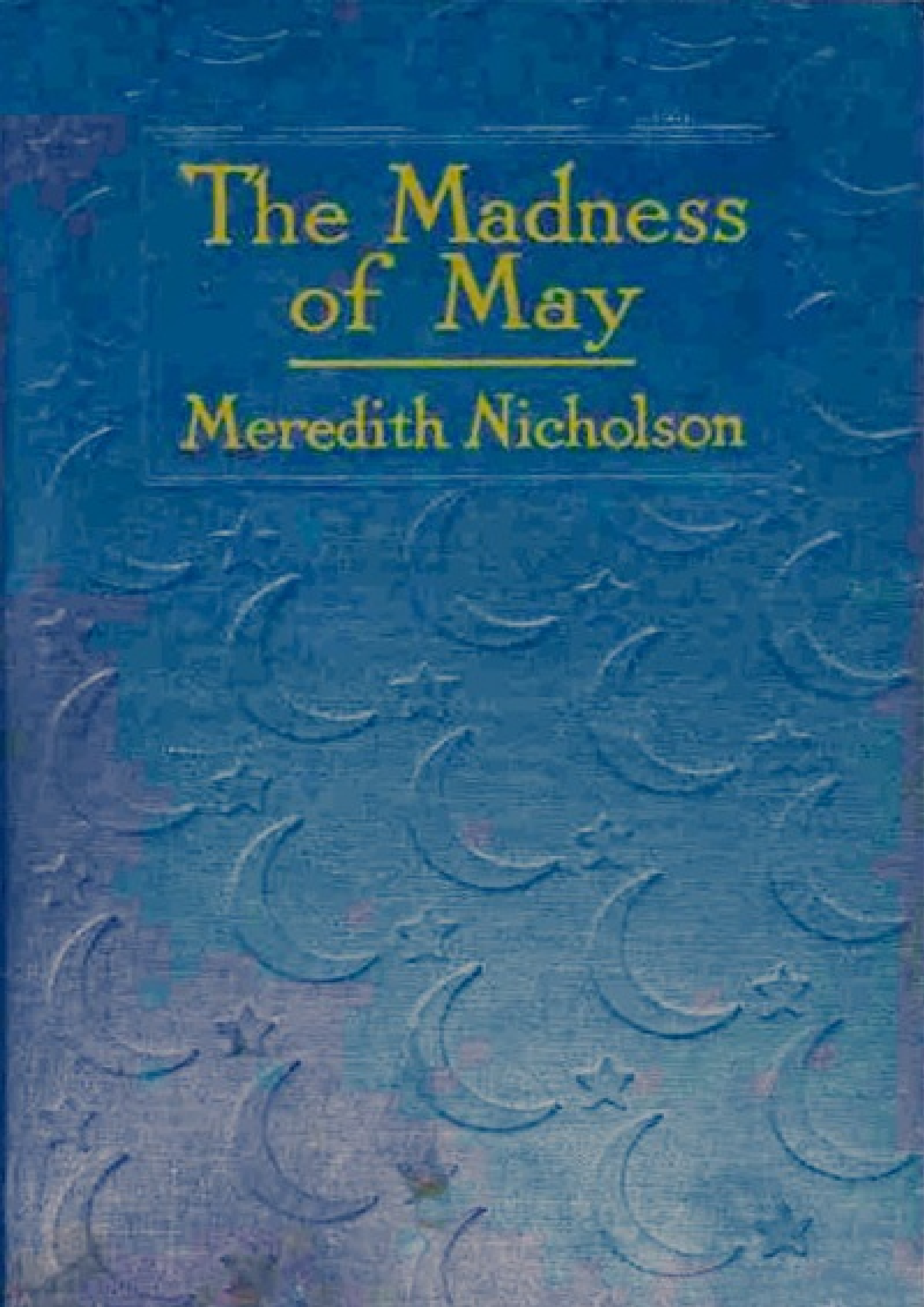


The Madness
of May

Meredith Nicholson





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About Nicholson:

Meredith Nicholson (December 9, 1866 – December 22, 1947) was a best-selling author from Indiana, United States, a politician, and a diplomat.

