

THE CLUE OF THE PRIMROSE PETAL

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The Clue of the Primrose Petal by Harvey Wickham

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HARVEY WICKHAM

**THE CLUE OF THE
PRIMROSE PETAL**

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BY
HARVEY WICKHAM



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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCING THE GARDEN OF EDEN

AS the taxi turned from the last narrow street of the village and struck the broad asphalt of a lordly country road, Ferris McClue took a letter from his pocket, and—pausing now and then to skip the unimportant parts—began to read it aloud.

“‘Obtain entrance to Ivy Towers—make thorough investigation of conditions. When ready to report, insert in one of the New York morning papers an advertisement pretending to offer for sale a second-hand motion-picture projecting outfit.’ What do you think of that?”

The other occupant of the cab—a trim young lady in a dark blue tailor-made suit—shook her head. McClue continued:

“‘I leave it to your own professional judgment how you are to secure admittance to the Towers and in what capacity you are to appear. The only stipulation is that you go in

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person and obtain a footing which will enable you to get into close touch with the inhabitants. There is no necessity for you to know my name, and I hope the enclosed cashier's check will be sufficient to compensate you for your natural curiosity in that regard.' The impudent pup! 'Your report will be called for at your office by a third person as soon as I hear from you in the manner indicated, when you may expect a supplementary fee.'

"There! That's all—excepting some directions for reaching the place, and a typewritten signature, 'Yours truly, Anxious.' You really must tell me what you think of it, Miss Hope."

The lady in the blue suit smiled. This was the third time she had listened to the substance of this preposterous letter since they left the city. So this was Ferris McClue, the man whom the newspapers had nicknamed "The Ferret!" But neither reporters, police officials nor the general public ever saw anything but his results, or were permitted to hear of him save as something cold, silent, inscrutable. No man is a hero to his valet, and it is only natural that no detective should be an unreal, miraculous cunning, creepy sort of person to his chief assistant. There was a trace of superiority in Clara Hope's smile—though superiority was beginning to be a little doubtful of itself.

INTRODUCING THE GARDEN OF EDEN

“I do not pretend always to understand him,” she had recently confided to her journal. “He acts very often like a mere boy, excitable and excessively enthusiastic. Much of his success looks like luck. But I now realize that there is more to him than I at first imagined, and that he is doing extremely well for an independent operator of only thirty-five, handicapped with a nervous temperament and an unmethodical education. I only hope that I am not becoming romantic, and that my present mode of life is not undermining my character. I must admit that I am falling into his habit of using slang and semi-grammatical expressions, and that there is something in the world of late which fills me with a curious thrill, as if all the oxygen in the atmosphere had been turned to ozone.”

Two years before the date of this entry, she had been—if not more admirable, certainly more firm, and for one thing quite incapable of keeping a journal at all. Clara was a school-teacher then, living in a world bounded by discipline, correct English, arithmetic and elementary geography. She had looked down upon all detectives with what she afterwards discovered to be a not altogether well-informed contempt, regarding them as hardly respectable, and interesting only to the readers of cheap, paper-bound

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volumes—to youths, in short, who would not scruple to smuggle their favorite fiction into the very school room.

McClue often declared that it was the careless perusal of one of these confiscated masterpieces which led to her professional undoing and “woke her up.” But he was mistaken. It was a healthy desire for bread and butter which did the trick. Teaching in a small town position that calls for a good address and presentable raiment—on sixteen dollars a week—is likely to have an awakening tendency upon anybody in time. And when, one day, she came upon a want ad offering “twenty-five a week” to “any plain-featured young woman, preferably a high-brow, not afraid of clerical work,” she laid aside her dignity enough to respond.

She had winced on discovering that the job was with a detective agency, and that all that was wanted was a filing-clerk. But she was thirty-one, and there was the future to think of. So she laid aside her dignity some more, and even felt a satisfaction not altogether based on economics when McClue picked her out from the crowd of applicants, though the mode of selection was apparently nothing more scientific than the “Eney! Meeney! Miney! Mo!” of a childish game.