittered for an instant. The other man recoiled, but regained his composure again almost instantly and stepped nearer Warwick.

"Maybe you'd like to try to do that little thing right now!" he said.

"Ah! You'd like very much to have me, wouldn't you?" Warwick exclaimed. "But it happens that I have an engagement—a rather important engagement—"

"Yes, I know all about that!"

"You do, eh? It appears to me that you are a bit too much interested in my personal affairs. My word! You seem to know as much as my private secretary would—if I had one. I'd advise you to remember that little tip of mine!"

John Warwick glared at the man, and then hurried across the street to where his limousine was waiting. He told the chauffeur to drive him to the residence on American Boulevard, and there he picked up Silvia, who cuddled up beside him in the big car and seemed to be very happy in so doing.

"Are you going to tell me what you are going to do tonight?" she asked.

"Little girls should not ask too many questions," Warwick told her. "It isn't much of a task, really."

“I think you are mean if you don’t tell me!”

“Promise to keep it a dark secret?”

“Of course!”

“And you must forget it as soon as I have told you, and keep your mind off it. You don’t want me to fail, do you?”

“Certainly not, John!”

“Very well. Mrs. Burton Barker always wears a little locket on the end of a long, gold chain. I am to get that locket. Don’t ask me why, for I do not know. Your jolly old uncle wants it for some purpose, and that is enough for me. Now, you forget it!”

“Very well, I’ll try, only I’m not so sure that I can,” Silvia said. “But I’ll not bother you, John.”

Warwick glanced through the window as the big car speeded toward that section of the city where pretentious residences predominated. The Burton Barkers had an imposing mansion surrounded by lawns that were fringed with big trees.

It was one of the show places of the city. Warwick knew it well, had been in almost every room of it. He often had inspected it while Burton Barker was having it constructed, and afterward he had been a guest there scores of times. That was when he had believed that Barker was his friend.

Barker still thought that he believed it. Barker was not aware that John Warwick knew he had conspired with other men to rob him in business deals. Warwick would not have known it, had not The Spider proved it to him. Warwick had no repugnance, therefore, in committing a crime in Burton Barker’s residence while he was a guest there. He remembered that Barker had robbed him in his own house, while pretending deep friendship.

The limousine turned into the driveway and came to a stop before the house. Warwick helped Silvia out, and they entered. Many guests already had arrived, the orchestra was playing, and the scene was one of wealth and splendor.

They greeted their host and hostess, and for an instant Warwick’s eyes rested on

the locket he was to get. It still hung on the end of the long heavy gold chain, and Mrs. Burton Barker was twisting the chain around the fingers of her left hand, as she seemed always to be doing.

John Warwick danced once with Silvia Rodney, and then handed her over to another partner, and walked slowly through the rooms, nodding to his friends and acquaintances, acting as though he were searching for somebody, but, in reality, spotting any strangers who might happen to be present.

If it was to be his lot to face foes, he wanted to know their identities, if possible. From what had been told him, he did not know whether his antagonists would be strangers or persons with whom he was well acquainted.

One thought dominated his mind—that The Spider expected success and would not countenance failure. John Warwick had been ordered to get the locket worn by Mrs. Burton Barker, and the supercriminal expected him to get it.

Warwick passed on through the rooms, went to the veranda, strolled there and smoked a cigarette, and retraced his steps to the house again. Some belated guests were arriving. Warwick wandered toward the foot of the stairs to inspect these late-comers.

And then he almost lost his composure for a moment and stepped quickly aside, where he would not be observed. Greeting the hostess was the man who had followed him in the roadster in the afternoon, and with whom he had talked in the street before the apartment house just before starting for the Barker residence.

The man was in proper evening dress, and he greeted Mrs. Burton Barker in the approved manner.

John Warwick was puzzled to a certain extent. Mrs. Burton Barker was talking to the man as if she had been acquainted with him for some time. Was he in her employ, trying to protect the locket, and did he suspect John Warwick of planning to purloin it? The thought almost made Warwick shudder, especially when he remembered how the man had spoken regarding The Spider, for Warwick lived in continual fear of the day when suspicion would be cast upon him.

Or, was the man talking to Mrs. Burton Barker merely one of those others who

were making an attempt to get possession of the locket before The Spider's people could?

While fussing around and pretending to be bored, Warwick watched the pair closely. To all appearances, the man was merely exchanging polite greetings with his hostess, but John Warwick knew that they might be speaking of important things that had to do with him. Mrs. Burton Barker was a clever woman in a way—she was able to smile and laugh, and at the same time speak of serious affairs and let those near think she was indulging in small talk, and Warwick knew it well. He had been trained in the same social school.

“Have to make sure of my ground—what?” Warwick told himself. “Must use strategy, and all that sort of thing! Can't be making some silly mistake and getting into trouble at this stage of the game. It wouldn't do at all! My word, no!”

He wandered down the corridor and approached them from another direction. He watched the man's face, made an ineffectual attempt to read his lips and ascertain what he was saying, regarded Mrs. Burton Barker carefully, and tried to imagine what she was replying.

Warwick noted that this man spent more time with his hostess than any of the other guests, and that increased his suspicions.

“No use working in the dark—what?” he told himself. “Have to ascertain a few things, I fancy!”

Warwick straightened his shoulders, managed to get a smile on his face, and then started walking directly toward Mrs. Burton Barker and the man with whom she was talking.

Chapter 5

Into a Trap

MRS. BURTON BARKER smiled a welcome as John Warwick approached, for she always had admired him, but Warwick was not certain at the present time whether the welcome was sincere. The man standing beside her glared at Warwick for an instant, and then quickly regained his composure and got a blank expression into his countenance. Mrs. Burton Barker introduced him to Warwick as Mr. Marlowe, and the two men bowed coldly.

“This world is a queer old place—what?” Warwick said. “For instance, Mr. Marlowe is almost the exact image of a chap with whom I had a peculiar controversy today.”

“Why, how was that, John?” Mrs. Barker asked.

“I was out motoring with Miss Rodney,” Warwick explained. “A chap seemed to be following us. I managed to get a good look at him. And this evening, just before I started here, I caught the same chap watching the place where I live. Made me a bit angry, don’t you know—went across the street and protested to him about it. Chap talked to me like a silly ass!”

“But why on Earth should he have been watching you, of all persons?” Mrs. Barker asked.

“Don’t know, I’m sure.”

“And you say that I resemble him?” Marlowe queried, a smile twitching his lips.

“Enough to be a twin of his,” John Warwick replied. “I refer to looks, of course—face and form and all that. Voice somewhat similar, too.”

“Of course it wasn’t Mr. Marlowe?” Mrs. Barker said.

“My word! Never said that it was!” John Warwick protested. “I meant that it is peculiar how you’ll meet a chap and think how much he looks like somebody else you have met. Only a certain number of types in the world, I fancy! Deuced

peculiar, isn't it? Always seeing somebody who looks like somebody else!"

John Warwick grinned, and for an instant his eyes met those of Marlowe squarely.

Mrs. Burton Barker turned away then, to greet some of her other guests, and Warwick and Marlowe stepped to one side, and started walking toward the den that had been set aside as a lounging and smoking room for the male guests. There happened to be nobody in the den when they reached it.

"So you followed me here!" Warwick said, in a low voice, as soon as they were alone. "I'll have to ask you for some sort of an explanation, I fancy!"

"It happens that I am here as an invited guest," Marlowe told him. "Are you the social censor hereabouts?"

"My word, no!" Warwick exclaimed. "It is nothing in my life what sort of person Mrs. Barker wishes to invite to her residence. But you followed me—that's the point!"

"And why should I follow you?"

"That is precisely what I am eager to know," Warwick told him. "There's no confounded sense in it! It annoys me, really! I can't be having it, you know."

"And just how are you going to stop it?" Marlowe asked.

"Why, confound it, I'll simply handle you, if this thing continues! Don't you think you'd better give me some sort of an explanation?" Warwick said.