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Chapter 1

Billy Deering let himself into his father's house near Radford Hills, Westchester County, and with a nod to Briggs, who came into the hall to take his hat and coat, began turning over the letters that lay on the table.

"Mr. Hood has arrived, sir," the servant announced. "I put him in the south guest-room."

Deering lifted his head with a jerk. "Hood—what Hood?"

"Mr. Hood is all I know, sir. He said he was expected—you had asked him for the night. If there's a mistake——"

Deering reached for his hat and coat, which Briggs still held. His face whitened, and the outstretched hand shook visibly. Briggs eyed him with grave concern, then took a step toward the stairway.

"If you wish, sir——"

"Never mind, Briggs," Deering snapped. "It's all right. I'd forgotten I had a guest coming; that's all."

He opened a letter with assumed carelessness and held it before his eyes until the door closed upon Briggs. Then his jaws tightened. He struck his hands together and mounted the steps doggedly, as though prepared for a disagreeable encounter.

All the way out on the train he had feared that this might happen. The long arm of the law was already clutching at his collar, but he had not reckoned with this quick retribution. The presence of the unknown man in the house could be explained on no other hypothesis than the discovery of his theft of two hundred thousand dollars in gilt-edged bonds from the banking-house of Deering, Gaylord & Co. It only remained for him to kill himself and escape from the shame that would follow exposure. He must do this at once, but first he would see who had been sent to apprehend him. Hood was an unfamiliar name; he had never known a Hood anywhere, he was confident of that.

The house was ominously quiet. Deering paused when he reached his own room, glanced down the hall, then opened the door softly, and fell back with a gasp before the blaze of lights. There, lost in the recesses of a comfortable chair, with his legs thrown across the mahogany table, sat a man he had never seen before.

"Ah, Deering; very glad you've come," murmured the stranger, glancing up unhurriedly from his perusal of a newspaper.

He had evidently been reading for some time, as the floor was littered with papers. At this instant something in the page before him caught his attention and he deftly extracted a quarter of a column of text, pinched it with the scissors' points and dropped it on a pile of similar cuttings on the edge of the table.

"Just a moment!" he remarked in the tone of a man tolerant of interruptions, "and do pardon me for mussing up your room. I liked it better here than in the pink room your

man gave me—no place there to put your legs! Creature of habit; can't rest without sticking my feet up.”

He opened a fresh newspaper and ran his eyes over the first page with the trained glance of an expert exchange reader.

“The Minneapolis papers are usually worthless for my purposes, and yet occasionally they print something I wouldn't miss. I'm the best friend the 'buy your home paper' man has,” he ran on musingly, skimming the page and ignoring Deering, who continued to stare in stupefied amazement from the doorway. “Ah!”

The scissors flashed and the unknown added another item to his collection.

“That's all,” he remarked with a sigh. He dropped his feet to the floor, rose, and lazily stretched himself.

Tall, compactly built, a face weather-beaten where the flesh showed above a close-clipped brownish beard, and hair, slightly gray, brushed back smoothly from a broad forehead—these items Deering noted swiftly as he dragged himself across the threshold.

“Really, a day like this would put soul into a gargoyle,” the stranger remarked, brushing the paper-shavings from his trousers. “Motored up from Jersey and had a grand time all the way. I walk, mostly, but commandeer a machine for long skips. To learn how to live, my dear boy, that's the great business! Not sure I've caught the trick, but I'm working at it, with such feeble talents as the gods have bestowed.”

He filled a pipe deftly from a canvas bag, and drew the strings together with white, even teeth.

This cool, lounging stranger was playing a trick of some kind; Deering was confident of this and furious at his utter inability to cope with him. He clung to the back of a chair, trembling with anger.

“My name,” the visitor continued, tossing his match into an ash-tray, “is Hood—R. Hood. The lone initial might suggest Robert or Roderigo, but if your nursery library was properly stocked you will recall a gentleman named Robin Hood of Sherwood Forest. I don't pretend to be a descendant—far from it; adopted the name out of sheer admiration for one of the grandest figures in all literature. Robin Hood, Don Quixote, and George Borrow are rubricated saints in my calendar. By the expression on your face I see that you don't make me out, and I can't blame you for thinking me insane; but, my dear boy, such an assumption does me a cruel wrong. Briefly, I'm a hobo with a weakness for good society, and yet a friend of the under dog. I confess to a passion for grand opera and lobster in all its forms. Do you grasp the idea?”

