

"The VANITY CASE"

A Tale of Mystery and Love

By CAROLYN WELLS

CHAPTER 1.

MRS. PRENTISS enjoyed insomnia, but she didn't know it. That is, she knew she had insomnia, of course, but she didn't know she enjoyed it. On the contrary, she thought it made her miserable. But it didn't. It was really her best asset, socially, and she could get herself into the limelight almost any time by descending and dilating upon her long hours of wakefulness when others were sleeping.

Sympathy flowed freely at hearing of her weary vigils, her interminable but futile efforts to get to sleep, her tossing and turnings on her bed of unrest.

Partly because of a physical tendency that way, and partly by reason of nurturing, pampering and aggravating the disease, Mrs. Prentiss was chronically and happily insomnia.

Which explains why, one night, she prowled about her bedroom, in her not very fetching mid-Victorian nightdress, and gazed out of one window after another.

For her bedroom had windows facing three ways, which enabled the wily Mrs. Prentiss to note conditions in the houses of her neighbors on either side as well as across the street.

And, from a window that looked west, she could see, late as it was, sundry goings on that thrilled her curious soul. And, when the goings on had ceased and no hint of them was left save two tiny specks of light, Mrs. Prentiss thought the show was over, only to have it re-opened two or three times more.

Breathlessly she watched, and, though her soiloquized exclamations were of homely diction, such as "For the Lord's sake!" or "My goodness!" they nonetheless expressed the whole gamut of human surprise and wonderment.

Gaybrook Harbor was one of the most beautiful bits of natural charm on Long Island, and one of the most desirable locations for a summer colony.

The Harbor was, as harbors have a way of being, crescent shaped, and down to the middle of its curving arm ran a little stream of pleasant water.

Though really a tiny river, the stream was called Gaybrook and was as pretty as its name.

Now this arbitrary provision of nature divided the Harbor into two social as well as topographically. Not far from the shore, a bridge, a miniature Rialto, connected the land on the two sides of Gaybrook, but except for that there was a great gulf fixed.

On one side, the north side, the collection of estates and dwellings was called Harbor Gardens, and the other side was Harbor Park.

United municipally, geographically and patricially, the two were yet divided socially, or at least in some phases of the social life.

Harbor Park was there first, and it held the railroad station, the postoffice, the church, the clubhouse, the amusement halls and the "places" of many of the rich and great, whose greatness was the direct result of their riches. They were men of wealth, with wives of extravagance, with spoiled children and pampered servants. They were, for the most part, men of hearty good fellowship, of outdoor habits and convivial tastes.

Now, somewhat as a reaction, there had sprung up on the other side of the bridge, the modern institution known as an artist colony.

As one of their brilliant minded youths put it, "In Harbor Gardens you find men who do things. In Harbor Park, you find men who 'do people'."

Yet they came together in many ways. They all belonged to the one and only country club, they all went to the one and only church and they shopped at the stores in Harbor Park. In fact, there was no outward and ordinary signs of friction or dissension, but the Park people felt they were more worthwhile than the Gardens people, while the Gardeners, as they came to be called, knew they were superior to the Parkers.

So the Harbor people lived and flourished, with the silent bond of the Harbor holding them together, and the subtle bar of the bridge dividing them.

Mrs. Prentiss, she of the insomnia, was a resident of the Gardens. The widow of an artist, she had lived on in their attractive bungalow, covered with honeysuckles and Virginia creeper, and furnished with wicker things and rush rugs.

Next door to her, toward the west, was the far more pretentious bungalow of the Perry Heaths. It was indeed, a two-story house, but when Heath was told that bungalows didn't have more than one story, he replied, "This bungalow has."

He was an artist, was Perry Heath, and though his pictures were not of great value, they were graceful little aquarelles, and found an ultimate if not a ready sale in the New York shops.

That is, they had done so, but with the recent fad for "no pictures at all" the water color Othello began to find his occupation going. Yet, in a way, it didn't matter much, for Myra, his wife, had always had money, and recently, by reason of an uncle's death, had inherited not more. Heath's work was rather desultory, anyway. He painted what he felt like it, and the rest of the time he spent on the water or in it, or else he ran down to New York for a few days.

An impulsive, irresponsible existence was his, but his artistic temperament balked at dates or fixed hours, and he was far from being alone in that attitude.

Myra Heath, an acknowledged beauty, of the ash blond, Saint Cecilia type, was superior and self-contained by nature. Many called her cold, others opined her inordinately calm exterior covered a flaming Vesuvius of temper, if not of temperament.

No one ever caught sign of a jarring note between husband and wife, yet no one ever saw sign of affection. If they did not wash their dirty linen in public, neither did they air their clean linen, there, and this mere absence of anything to talk about caused the gossip to talk volubly about them.

The neighbor, Mrs. Prentiss, was deeply curious and spent much of her insomnia at her west window, hoping for a cloud as black as a man's hand to appear, that she might draw some conclusions as to the family status.

So far, she had been unsuccessful. The Heaths lived most naturally and ordinarily. Now and then they went to parties. Now and then they went to parties. He went to the club, she went to bridge games, and they both went to church. A more exemplary couple could not be imagined. Yet Mrs. Prentiss, perhaps in the vagaries of her insomnia, had a persistent intuition that there was a fly in the Heath ointment, and she was determined to swat it.

The bungalow of the artists was a long-fronted house, shingled and painted white. With the superior taste of the Harbor Gardens crowd, he scored such things as living rooms, sun parlors, breakfast alcoves and sleeping porches.

Eight years younger than her hostess, they were home-town friends, and Bunny was happily spending a month at the Gardens.

In her Paris frock, which was merely a wisp of orchid-colored chiffon, Bunny looked like a French doll. But she was far from being of a doll-like nature.

"I say," she remarked, as her well reddened lips opened to allow the words to come out and a cigarette to enter, "any of the hilarious populace coming to dinner?"

"No," said Myra, her pale lips lazily smiling as she glanced at Bunny. "We're all alone, for once. After dinner, we'll have a spot of bridge and tuck in early."

"Fine!" Bunny said, "I think I'll wash my hair. Don't want to trail down to New York just for that. Katie can help me dry it."

"Yes, after she comes in," Myra acquiesced. "It's her night out."

"I'll help you dry it," volunteered Larry Inman, the other guest. He was a distant relative of Myra's, a second or third cousin, once or twice removed, but he traded on the relationship to come now and then for a visit.

He was a wholesome looking, well-up-chap, with dark, curly hair and red-brown eyes. Tall, broad-shouldered and athletic, in his white flannels, he looked a typical summer guest, and Perry Heath often said, he wasn't a bit crazy over Larry, but he tolerated him around because he fitted into the atmosphere.

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In the "Real Estate For Sale" columns of today's want ads, this is real estate bargain week and the choicer offerings of Indianapolis real estate dealers are listed according to the sale price. No matter about price you wish to pay, you can find just the place you want in today's "bargain" offerings. Turn to the real estate for sale ads now.

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