"Explanations are not necessary," replied Marlowe. "They'd be a waste of time and breath. I guess we understand each other, all right. Yes, I guess we do!"

"You are a very poor guesser," Warwick told him. "My word! Follow a chap around all day, and then refuse to tell him the reason for it! It isn't done, you know! It isn't right at all!"

"Stop trying to throw a bluff, Warwick! I happen to be wise, you know."

"I know nothing of the sort! You may be old man Wisdom himself, for all I

know—or merely a silly ass! Come, now—give me an explanation. I think that I am entitled to it.”

“Why not ask The Spider what you want to know?”

“There is some more of that Spider stuff!” said Warwick. “What on Earth does that mean? Are you dippy, and all that sort of thing? Bats in the belfry—what? My word!”

Marlowe stepped nearer to him and spoke in a lower voice. “Suppose, Mr. Warwick, that we walk out on the veranda, or around the lawn, where it will be possible for us to talk without running a chance of being overheard,” he said. “We may be able to arrive at an understanding of some sort.”

“Very well,” Warwick replied. “I certainly must have some sort of an explanation!”

They made their way through the corridor and to the veranda, where there were several couples sitting around in the semi-gloom between dances, and Marlowe went slowly down the steps to the lawn and started following a walk that curved around the house toward the flower gardens at the back.

Warwick, smiling faintly, followed at his heels. Streaks of light came through the branches of the trees here and there, and yet there were plenty of dark and shadowy places where an assault could be staged without much trouble. John Warwick was alert and cautious. He did not intend to have this fellow, Marlowe, catch him off guard and eliminate him for the time being.

“Well, talk!” he said, after a time. “I fancy that we’ll not be overheard around here—what?”

“Warwick, as I said, I am wise to you,” Marlowe began. “I happen to know that you are The Spider’s trusted right-hand man. Don’t take the trouble to deny it—for I know! And I know, also, that you are under orders right now.”

“Orders? My word!”

“Orders to get possession of a certain something that is at present in the residence of Mrs. Burton Barker.”

“Oh, I say!”

“That is attached to the person of Mrs. Burton Barker. I’ll go as far as to specify. So you see, I understand the affair perfectly, Warwick. I happen to be connected with certain persons who do not care to have you succeed in your little undertaking. In fact, it is my particular business to see that you do not succeed. Now you understand fully why I have been following and watching you.”

“My word!” Warwick gasped. “I never heard such utter piffle in all my life before. Cannot understand it at all! Quite beyond me, and all that sort of thing!”

“Yeah? Well, that kind of talk doesn’t fool me a bit, Warwick!” Marlowe told him. “You might as well save your breath. And you might as well give up all intention of trying to do as you have been ordered. For you are not going to succeed this time, Warwick, though you have done some clever things before.”

John Warwick threw back his head and laughed.

“Most remarkable conversation!” he said. “It’s all utter rot, of course; but allow me to tell you that, any time I set out to do a thing, that thing is done! I always succeed, old chap! Understand? There’s no such word as failure in my personal vocabulary. My word, no! However, I am glad that you have told me this interesting little tale.”

“Are you going to keep on trying to throw that bluff?” Marlowe demanded. “Maybe you think that I don’t know a thing or two. The best thing for you to do is to forget your orders. You’ll run into trouble if you try to carry them out!”

John Warwick laughed again, softly, as if at an excellent jest, and then turned back toward the house.

“I fancy that this conversation has been quite a waste of time,” he said. “I might have been dancing, and all that sort of thing. Silly ass to listen to you—what?”

“You’ll be a silly ass if you don’t take the advice I gave you,” Marlowe said. “You may not think that you are up against a tough game, but you are!”

Now they were passing a clump of brush that grew close to the walk and threw a deep shadow over it. Warwick had noticed it as they passed it before, had watched it searchingly for a moment or so, but had seen nothing that looked

suspicious. He glanced at Marlowe now, but Marlowe was walking half a pace ahead of him and seemed to be giving the brush no attention at all.

“Well, Warwick, are you going to give it up?” Marlowe asked. “Are you going to take my advice?”

“Advice is something I rarely accept from a chance acquaintance,” Warwick replied.

He chuckled again. And suddenly two men sprang from the dark near the clump of brush, and launched themselves upon him. At the same instant, Marlowe whirled around and sprang.

Warwick darted backward, and his chuckle died in his throat. He had been half expecting such an attack at first, but had grown to think that it would not materialize. Now he found himself fighting against overwhelming odds. He had an automatic in his pocket, but he had no chance to draw it, and, furthermore, he did not care to fire. He wanted publicity no more than these other men.

One of the men was throttling him now, preventing an outcry; another was trying to trip him and hurl him to the ground; Marlowe was gripping one of his arms, and also watching the walk ahead. Two more men came from the darkness and joined in the fray.

Warwick, his back against the clump of brush, fought as well as he could. He tried to hold off his antagonists, to clear a space through which he could dart to the walk and run down it toward the veranda. But he found that they were too many for him.

“Quiet as possible, men!” he heard Marlowe command. “We don’t want a row that will attract any of the guests! Do your work quickly! Clever, is he? He walked right into the trap!”

The pungent odor of chloroform assailed Warwick’s nostrils. He tried to fight furiously, to hold off unconsciousness, to keep from being a prisoner in the hands of these men, but they held him in such manner that he scarcely could put up a struggle.

Their voices seemed to come to him from a great distance. He felt his senses going, tried to strike and kick. He called himself a fool for not guarding against

surprise better while taking that walk with Marlowe, when he might have known there would be some sort of a trap.

And then the drug had its way, and Warwick ceased to call himself anything.

*

As the limp form dropped to the ground, Marlowe issued his orders quickly and in a low voice.

“Get him across the lawn and into the machine! Take him away as quickly as you can—and for Heaven’s sake, don’t make any mistakes! Watch him carefully! I’ll let you know when to release him—when my work is done!”

One of the men grunted in reply, and then two of them picked up the unconscious Warwick and carried him across the Barker lawn, from shadow to shadow, dark spot to dark spot, careful not to be observed. Close to the curb, on the side street, a limousine was waiting, its curtains drawn, its engine purring, a chauffeur sitting behind the wheel.

John Warwick was tossed into the limousine, and it left the curb and ran down the street, gathering speed. Two of the men had entered it with Warwick; the two others hurried down the street in the opposite direction.

And Marlowe, grinning like a fiend, walked slowly through the grounds and approached the veranda from the opposite direction. He went along the railing, tossed away a half-smoked cigarette, and passed through the open front door. Ten minutes later he was being introduced to a certain young woman guest and was asking her to dance with him.

The young woman was Silvia Rodney.

Chapter 6

Togo Takes a Hand

THAT particular brand of nausea which follows a dose of chloroform had been experienced by John Warwick before; and when he regained consciousness now, and experienced it again, he kept his eyes closed, pretending to be under the influence of the drug and waiting for his brain to clear, Warwick realized that he was stretched on a couch of some sort; and he heard the voices of two men in conversation. His wrists were lashed together in front of him, but his ankles were not bound and there was no gag in his mouth. After a time, he opened one eye and glanced around the room.

It was a medium-sized room furnished in quite an ordinary manner. There were half a dozen chairs, a table, and a buffet. Warwick could see a closed door and two windows at which the shades had been drawn. Two incandescent lights burned in a chandelier.

The men were still conversing. Warwick could not see them, for they were beyond his feet, and he did not want to turn his body yet and let them know that he was conscious.

“Ain’t nothin’ much to it,” one of the men was saying. “We keep this bird here until Marlowe telephones that he’s turned the trick, and then we give him another dose of chloroform, take him in the car out to the edge of the park, and drop him there. When he comes back to Earth, he can go home—and he won’t know where we kept him. That’s all.”

“I thought he was one of these clever ones.”

“He is—but he ain’t as clever as Marlowe, I reckon. We haven’t anything to worry about, anyway—we do as we’re told and cash in on the coin.”

“What’s all this about a locket, anyway?” the other asked.

