

"The VANITY CASE"

A Tale of Mystery and Love
By CAROLYN WELLS

BEGIN HERE TODAY
In Harbor Gardens, Long Island, in a large bungalow, lived Perry Heath and his wife, Myra. They were entertaining as house guests, Lawrence Nix, a distant relative of Myra's and, aside from Perry, her only heir, and a golden-haired, vivacious, and old friend of Myra's.
Myra Heath was beautiful but cold. She never used rouge, never wore color. She collected rare bits of bottles and her latest was a whisky bottle, which aroused her artist husband's scorn.
Provoked at a growing intimacy between Perry and Nix, and conscious that she had made her will in favor of Nix, she was determined to get rid of him. She was a woman of the house, but the next day she was strangled in the study door with candles burning at her head and feet. She is made up with rouge, she is dressed in gay color. Near her is a card marked "The Will of Perry Heath."
She has been killed by a blow with her cherished whisky bottle. When the coroner comes, Nix and Perry are strangely nervous when made to answer questions. Meanwhile, the topic of conversation among Sam Anderson, Cunningham and others, Mrs. Prentiss, is the murder of Myra Heath. Mrs. Prentiss, going over to the Heaths and inviting Nix to stay at her house next week, Nix breaks out crying, and Perry, at sight of her beauty, is hurt.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY CHAPTER X
Toddy felt decidedly out of it. The girl had not looked at him after the aunt's presentation of him, and he resented it. To be sure she was nearly frantic with fear and anxiety, but she might at least recognize his existence.

Nor was Bunny totally oblivious of this eager and would-be helpful knight.
But she was so distracted with her woe. She was still suffering from the grief and shock of the whole affair, and she was distraught at the continued absence of Perry Heath.

Mrs. Prentiss was determined to see Myra's body, and having said a temporary good-bye to Bunny, she approached the guardian of the studio door just as Wallace Forbes, on the same errand bent, arrived there.

His cajolery and her claim as a sort of guardian of Miss Moore, won them an entrance, and the pair closed the door behind them and stood almost transfixed at the scene before them.

The blinds were drawn and the lights shaded, but Myra's face shone forth in a startling unearthly beauty. She looked so alive; her careless, relaxed position, seemingly that of a moment's abandon to rest.

"You knew her?" Forbes asked of Mrs. Prentiss, who was also gazing, as if spellbound, at the strange, beautiful countenance.

"Yes, but I never saw her look like this! She never used cosmetics and she never wore gay colors."
"No, that's the inexplicable thing. Who fixed her up like that, and why? Was it done before she was killed—or after?"

"Oh, horrors, Mr. Forbes, before, of course! Nobody, even a ghoul, could paint the face of a woman he had murdered!"

"It would seem so. But why would Mrs. Heath paint up like that, or allow any one else to do it?"
"Oh, that isn't unanswerable. She might have consented to try it for once—on a dare, maybe."

"Yes, that's true. But then, granting she did so, and that she donned the scarf and the beads in the same spirit of experiment, who came in and killed her?"

"You don't think the card means that it was her husband's deed, then?"
Mrs. Prentiss was always straightforward of speech, and she asked the question bluntly.

But Forbes only replied by saying, "Do you?"

"I don't know. I know Perry Heath, and he always seemed to me a good-natured, easy-going man, but you can't tell what those quiet chaps will do on a sudden wild impulse. You a detective?"

"No, not a real one, but I'm interested in the subject, and especially so in this case, because of its own strange and bizarre effect and, too, because I know the people implicated."

"Well, then I'll tell you something, and you can advise me whether to tell it to the police or not."
"Of what nature is your secret? Perhaps you'd better take it direct to the authorities."

"No, you listen. Last night, I couldn't sleep and pretty much all night I was up and around my room, and I looked over here a lot. And, I saw strange goings and comings in this part of the Heath house."