Deering did not grasp it. The man had protested his sanity, but Deering had heard somewhere that a confident belief in their mental soundness is a common hallucination of lunatics. Still, the stranger's steady gray eyes did not encourage the suspicion that he was mad. Deering's own reason, already severely taxed, was unequal to the task of dealing with this assured and cheerful Hood, who looked like a gentleman but talked like a fool.

“For God's sake, who are you and what do you want?” he demanded angrily.

Hood pushed him gently into a chair, utterly ignoring his fury.

“What time do we dine? Seven-thirty, I think your servant told me. I shan't dress if you don't mind. Speaking of clothes, that man of yours is a very superficial observer; let me in on the strength of my automobile coat, and I suppose the machine impressed

him too. If he'd looked under the surface at these poor rags, I'd never have got by! That illustrates an ancient habit of the serving class in thinking all is gold that glitters. Snobs! Deplorable weakness! Let's talk like sensible men till the gong sounds."

Deering shook himself impatiently. This absurd talk, carefully calculated, he assumed, to prolong his misery, had torn his nerves to shreds. Hood sat down close to him in a straight-backed chair, crossed his legs, and thrust his hands into his coat pockets.

"My dear boy, in the name of all the gods at once, cheer up! To satisfy your very natural curiosity, I'll say that I fancied you were in trouble and needed a strong arm to sustain you in your hour of trial. Laudable purpose—ah, I see you begin to feel more comfortable. I have every intention of playing the big brother to you for a few hours, weeks, or months, or till you come out of your green funk. You wonder, of course, what motive I have for intruding in this way—lying to your servant, and making myself at home in your house. The motive, so far as there is any, is the purely selfish one of finding enjoyment for myself, while incidentally being of service to you. And you're bound to admit that that's a fair offer in this world of greed and selfishness. The great trouble with most of us is that the flavor so soon wears out of the chewing-gum. Do you remember the last time you had a good, hearty laugh? I'll wager you don't!"

Deering scowled, but Hood continued to expound his philosophy:

"The world's roaring along at such a rate we can't find happiness anywhere but in the dictionary. It's worrying me to death, just the spectacle of the fool old human race never getting a chance to sit down by the side of the road and pick the pebbles out of its shoes. Everybody's feet hurt and everybody's carrying a blood pressure that's bound to blow the roof off. I tell you, Deering, civilization hasn't got anything on the gypsies but soap and sanitary plumbing, I'm just forty-five and for years I've kept in motion most of the time. Alone of great travellers William Jennings Bryan has reviewed more water-tanks than I. I find the same delight in Butte, Peoria, Galesburg, Des Moines, Ashtabula, and Bangor, in Tallahassee, Birmingham, and Waco, that others seek in London, Paris, and Vienna—and it's all American stuff—business of flags flying and Constitution being chanted offstage by a choir of a million voices! I've lived in coal-camps in Colorado, wintered with Maine lumbermen, hopped the ties with hobos, and enjoyed the friendship of thieves. I don't mean to brag, but I suppose there isn't a really first-rate crook in the country that I don't know. And down in the underworld they look on me—if I may modestly say it—as an old reliable friend. I've found these contacts immensely instructive, as you may imagine. Don't get nervous! I never stole anything in my life."

He thrust his fingers into his inside waistcoat pocket, and drew out a packet of bills, neatly folded, and opened them for Deering's wondering inspection.

"I beg of you don't jump to the conclusion that I roll in wealth. Money is poison to me; I hate the very smell of it—haven't a cent of my own in the world. This belongs to my chauffeur—carry it as a precaution merely."

Hood relighted his pipe, and dreamily watched the match blacken and curl in his fingers.

"Your chauffeur?" Deering suggested, like a child prompting a parent in the midst of an absorbing story.