“You can search me! All I know is that Marlowe is crazy to get his hands on it—some secret, I suppose. None of our business! The big idea is to keep this man Warwick from getting it for The Spider—understand?”

“I don’t believe there is any Spider!”

“Don’t fool yourself! I guess Marlowe used to know all about him over in the old country. There’s a Spider, all right, and he’s a tough bird to go up against! I don’t want him and his gang after me any—not any!”

Warwick groaned and turned his head, and then sat up weakly and held his lashed hands to his face. He heard the two men get out of their chairs and start toward him. So they were as much in the dark regarding the locket as he was, were they? They were merely engaged to detain him until Marlowe had obtained possession of the thing, and then were to release him.

“Alive again, are yuh?” one of the men asked.

“What—what is the meaning of this?” Warwick gasped. “Oh, yes—there was a fight—”

“It wasn’t much of a fight, I guess—you didn’t have a chance!” said the other, laughing.

“Where am I?”

“That’s somethin’ you ain’t supposed to know, Mr. Warwick. Here you are, and here you stay for the time bein’—and if you try any funny tricks, you’ll wish that you hadn’t.”

“But—what is the idea?” Warwick demanded.

“I guess you know all about that. Anyway, we ain’t prepared to answer any questions,” one of the men told him. “We’re just here to see that you remain for a time.”

“How long?”

“Until we get orders to let you go—and let that be an end of your questions,” the other growled.

Warwick looked at them more carefully—and two precious thugs they were. He glanced rapidly around the room. He had been in corners as close as this before, and had escaped. He realized that these men meant him no real harm physically

—but they were interfering with his work. The Spider had told him to get that locket from Mrs. Burton Barker, and had warned him to be on guard against foes—and the supercriminal expected nothing except success.

“Better just take it easy, Mr. Warwick,” one of the men told him. “We don’t want to muss up a gent like you, as has done some nervy things in his time, but we’ll have to do it, if you try any tricks. We got our orders.”

“I don’t fancy this at all, my men,” Warwick said. “Confound it, I escorted a young lady to an affair this evening, and I should be there dancing with her now. What’ll she think of me if I desert her in this manner?”

“It’s hard luck, but it can’t be helped.”

“If you men aid me to get back there, I’ll make it worth your while—and forget all about this.”

“Well, we need the money, but it wouldn’t be healthy for us to let you you go,” one of his captors replied. “We’d get ours, if we did! So we can’t talk along them lines, Mr. Warwick.”

“I’ll pay your own figure,” Warwick said.

“Nothin’ doin’, sir!”

Warwick knew that the decision was final. He got slowly to his feet and paced around the room. But when he tried to get near the door or one of the windows, one of his captors always got in front of him. He tried the cords that lashed his wrists, and realized that they had been tied well. There seemed to be no present way of escape.

“Might as well take it easy,” one of the men assured him. “A little wait won’t hurt you any—and maybe you can get back there in time to take your young lady home. You can make up some whale of a story and be a hero.” The man laughed raucously, and the other joined in.

“I suppose you realize,” said Warwick, “that you could be sent to prison for doing such a thing as this.”

“Oh, we ain’t worryin’ any about that, sir. This scrap is strictly between

ourselves, and neither side is goin' to call in the police. If we go to prison, a certain gent of The Spider's gang will go right along with us!"

"What do you mean by speaking of The Spider's gang?" Warwick asked.

"I suppose you don't know—oh, no! You never heard of The Spider and his gang, you didn't. You ain't been workin' for him for more than a year—oh, no!"

"My word! Never heard such nonsense in my life!" Warwick gasped. "Can it be that you have made a mistake, got the wrong man, and all that sort of thing?"

"Not any, we ain't—and you might as well cut out the bluff!" came the reply.

Warwick continued walking around the room, and after a while he sat down on the couch again.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"A few minutes to eleven," one of his captors told him. "I guess you'll be turned loose about midnight—so you ain't got long to wait. Better just take it easy!"

Warwick engaged in no further conversation. He felt his bonds whenever he had a chance, and convinced himself that they could not be removed easily. He thought of dashing to a window, but he knew that the two men would be upon him before he could accomplish his purpose. And the window might be in the second or third floor—he could not tell. This might be a cottage, or a cheap lodging house. Warwick did not even know in what part of the city it was located.

To all appearances, he had resigned himself to his fate. He yawned once or twice, and asked for a drink of water. One of the men went out of the room, and returned with the drink within a short time. While he was gone the other watched Warwick closely, a revolver held ready in his hand.

Though he did not show it in his countenance, John Warwick was beginning to get frantic. He would fail—and from The Spider there would be no forgiveness. The supercriminal had warned him that he did not want failure this time. Warwick could not imagine why he had not been more careful. Here he was, a prisoner, and Marlowe and the others having every opportunity to achieve their desire.

He thought of Silvia Rodney, too, and knew that she was worrying because of his absence. Was he to lose Silvia because of failure to get the locket from Mrs. Burton Barker? Would The Spider, angry at his failure, keep him as a member of the band instead of granting him his release?

But there seemed to be no way of escape. The two men watched him closely, and if he got up to walk around the room, they left their chairs and remained close to him. A wrong move, a shriek for help, would cause them to spring upon him. They might even render him unconscious again—and then he would, indeed, be helpless and unable to carry out the orders of The Spider.

He wondered whether Marlowe had the locket already. For the hundredth time, he asked himself what that locket could be, and what secret it held.

“Well, are you going to keep me here all night?” he growled.

“Until we get orders to turn you loose.”

“My word! This is disgusting—what? Liable to make you chaps pay for it in the end!”

“We ain’t scared much!”

“Fancy I’ll square accounts with you before we’re done!” Warwick said.

He began pacing the floor again, walking from one corner of the room to the other, while they drew nearer and watched him carefully. He glanced toward the door—and saw that the knob was turning slowly!

Warwick’s heart almost stood still. He guessed that the man on the other side of the door was a friend instead of a new foe, else he would not be so furtive about his entrance. He glanced at the door now and then, maintaining a conversation with the two men, at the same time edging toward the window, and acting as if he were about to make a break for liberty, thus causing them to watch him closely. Their attention was attracted from the door.

Warwick glanced that way again—and saw that the door had been opened a crack. Suddenly it was hurled wide open, and a form darted into the room. The door slammed shut.

“Hands up!” a stern voice commanded.

Warwick’s captors whirled around. They found themselves menaced by an automatic. And they beheld the malevolent, glittering eyes of one Togo, John Warwick’s Japanese valet.

Chapter 7

In the Conservatory

WARWICK gave a glad cry and darted to the wall, following it until he reached Togo's side, keeping from getting between Togo and the other two.

"You are all right, sar?" Togo asked.

"Quite all right, thanks," Warwick replied. "Hand me that weapon, old boy, and I'll keep these two thugs covered while you take these confounded cords off my wrists. And, if they lower their hands or make a move—"

He left the sentence unfinished. There was no need to finish it. The two men before him knew what he meant, and they did not relish the look in John Warwick's face.

He held the automatic, and Togo unfastened his wrists. Warwick motioned toward one of the men.

"He has a revolver, Togo—get it!" he ordered. "And then you may search the other. We can't be letting them retain weapons—what? My word, no!"

Togo carried out the command with alacrity, and returned to Warwick's side with two revolvers and one knife. The two men had backed against one of the walls of the room, and still held their hands above their heads.

"Sar, may I attend to them?" Togo asked.

"My word! Always bloodthirsty, aren't you?" Warwick said. "What would you do with them, old top?"

"I shall teach them never to annoy a gentleman again, sar!"

"This gentleman would not have been annoyed, Togo, old boy, if he had been thoroughly awake," Warwick said. "Serves me right—what? Teach me to keep my eyes open, and all that sort of thing!"

“But, sar—”

“Besides, Togo, we haven’t time to play with these two precious thugs. And they treated me decently, at that. Just where are we, Togo, by the way?”

“In a little cottage, sar, at the edge of the city.”

“Um! And how do you happen to be here?”