"What sort of goings and comings?"
"Not exactly the people, but the lights, they kept snapping on and off. First, there were full lights here. Then, about half-past eleven they all went out—the lights, I

mean—downstairs, and two or three bedrooms—were lighted up. Then, about midnight, I saw a small faint light in this room—the studio of Mr. Heath's. And not more than ten or fifteen minutes after that, the full light flashed on in this same room. Well, sir, after a time those lights went off and there remained only two small sparks—those candles, there, that are now burnt out. I saw the two sparks, low down, through the window, but I couldn't make out what they were. I never thought of candles on the floor!"

"Of course not. This story is very important, Mrs. Prentiss. Of course, you must tell it to the police, but go on and tell me the rest. Hurry it along, we may be interrupted at any minute now."

"Well, then, those little lights kept on burning—I realize now they were the candles—and later still, say, 'long about half-past 11, the big light snapped on again."

"Then some one was here after the candles had been placed on the floor?"

"Yes, half an hour after."

"Go on."

"Yes, I'm not through yet. Then the big light went off and the two sparks showed again. And after another short interval on snaps the big light again."

"You amaze me, Mrs. Prentiss! Then people were in and out after the murder?"

"Well, we don't quite know that—but they were in and out after those candles were set burning. Then, if you please, the big light goes off and the candles show again. And that was well after 2 o'clock. I went back to bed and then I feel asleep. That's all I know about it."

"And it's a lot. Of course, we can't explain the various lights until we know more of the movements of the household during the night. Perhaps the candles were lighted early, before Mrs. Heath was attacked at all."

"Maybe, but they were surely not put on the floor until after she was dead. Why should they be? They are so evidently meant as funeral candles. Why place them on the floor, at her head and feet, before she was dead?"

"You are right. When you saw the sparks, and didn't realize they were candle flames, were they, do you think, just where they are now?"

"Yes, exactly. They were right in line with my vision as I looked from my window."

"The police detective may experiment with other candles, and see if you can verify their position."

"He may, if he chooses, but I know now those candles stood right there where they are now, ever since 1 o'clock, or thereabouts, last night."

CHAPTER XI
That afternoon at 2 o'clock the lounge at the Heath home looked a more fitting place for a social reception than for a coroner's inquest.

The big room, with its windows open front and back, showed windows of bright colored flowers, over which the thin sash curtains swayed in the breeze, and the sunlight played through their fluttering folds.

On the tables were vases and baskets of flowers arranged with the care and taste that was the resulting routine of Myra's instructions.

The easy chairs and davenport showed their summer garb of flowered English chintz, and small light chairs had been brought from the caterer's for the audience that was expected.

Many people came, both from the park and from the gardens, for the Heaths had numerous friends, and there was the usual quota of curiosity seekers.

Coroner Osborn sat at a table, his canny, dark eyes darting about the room, and his small features twisted into a thoughtful frown, as he realized the magnitude of the task before him.

But he was a man of efficient habits, and on the stroke of two he called his first witness.

This was Katie, the parlor maid, who had first discovered Myra's body.

She took the chair indicated, and faced the coroner with composure.

But Osborn had no suspicion that the girl was in any way implicated in the crime, and he merely asked a few definite and direct questions as to her movements that morning and her actions on making the discovery of the tragedy in the studio.

He had heard her story before, but had it repeated for the benefit of the men who were serving as jurors.

Again Katie hesitated when asked at what time she had returned to the house the night before.

"At what hour?" pressed the point, Coroner Osborn, who you supposed to come home, when you have your evening out?" he asked her.

"At 11 o'clock," she replied, with apparent reluctance.

"That seems to be a bit late, but no matter. What time was it when you really returned?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Who let you in? I don't suppose you carry a latch-key."

"No, sir. I—I just got in—myself."

The coroner turned to Herrick.

"At what time did you lock up the house?" he asked.

"At something after 11.30." The man spoke stolidly, for he could see that this must impair Katie's story, and the servants were, for the most part, loyal to one another.

"You locked the back doors—the kitchen entrance as well as the front door and windows?"

"Yes, sir," Herrick could see, no way to evade the truth.

"Then, how did Katie get in?" the inexorable voice continued.

There was a moment's silence, and then Emma, the waitress, spoke up and said: "I let her in."

"Ah, now we are getting facts. How did you know when she came?"

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