“I was about the grounds at the Barker residence, sar,” Togo explained, “and saw the attack on you. I could not interfere at that time because there were so many, and because—it would not have done to create too much of a disturbance, sar.”

“Quite correct!” Warwick said.

“When they took you away in the limousine, sar, I engaged a taxicab that happened to be passing the corner, and followed. I have the cab waiting near here, sar.”

“Excellent, Togo, old top! We’ll use that cab in short order. And these men—”

“Please let me handle them, sar.”

“You may use that peculiar method of which you are a master and put them to sleep,” Warwick said. “Take the largest one first—he has the ugliest face. If the other makes a move, I’ll indulge in a bit of target practice—what?”

Togo sprang to do Warwick’s bidding. His hands found the man’s throat, his thumbs pressed against certain spots in the back of the neck, there came a groan and a gasp—and one of their foes was unconscious on the floor.

The other had watched from the corners of his eyes. He gave a shriek of fear as Togo turned toward him—but the shriek died in his throat as Togo turned toward him—but the shriek died in his throat when Togo’s thumbs pressed home. He, too, was allowed to sink to the floor.

“We must hurry, Togo!” Warwick exclaimed. “This delay may mean failure, you know.”

Togo led the way through the front of the little cottage, and out into the open air.

He ran down the walk to the street, Warwick at his heels, and came to the taxicab. Warwick commanded that they be driven to the Barker residence, and he promised rich reward if the journey was made in record time.

“Feel like an ass, Togo!” he said, as the taxicab lurched along the street. “Got caught napping—what?”

“I told you that this was a dangerous adventure, sar.”

“So you did! Never imagined I’d run into such violence while trying to get a silly locket from a foolish woman!”

“But that locket is no common one, sar.”

“Can’t be! Other chaps seem determined to get it,” Warwick said. “Mighty glad you were Johnnie-on-the-spot, old boy! Feel gratitude, and all that! Must reward you someday.”

“I was glad to help, sar.”

“Always glad to be of service when there is a promise of a row, eh?” Warwick said.

“Yes, sar,” said Togo, grinning.

“Togo, old top, this night may be my Waterloo. Wouldn’t be a bit surprised if I fail to carry out the orders of our flabby-cheeked old friend, what? Other chaps have had an hour or more to get away with that locket.”

“It is possible, sar, that they will take ample time and work slowly, thinking you are being held a prisoner,” Togo said.

“Hope you’re a good prophet! Dislike very much to fail at this juncture—might cause me all sorts of troubles and disappointments, old top.”

“Pardon me, sar, but you have not failed yet. Even if they have it by the time we reach the Barker place, sar, we may be able to recover it.”

“How’s that?”

“That man Marlowe—I know of him sar.”

“You do, eh? What about the chap?”

“He is an old foe of The Spider’s, sar.”

“Is, eh? Then the jolly old Spider will be more than angry if we do not succeed tonight. My word! Have to make every possible effort, and all that sort of thing!”

“If this Marlowe gets away with the locket, sar, we might follow him and get it ourselves.”

“Might, certainly. Rather get it from Mrs. Barker, however. Like to outwit the chap instead of using violence. Silly ass of a thing—that locket! Can’t imagine what The Spider wants with it. Buy all you want for fifty dollars each. Locket of Tragedy, eh? Rot! Utter rot, I say!”

The taxicab stopped on the corner nearest the residence of Burton Barker, and John Warwick and Togo got out, and the former rewarded the chauffeur handsomely. And then he led the way across the velvety lawn, keeping well in the shadows.

“I’ll have to make it appear that I’ve been wandering around the grounds and smoking—what?” Warwick whispered. “I’m going inside immediately, old top. Can’t endure the uncertainty, and all that sort of thing.”

“I’ll remain in the neighborhood, sar,” Togo said. “You may have some need of me.”

“Good enough!” Warwick replied. “Be somewhere along this walk, so I can locale you quickly, if it is necessary. Luckily, those chaps didn’t muss me up much. ‘Bye!’”

Warwick went into the residence of Burton Barker through a side entrance, dodged the others, went to the room that had been set aside for the gentlemen guests, and there brushed his clothing. His linen had not been soiled, he was glad to observe. He was still fairly presentable.

And then he made his way slowly down the broad stairs and came to the hall below. The orchestra was playing, couples were in the mazes of a dance, others

were chatting in the conservatory and in the refreshment rooms.

Warwick stood at the entrance of the ballroom as if bored by the scene, and watched the dancers. His eye caught Silvia's; he nodded, and she flushed with pleasure. Then his eyes moved on—and presently he had located Mrs. Burton Barker.

He was glad to find that she still wore the locket at the end of the long chain. So Marlowe had not had the opportunity to get it yet—else he was waiting for an appropriate moment. John Warwick felt hope bubbling in his breast again. There still was a chance of carrying out The Spider's orders.

Another dance began, and Warwick noticed that Marlowe was dancing it with Mrs. Burton Barker. He stood back a short distance from the door, so that he could watch them without being observed. Silvia also was dancing, so Warwick did not have to give her his present attention, and was free to attend to The Spider's business.

“Must get that silly locket!” Warwick told himself. “Never do to fail now—what? Marlowe chap had his chance and didn't make the most of it. Have a try at it myself now, I fancy. Have to keep my eye on him, though. Wonder if he has any more assistants about? Must be alert, and all that sort of thing!”

The dance came to an end, and Marlowe and Mrs. Burton Barker passed within a short distance of Warwick as they walked into the hall. Warwick watched closely as Marlowe took his hostess to the refreshment room. It was evident that the man was trying to flirt with her—and she was the sort of woman who always is ready for a flirtation with any presentable man.

They went toward the conservatory. John Warwick guessed that Marlowe might make an attempt to get the locket there. He could engage Mrs. Burton Barker's attention and snip the thing from the end of its chain easily. Perhaps he would be able to make her believe that she had dropped it while they were walking through the hall and thus escape suspicion.

Warwick followed them into the conservatory, where there were many couples walking about. He dodged those he knew, and made his way behind a bank of foliage and bloom. Marlowe and Mrs. Burton Barker were on the other side of it, just sitting down. From where he stood, Warwick could watch them closely without being seen by them. They were indulging in small talk that meant

nothing, and Warwick sensed that Marlowe was merely waiting for an opportunity.

Suddenly Marlowe bent closer to Mrs. Burton Barker, and the tone of his voice changed.

“Do you know, you are the sort of woman that fascinates me,” he said.

Mrs. Burton Barker laughed lightly and bent away from him, and once more Marlowe moved closer to her.

“I mean it!” he said. “You are a wonderful sort of woman—quite beyond the ordinary a man meets every day.”

“You are good at flattery,” Mrs. Barker observed, thus asking for more of it.

“It is not flattery, but the truth!” Marlowe declared. “Didn’t you notice that I was interested more than usual? Trust a woman to know when a man is interested!”

Warwick saw him bend toward her again—and smiled. He knew what Marlowe was doing. In a moment, he would become too enthusiastic, Mrs. Barker would put up her hands to ward him off, and then Marlowe would—

“Don’t be foolish, please!” Mrs. Barker was saying, but in a tone that said she liked to have him foolish.

“I’d rather spend five minutes with you than hours with a silly, flighty girl,” Marlowe went on. “When a man finds a woman who combines beauty with intelligence, he has found a treasure. Your husband is a very lucky man.”

“I fear that there are times when he does not believe that,” Mrs. Burton Barker said.

Marlowe suddenly bent nearer to her—and she did exactly what John Warwick had known she would do, she put up her hands, and turned her face away, trying to act the timid, modest, half-frightened girl, making an attempt to avoid a caress.

Warwick watched more closely now. He saw Marlowe lean forward again, put his face close to hers and whisper some foolishness—and while he did it, his left

hand went forward, a bit of metal flashed in the uncertain light of the conservatory as the gold chain was snapped, and the locket was in Marlowe's hand and being conveyed to his pocket.

Chapter 8

Another Attempt

JOHN WARWICK stepped back silently, walked around the bank of foliage and bloom, and confronted them.

“Pardon,” he said, “but I believe I have a dance with our charming hostess.”

Marlowe already was upon his feet, his eyes bulging, regarding Warwick as he might have looked at a man from the grave. Warwick smiled at him peculiarly.

“Must not monopolize Mrs. Barker,” he said “My word! Haven’t danced with her for quite some time! Pleasure I cannot miss this evening—what? Must assert my rights, and all that sort of thing!”

“Of course I’ll dance with you, John,” Mrs. Barker said.

“My word! You’ve lost your precious locket!” Warwick exclaimed.

Mrs. Burton Barker gave a gasp of dismay and felt at the end of the chain. Instantly, she was in a panic.

“Oh! I must find it!” she cried. “See—the chain is broken!”

“Probably caught it against something and snapped it,” Warwick said lightly.

But he gave Marlowe another look, and Marlowe realized that Warwick knew what had happened.

“Imagine you’ll find it without much difficulty,” Warwick went on to his hostess. “Saw you come in here—and you had the locket on the chain then.”

“You’re sure?”

“Absolutely!” Warwick replied. “Probably dropped it around here some place. Easy to find, what? Just close the conservatory door—and then we know the locket is somewhere inside.”

Marlowe glared at him, and Warwick chuckled. Mrs. Burton Barker was looking around the floor, her hands clasped before her.

“I must find it—must find it!” she repeated.

“Good-luck locket—what?”

“Yes—a talisman,” the woman replied. “Why don’t you help me find it?”

“No doubt it’ll be found almost instantly,” John Warwick observed, meeting Marlowe’s eyes again. “Locket can’t run away—what? My word, no! Have to be right around here some place! Let’s look!”

They pretended to search. Warwick watched Marlowe closely from the corners of his eyes. He saw Marlowe drop the locket against the bank of flowers and then pretend to stoop and recover it.

“Here it is, Mrs. Barker,” he announced.

“Oh, thank you!”

“Chain probably worn through,” Warwick observed. “Fine gold, you know—little jerk would break it. Better have it repaired, dear lady—what?”

“I shall have it repaired in the morning,” she said.

A servant approached with the intelligence that some guest wished to see the hostess, and Mrs. Burton Barker, promising to dance with Warwick later, took her leave. The two men were left alone.

Warwick stood before Marlowe, his hands upon his hips, and chuckled at the other man, whose face depicted his rage.

“Coarse work, what?” Warwick said.

“Think you’re smart, don’t you?”

“Why didn’t you bluff it out, old chap? Didn’t have the nerve? My word! I was standing behind the plants, you know, and saw you snip the thing.”

“This isn’t the end, Warwick!”

“Trying to threaten me now? Oh, I say! Doesn’t ruffle a single feather of mine, really! My word, no! Calm in the face of danger, and all that sort of thing. By the way, better engage a new crowd of thugs. Those you have at present aren’t quite up to the standard. Managed to get away from them, you see.”

“I see!” Marlowe exclaimed. “May I ask how you did it?”

“Quite simple. Friend of mine saw me being abducted, followed, got into the cottage, overpowered the chaps, and rescued me.”

“That damned Jap, I suppose.”

“Wouldn’t curse him, if I were you!”

Warwick warned. “He’s quite the man, you know—been no end of help to me on several occasions. Don’t like to hear him spoken of in that tone.”

“Suppose we just put aside this high-falutin’ talk,” Marlowe said. “We understand each other—it’s war between us. We’re both after that locket. And I’m going to get it!”

“You had it a moment since and didn’t retain it,” Warwick reminded him. “My turn now, what?”

“Not if I know it! If you get that locket, Warwick, you’ll be a very clever man!”

“Oh, I say! Not that, surely! Well, can’t stand here talking to you all evening. Have to toddle along!”

“And I’ll toddle right along in your wake,” Marlowe informed him, angrily.

“Still following and watching me—what?”

“You can bet that I am!”

“And a lot of good it will do you!” John Warwick said. “Making a regular ass of yourself—you are! Have to toddle! ‘Bye!’”

He whirled around, walked through the conservatory and entered the wide hall. He saw Mrs. Burton Barker at the foot of the stairs, talking to a couple of guests

forced to take leave early, and went toward her.

“Sure you have your locket?” he asked, when the others had gone.

“I have it in my hand,” she answered. “It gave me quite a start to find it missing. I’m glad that you noticed it, John.”

“You make quite a fuss over that locket, what?”

“It—it is a good-luck thing, John. I’m a bit superstitious, you know—always was, in fact.”

“Don’t seem to remember anything of the sort,” Warwick told her. “Always regarded you as an ultramodern young woman who didn’t believe in rot.”

“It is just a fad of mine,” she said.

“Let’s see the locket a moment—maybe I can fix it.”

“I’ll have it repaired in the morning, John; you needn’t bother now.”

“You’ll be dropping it somewhere, and then you surely will lose it,” he told her. “Better let me tie it on the end of the chain.”

He lifted the chain and looked at it closely. She handed the locket to him, and he started fastening it to the end of the chain. He knew that was the only way. If she took the locket upstairs, she probably would hide it some place where it could not be found easily. There was a chance of getting it while she was wearing it.

Silvia Rodney approached at that moment with a man with whom she had been dancing, and stopped to speak to Mrs. Burton Barker.

“Dear hostess almost lost a locket,” Warwick said. “Found it again, however. Trying to fasten it to the chain again.”

His eyes met Silvia’s for an instant, and the girl smiled at him. Marlowe approached and joined the group.

Warwick finished attaching the locket to the chain, and stood back. Mrs. Barker was making an attempt to show that she was not agitated, that she had almost

forgotten about the locket. But she was watching it closely, Warwick knew. Her fingers played with the chain continually, and now and then ran down it and touched the locket at the bottom.

“Shall we dance?” Warwick asked.

They entered the ballroom and danced. He had no chance to get the locket. He wished he might detach it in such a manner that he could kick it into a corner and pick it up afterward. But he knew that he would have to wait until Mrs. Burton Barker’s mind was centered on something else. It might be disastrous to make an attempt to get the locket now.

They finished the dance, and walked into the wide hall again. Marlowe was talking to Silvia and the man who had been dancing with her, and Warwick led Mrs. Barker toward them.

“Why not the veranda and smokes?” Marlowe asked lightly.

Warwick flashed a look at him, but agreed. They all moved out to the veranda, walked toward one end of it where there were easy chairs. They seated themselves and lighted cigarettes, and indulged in some more small talk. Warwick and Marlowe were watching each other carefully, each fearing that the other would make an unexpected move.

Warwick began wondering how the thing was to be accomplished. It had seemed so simple compared to some things he had done—merely snipping a locket from a chain and getting away with it without arousing suspicion. He began to tell himself that he must be slowing up, to let such a man as Marlowe prevent him from carrying out the orders of The Spider. He would have to be doubly careful about it now. He wasn’t quite sure that Mrs. Barker believed the locket had been lost accidentally in the conservatory. He couldn’t afford to run any grave risk, when his future happiness and that of Silvia Rodney depended upon his success.

Mrs. Barker addressed a remark to him, and he bent forward to reply. At that instant, the lights in the house went out.

There came a chorus of exclamations from the ballroom. Chairs scraped on the veranda as guests got to their feet. Mrs. Burton Barker started to say something, and the sentence was broken off in the middle.

John Warwick sprang to his feet, for he suspected a trap of some sort. It would be like Marlowe to have a confederate snap off the lights so that he could work in the dark.

Then there came a sudden rush of men over the railing. Warwick felt himself hurled to one side. He heard an exclamation of fear, and Marlowe's whispered commands.

Warwick realized what was taking place, then. They were kidnapping Mrs. Burton Barker. They probably would carry her a short distance across the lawn, tear the locket from the chain and get away with it. Marlowe would remain behind, and probably take part in the search for the assailants, thus freeing himself of any suspicion.

It all occurred in a short space of time. Warwick sensed that Marlowe would have him attended to, also. And so he darted noiselessly to the railing and vaulted over it to the ground. He brushed against another man, who instantly grappled with him. Warwick started to fight. He felt his throat gripped, felt a peculiar pressure—

“Togo!” he whispered hoarsely.

“That you, sar? I thought it was one of the others,” Togo gasped. “Did I hurt you, sar?”

“No! Silence, old top! Let's see what's going on here!”

Those inside the house were crying for lights. Servants were calling to one another, and Warwick heard something said about a fuse burning out.

He crouched at the end of the veranda with Togo. He realized that Mrs. Burton Barker was being lifted over the railing, and a whiff of chloroform came to his nostrils. Marlowe was talking loudly now, as if to cover the confusion. Warwick heard Silvia's voice, asking what had happened.

And then he gripped Togo by the arm and led the way around the end of the veranda. He knew that Marlowe's men were ahead of them. He watched and saw them cross a space between two dark spots—four of them carrying a woman.

He darted forward again, with Togo at his heels, whispering explanations and

orders.

“Taxi still at corner, sar,” Togo whispered in reply.

Across the lawn they followed the men, careful to avoid being seen. The odds were great, and Warwick did not care to attempt a combat and come from it vanquished. The men ahead were running now. They dropped the unconscious form of Mrs. Burton Barker beside a clump of brush.

Warwick stopped there just an instant. It was as he had expected—the locket was gone.

Chapter 9

A Lost Locket

AGAIN, John Warwick darted forward, Togo close behind. Warwick was in a rage now. He did not believe in using violence toward women. He always had prided himself on avoiding the use of it whenever the orders of The Spider compelled him to deal with those of the gentler sex. And he did not intend to let four thugs assault a woman in that manner, chloroform her, and steal something that he himself wished to get into his possession.

He stopped behind a tree. The four men were at the curb, mumbling among themselves. It was evident that they were waiting for a motor car, and that the driver had missed his calculations.

“Let us get at them, sar,” Togo whispered.

Warwick was just angry enough to agree. He gave the signal and, with Togo, rushed forward.

They hurled themselves upon the four like twin hurricanes. John Warwick went into action like a battleship, showering blows on all sides, but he worked silently, conserving his breath and strength as well as he could.

Togo sprang for the throat of the nearest man, and had him stretched unconscious on the ground in an instant. Then he reached for the second. But the others were putting up a fight, now that the first shock of surprise was over. Warwick and Togo found that the three of them were a match, a little more than a match. With his back against a tree, Warwick fought as well as he could, and Togo tried in vain to clutch one of his antagonists by the throat and put him out of the combat.

Warwick sent a second man lurching to the ground with a well-directed blow. The odds were even now. Togo screeched once and hurled himself at one of the thugs, and the man turned and ran. Warwick made short work of the other.

It took Warwick only a few seconds to search the three men on the ground—and he did not find the locket. Lights were blazing up in the house again, and male

guests were rushing toward him. They crowded about him, demanding to know what had happened.

Warwick explained in a few words. Some men had attacked Mrs. Burton Barker on the veranda as the lights went out. She was beside the clump of brush now, unconscious from chloroform. He had taken after the men. Here were three of them—and another had got away. Togo, the Japanese valet, was after that fourth man.

The male guests made short work of the three on the ground. They were picked up and taken to the house, to be held there until the police could be called. Mrs. Burton Barker was carried inside, too, where the frantic guests were huddling together and talking in whispers of what had occurred. They supposed it was an attempt at robbery; they felt of their necklaces and rings, to be sure that they had not suffered loss.

Warwick remained on the lawn for a quarter of an hour, and at the end of that time Togo returned.

“He got away from me, sar,” Togo reported.

“Well, it can’t be helped, old chap.”

“They—they got it, sar?”

“I imagine that they did, Togo, honorable chap. That was the scheme of course. The man who escaped evidently had it.”

“And now, sar—”

“Now, old top, I shall be compelled, for the first time in my life, to report to The Spider that I have failed. And he was particular to tell me, too, that he didn’t care to have me fail in this case. He will rave and roar, I doubt not—almost have a fit, and all that sort of thing.”

“You are not going to give up, sar?”

“I am not, honorable Jap. Marlowe is the head of this gang, and you can wager that Marlowe remains in the house so that nobody will suspect him. Sooner or later, Marlowe will get that locket from the man who has it.”

“Then we watch this Marlowe, sar?”

“We do,” Warwick said. “I have to go into the house now, of course. You may remain outside, Togo, and use your own judgment.”

“I understand, sar.”

“Never heard of such a fuss—all this row over a silly locket! Wonder what the thing is, anyway!”

“I feared there would be trouble, sar,”

“Spider told me as much, but I scarcely believed him,” Warwick said. “Imagine I look a pretty specimen now. One of those beggars caught me a clip under the eye—be black in the morning. I’ll go into the house now, old top!”

Warwick made his way to the veranda. He discovered that he was a hero. The male guests had told their fair companions that John Warwick had followed the four men who had assaulted and robbed Mrs. Burton Barker and accounted for three of them.

Warwick pushed his way to the stairs and up them to the second floor. Servants rushed to his aid. In a bathroom he inspected himself. There was a cut beneath one eye. His collar was torn, his tie soiled, and there was dust on his clothes.

“Pretty sight!” he complained as he bathed his bruised knuckles. “My word, yes! A bit of a row, and all that, but one of the chaps got away!”

Burton Barker rushed into the room, bubbling his thanks and reporting that his wife was all right again—and would descend and order the dance continued.

Then Marlowe stepped into the room.

“Good boy, Warwick!” he said, grinning. “You certainly handled those fellows!”

“Where were you?” Warwick asked nastily.

“It happened so quickly, I didn’t realize what was taking place,” Marlowe lied. “One of the fellows hurled me back along the railing, and by the time I could get to my feet, they were gone with Mrs. Barker—and you were gone, too. Miss

Rodney was nervous—I escorted her inside as soon as the lights came on again.”

“Very kind of you—thanks,” Warwick said.

“You certainly battered up those three prisoners. They are saying that half a dozen men jumped on them.”

“Silly asses! Ought to go to jail!” Warwick said.

“They’ll go to jail, all right!” Barker declared.

A servant pushed in and called him, and Barker hurried away. The others could hear a woman wailing in one of the other rooms—Mrs. Burton Barker had discovered that her locket was missing. They could hear her shriek that it must be recovered, could hear Barker giving orders to his servants.

Warwick dismissed the servants who had been helping him, and began putting on a fresh collar one of them had brought. The cut beneath his eye had been bathed and court-plaster applied, but Warwick knew that it would be a bad sight in the morning. He turned from the mirror and saw Marlowe watching him.

“Well?” Marlowe asked.

“Three of your men are going to jail,” Warwick said in a low tone.

“That’s their fault.”

“They are liable to talk, aren’t they?”

“I’m not a bit afraid of that,” Marlowe said. “They’ll take their medicine, and they’ll be paid for doing it. They did their work well, you know.”

“I suppose so.”

“You didn’t have a chance, Warwick! It was a good fight while it lasted, but it didn’t last long. It might have been different if you had been given plenty of help. I don’t understand why The Spider didn’t give you help.”

“There goes that Spider stuff again!”

“Oh, stop the bluff, Warwick! I’m wise, and you know that I am wise! I say it is

a wonder that he didn't give you help."

Warwick stepped close to him. "Very well—since you know so much!" he said. "If I am working for some chap you call The Spider, let it be known that I never need much help!"

"This was the time you needed it, Warwick!"

"Got three of your men, at any rate!"

"But one got away, eh? And so you didn't get the locket!" Marlowe laughed, sneered, and turned toward the door.

"Lots of time yet to get that," Warwick hurled after him.

"Not a chance, Warwick—not a chance in the world! You've had your last look at that little trinket. And what you'll get from that boss of yours will be plenty—don't forget that for a moment. He could not have taken you into his confidence, or you'd have made a better attempt to win out. This was a mighty important deal."

"Don't know what you're talking about, I'm sure!" Warwick said.

"Well, you've lost, Warwick!"

"Game isn't over yet!" John Warwick observed. "Seen lots of them won in the last half of the ninth inning, you know. Rally—all that sort of thing!"

He passed Marlowe and went down the stairs. He intended to keep his eyes on Marlowe, even if he had to send Silvia Rodney home in the limousine alone. Marlowe, he knew, would get possession of that locket sometime. He would find Togo out on the lawn and tell him to hold the taxicab in readiness.

But Togo had disappeared for the time being. Servants with electric torches were searching the lawn for Mrs. Burton Barker's locket. That lady was trying to force herself to believe that it had been torn from her while she was being carried across the lawn—when, in reality, she knew that the assault had been for the purpose of getting the locket.

Mrs. Barker was on the veranda herself, almost hysterical, directing the search,

refusing to go to her room. Some of the guests were taking their departure. The orchestra was still playing, and some of the couples were dancing as if nothing had happened. It was a tribute to their hostess.

Warwick went down among the others and pretended to join in the search. For the first time since he had joined The Spider's band, he felt a dread of the supercriminal. He almost feared the interview that he knew he would be forced to hold with him. The Spider did not countenance failure. He had instructed Warwick to get that locket, and he expected success.

It would be like The Spider to refuse to release him from the band and allow him to marry Silvia, and Warwick told himself that he never would marry her unless he was released. He would get the locket yet, he told himself. He would follow Marlowe day and night, with only Togo to help him—he'd get that locket if he was forced to use violence against Marlowe and his men, if he had to turn burglar or highwayman! He never had failed The Spider before, and he did not intend to fail now!

The search came to an end—and the locket had not been found. Warwick went back into the house, and received thanks from a pale Mrs. Burton Barker. He saw that she was making a brave fight to retain her composure, and he wondered again what the locket meant to her, what it meant to others. Locket of Tragedy, Togo had called it, but John Warwick didn't see any sense in that.

He met Silvia in the hall, and they stepped to one side.

"You'll be a handsome man in the morning," she said, laughing a little.

"Do not rub it in, dear lady!" Warwick told her.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself, getting into a brawl while acting as my escort?"

"It is a serious matter!" Warwick whispered. "Dear lady, I have failed for the time being—they got away with the locket."

"How did it happen, John?"

"Marlowe—that chap you danced with—is at the bottom of it. He got Mrs. Barker to the veranda purposely. Those chaps sprang over the railing when the

lights went out, grasped her and chloroformed her, rushed across the lawn with her, took the locket and left her there. My luck, I suppose, that the man who had the locket in his possession escaped.

“Then there is no chance of getting it, John?”

“I haven’t quite given up yet. Going to watch this Marlowe chap. Old Togo’s about, ready to help. Have to get the thing, or your jolly old uncle will be furious. Might force me to remain in—er—his employ, and all that.”

“Perhaps it will all come out right, John.”

“Let us hope so!” Warwick said.

Marlowe stepped up to them. “Pardon me, but I believe that I have this dance with Miss Rodney,” he said pleasantly. “Our hostess wishes the ball to continue, despite the annoyance she has experienced. As a compliment to her—”

“Of course! Naturally!” Warwick said.

He surrendered Silvia and watched them as they started dancing. He felt a twinge of jealousy, but told himself it was because Marlowe was the man and because Marlowe had bested him for the time being.

He could not help admiring Marlowe’s courage. The fellow was carrying it off well. He was an excellent foe, John Warwick thought. And he became more determined to get the locket, if it took him weeks!

Chapter 10

A Surprise

SILVIA RODNEY danced the encore with Marlowe, while Warwick walked up and down the hall and now and then stopped to speak to some acquaintance and dodge hero worship.

Warwick was wondering just who Marlowe might be and how Mrs. Burton Barker had become acquainted with him. He intended to get a line on Marlowe and keep in touch with the man. He simply had to get the locket! Everything depended upon it—his future standing with The Spider, his own happiness, and that of Silvia.

He wondered why Silvia was dancing with Marlowe so much, since she knew now that Marlowe was a foe to them all. Her face was radiant when Marlowe returned with her and handed her over to Warwick.

“Now I’ll dance with you, John, and then, I think, we’d better go,” Silvia said.

Warwick could do nothing but go out upon the floor with her, but he managed a whisper.

“Please make it short, Silvia. I want to watch Marlowe and follow him. A great deal depends on it, you know. Simply must get that locket, what? He’ll lead me to it, and all that sort of thing. Have to triumph in the end, or your jolly old uncle will walk around my collar. My word, yes!”

“Aren’t you going to take me home, John?”

“Will it make you very angry if I send you alone?” Warwick asked.

“Of course!”

“But, in such a case—”

“I’ll be angry, nevertheless. And how will it look to the others, John? Will they not suspect something?”

“Have to cover it up in some manner,” Warwick said. “Might get out at the first corner and return.”

“Oh, let the old locket go!”

“Dear girl! Your jolly old uncle will be enraged.”

“I’ll smooth it over for you, John.”

“Afraid it would be a difficult task in such a case. Uncle seemed very keen on getting the thing, remember. Some sort of a secret connected with it, and all that. Appears to be vastly important, though for the life of me I cannot understand why.”

“Well, you let it go and take me home!”

“Just as you say, dear girl, but I fear that we are making a mistake,” Warwick told her, sighing. “Take all the blame myself, of course, and all that. My word! Jolly old uncle probably will roar like a lion. May refuse to—well, you know, dear girl!”

“You leave it to me, John. You’ve never failed before, have you?”

“Never!”

“Well, uncle cannot raise so very much of a row, then.”

“Can’t he? I’ve seen him angry!” Warwick said. “Rather face a tiger unarmed. My word!”

They finished the dance and went toward the hall. Marlowe was just taking leave of Mrs. Burton Barker, and he grinned at John Warwick as he approached. Silvia went for her wraps, and Warwick stepped out on the veranda for an instant.

He walked along the railing, until there came to him from the darkness a peculiar hiss that he recognized.

“That you, Togo?” he asked.

“Yes, sar.”

“Follow our man when he leaves—I cannot.”

“Yes, sar.”

Warwick walked back to the doorway, entered, and continued along the hall toward the stairs.

“Better luck next time,” Marlowe whispered as he passed.

“Hope so!” Warwick growled.

“Should have had help, you know. You were up against a tough proposition.”

“A proposition of toughs, you mean.”

Marlowe’s face flushed. “Bad loser, are you?” he sneered.

“Haven’t lost yet, you know,” Warwick retorted.

“You haven’t? Don’t fool yourself!”

“Lots of time yet—game’s young.”

“Not this particular game!” Marlowe said.

“May find out different,” Warwick told him. “Rally, you know—all that sort of thing. Seen it lots of times. Advise you to keep your eyes and ears open.”

“Oh, I’ll be watching out for you!”

“That’s an excellent idea,” Warwick observed.

He went on up the stairs for his things. He met Silvia; they spoke to Mrs. Burton Barker, and went out to the limousine. Soon they were speeding down the avenue and across the city.

“Oh, cheer up, John!” the girl said.

“Don’t feel like it, dear lady. Not used to failure—what? Rather gets me, you know, and all that. My word, yes!”

“It will be all right, John.”

“Not so sure about that. Have to report to your jolly old uncle as soon as we reach the house, I suppose, and take what is coming to me.”

“Why not put it off?” she asked.

“Never do in the world. Make a full report, and maybe he can get the silly locket by sending somebody else after it—somebody who is not a bungler,”

“But you were fighting against odds!”

“Makes no difference,” he declared, “Always fought against odds before and won. Makes no difference at all!”

They rode for a time in silence, Silvia snuggling close to his side.

“When we get home,” she said presently, “you wait until I talk to uncle.”

“Afraid it’ll do no good,” Warwick replied.

“Nevertheless, John Warwick, you wait until I have talked to him, and then you can go up and—er—take what is coming to you.”

“Very well. Put off the evil hour a few minutes, at any rate,” he said. “Imagine I’ll get an awful wiggling! My word, yes! Probably be told I’m a worthless beggar, and all that sort of thing. First time I’ve failed, you know—not used to it!”

“Perhaps there’ll be a chance yet.”

“A slight one,” Warwick admitted. “I gave Togo orders to follow that Marlowe chap. By the way, you seemed to like to dance with him.”

“John Warwick, are you jealous?”

“My word—no! Just remarked it!” Warwick said.

“Well, you’d better not be jealous, sir! That is something I’ll not endure! Here we are at home!”

Warwick told the chauffeur to wait and escorted Silvia inside the house. She left him in the big living room and went up the stairs to The Spider's den. She knew that he would not have retired, that he would wait to tell her good-night.

John Warwick spent a bad quarter of an hour. He paced back and forth across the room, fearful one moment, defiant the next, wondering what he could say to The Spider to justify himself. He decided that he could only explain and ask the supercriminal to be merciful.

And then Silvia came back down the stairs.

"How did he take it?" Warwick asked.

"Oh, I scarcely think he will have you shot John."

"Angry, I suppose?"

"You'll find out soon enough—you are to go right up and see him," she replied.

"Hope the old chap isn't too hard on me," Warwick said. "Can't dare to think of losing you, little lady."

He held her in his arms for an instant, kissed her, and then started slowly up the stairs.

Outside the door of the supercriminal's den, he paused for a moment to gather his courage. Warwick was a man who did not like to confess failure. He knew that The Spider probably had spoken kindly to Silvia, but he would not let that affect the manner in which he received John Warwick.

Finally, he opened the door, entered, closed and bolted it behind him as was the custom, and then whirled around to find The Spider in his usual place behind the big mahogany desk.

"Sit down, Warwick!" The Spider said. "And give me your close attention while I explain something about that locket."

"I regret—"

"Silence—and listen! It is getting late, and I am a tired man. I just want to tell

you, Warwick, of the importance of that locket. Several years ago, the woman you know as Mrs. Burton Barker was spending her first season abroad. Her mother was with her. In a peculiar manner, the girl saw a crime committed. She was young and romantic, and she took a fancy to the man who committed it—one of my men.”

“I understand, sir.”

“Without her mother’s knowledge, she kept engagements with this man. He saw in her only a foolish and romantic girl, and he kept up the acquaintance to get information. Her mother was rich, as you know. This man of mine intended to get all the information he could and probably lift the mother’s jewels,”

“I understand.”

“He let the girl know that he belonged to a famous band of criminals. He let her know too much. The Locket of Tragedy was the property of a famous Parisian, and this man of mine got it one night while looting an apartment. It was called that because it had been owned by persons who met violent ends. It had quite a history, and many a collector stood ready to pay a handsome price for it.

“I see,” said Warwick.

“A queen who poisoned herself owned it once, and then a famous courtesan who was tried for murder and executed. Almost every owner of the locket met with violence. My man got it as I have said, and he showed some of the loot to the girl who now is Mrs. Barker. She wanted the locket, and he let her have it, thinking he could steal it from her later. He didn’t dare refuse at the time, for he needed more information before attempting to rob her mother of a fortune in jewels.

“Before he could regain the locket her mother took a sudden notion to return to the States, bringing her daughter with her, of course. The night before they departed, this slip of a girl got possession of a bit of tissue paper. That paper is still in existence, and is enough to send me to prison for the rest of my life, and to send other men there. The authorities of Paris would pay a fortune for it.

“She returned to the States, and I sent my man after her with instructions to get the locket and the paper, which she kept in it. He failed, and returned, and I sent two other men. She did not wear the locket in those days—she had it hidden

somewhere. I sent her word that, unless she returned the locket and the bit of tissue, I'd have her criminal sweetheart slain. She had spunk—replied that if I did she would hand the paper over to the police.

“She had us there—understand? She threatened to hand the things over the first month she did not receive a letter from this man she admired. We were safe as long as he wrote those letters—and I saw that he did write them.

“Then she got married, and began wearing the locket. It had grown to be a sort of duel between us by that time. She did not surrender the things even after being married, I tried a score of times to get the locket and what it contained, and I failed. I let the thing slide, as the saying is, let her hold the sword over my head.

“Last month, Warwick, she got no communication, for the simple reason that this man of mine had died. I ascertained that she was making investigation—she thought that I had made away with him, understand? She was ready to hand that locket to the police and tell her story.”

“And the others—” Warwick asked.

“Members of a band antagonistic to me. They learned of the locket and its secret. They wanted to get it and send it to the authorities of Paris themselves—wanted to see me and some others sent to prison. Do you understand what that locket meant to me, Warwick? If those others got it, if Mrs. Barker retained it, I was doomed. That is how important that locket was to me!”

Warwick gave an exclamation of horror. So he, by his failure, had doomed The Spider—and perhaps himself. For, if an investigation were made, it might lead to Warwick and other new members of the band, too. And, as for Silvia—why, her life would be ruined! She would be pointed out as the niece of a supercriminal.

“It would be a case of chickens coming home to roost!” The Spider continued. “My crimes the last few years, since that accident that made me a cripple, have not been what the world would call extra bad. I have reformed to an extent, as you know. But in the old days, I did many things for which I still could be punished.”

“Sir, I—” Warwick began.

The Spider silenced him with a gesture.

“So you can see the importance of that locket,” the supercriminal went on, “And when you sent it to me just now, by Silvia—”

“Sir?” Warwick gasped.

“It was a great relief to me. It meant everything. It meant that I shall not have to spend my last days in some prison. And I am so thankful, Warwick, that I am going to quit. I have one thing more to do, and then I am going to disband my people. That one thing is good instead of evil—I’ll explain it to you later. And I’m going to give my ill-gotten gains to certain charities and retain just enough to live on. Silvia will marry you—and be happy. Go to her now, John Warwick, and leave me alone with my happiness.”

Warwick unbolted the door and hurried out. He almost rushed down the stairs, to where Silvia was waiting for him in the big living room. She laughed as she saw the expression in his face.

“Was it all right?” she asked saucily.

“Dear lady, suppose that you give me some sort of an explanation,” he said.

“Regarding what?”

“Your jolly old uncle has just told me that I sent the locket up to him by you—thanked me for it. Knew nothing about it, I assure you! Imagined that thug fellow had it—sent Togo chasing after Marlowe to watch the chap—”

Silvia’s laugh interrupted him.

“I told you that perhaps I could help, John,” she said.

“My word! Can’t understand it at all!”

“Why, John Warwick! When the lights went out and those men came over the railing, I suspected that it was a trick to get the locket. I slipped to one side and finally got right behind that man Marlowe I heard him whispering to the other men as they were using the chloroform. He took the locket himself, John, at that moment. There was a hit of light from the arc on the corner, and I could see by crouching against the wall. He took the locket and slipped it into his waistcoat pocket.”

“But that was dangerous—”

“Silly! If there had been a search, he would have pretended that he had just picked it up.”

“I suppose so. But how did you get the locket?”

“I got it while I was dancing with him, John—picked his pocket, you see.”

“My word!” Warwick gasped. “You picked a chap’s pocket?”

“Yes. It wasn’t at all difficult, John. Remember, you foolish boy, I have a strain of The Spider’s blood in my veins. It was that Spider strain that called upon me to do it. I wanted to help you—and it was a sort of adventure—”

“See here!” Warwick exclaimed. “You were deuced lucky, and you must never do such a thing again. Suppose he had felt in his pocket afterward and found the thing gone? He would have suspected you at once.”

“Oh, he did feel in his pocket!”

“But—”

“But, you see, John, when I took the locket. I slipped in its place a small portiere ring that I had taken from the draperies in the hall. He merely felt the ring and thought that it was the locket. See?”

“My word!”

“And then, John—”

But she did not finish the sentence. She could not with his lips pressed against hers.