"Oh, yes! Cassowary"—he pronounced the word lingeringly as though to prolong

his pleasure in it—“real name doesn’t matter. His father rolled up a big wad cutting the forest primeval into lumber, and left it to Cassowary—matter of a million or two. Cassowary had been driven to drink by an unhappy love-affair when I plucked him as a brand from burning Broadway. Nice chap, but too much self-indulgence; never had any discipline. He’s pretty well broken in now, and as we seemed to need each other we follow the long trail together. Manage to hit it off first-rate. He’s still mooning over the girl; tough that he can’t have the only thing in the world he wants! Obstreperous parent adumbrated in the foreground, shotgun in hand. I don’t allow Cassowary to carry any money—would rather risk contamination myself than expose him to it. If he stays with me for a few years, his accumulated income will roll up so that he can endow orchestras and art museums all through the prairie towns of the West, and become a great benefactor of mankind.”

Hood’s story was manifestly absurd, and yet he invested it with a certain plausibility. Even Cassowary, as Hood described him, seemed a wholly credible person, and the bills Hood had drawn from his pocket bore all the marks of honest money.

Dinner was announced, and Hood lounged down-stairs and into the dining-room arm in arm with Deering. A tapestry on the wall immediately attracted his attention. After pecking at the edges with his long, slender fingers he turned to his seat with a sigh.

“Preposterous imitation! I dare say it was passed off as a real Gobelin, but I know the artist who fakes those things—a New Jersey genius and very smooth at the game.”

Deering had never paid the slightest attention to the tapestry, which had hung in the room for a dozen years, but he apologized in a vein of irony for its spuriousness, and steeled himself against complaints of the food; but after tasting the soup Hood praised it with enthusiasm. He was wholly at ease, and his table manners were beyond criticism. He seemed indifferent to the construction Deering or the bewildered Briggs might place upon his confessions, to which he now glibly addressed himself.

“A couple of years ago I was roaming through the Western provinces with a couple of old friends who persist—against my advice, I assure you—in the childish pastime of safe-blowing. We got pinched *en bloc*, and as I was broke I had to sponge on the yeggs to get me out of jail.”

Briggs dropped a plate and Deering frowned at the interruption. Hood went on tranquilly:

“However, I was immured only three weeks, and the experience was broadening. That was in Omaha, and I’ll say without fear of contradiction that the Omaha jail is one of the most comfortable in the Missouri Valley. I recommend it, Deering, without reservation, to any one in search of tranquillity. After they turned me loose I introduced myself to an old college classmate—fraternity brother—no danger of exposure. I had him put me up at the Omaha Club, and then I gave a dinner to the United States commissioner who heard my case, the district attorney, and the United States marshal. I wanted to ask the yeggs too—it seemed only square—but the judge was out of town, and the marshal was afraid his Honor might cite him for contempt if he brought his prisoners to my party. These things probably seem to you most banal, but take it all round I do manage to keep amused. Of course, now and then I pay more for my fun than it’s worth. Last summer I mixed in with some moonshiners in

Tennessee. Moonshining is almost a lost art, and I wanted the experience before the business became extinct. An unsociable lot, the lone still boys, and wouldn't warm up to me a bit. The unhappy result was a bullet through my left lung. I got patched up by a country doctor, but had to spend two months in a Philadelphia hospital for the finishing touches."

Deering's uneasiness increased. This man who spoke so blithely of imprisonment and bullets in his lung must have a motive for his visit. With a jerk of the head he sent Briggs from the room.

"This is all very amusing," he remarked with decision as he put down his salad-fork, "but will you pardon me for asking just why you came here? I have your own word for it that your favorite amusement is consorting with criminals, and that money you flashed may have been stolen for all I know! If you have any business with me——"

"My dear boy, I don't blame you for growing restless," replied Hood amiably. "Of course, I know that your father and sister are away, and that you are alone. Your family history I am pretty familiar with; your antecedents and connections are excellent. Your mother, who died four years ago, was of the Rhode Island Ranger family—and there is no better blood in America. Your sister Constance won the Westchester golf championship last year—I learned that from the newspapers, which I read with a certain passion, as you have observed. If I hadn't thought you needed company—my company particularly—I shouldn't have landed on your door-step. You dined Monday night at the Hotel Pendragon—at a table in the corner on the Fifth Avenue side, and your dejection touched me deeply. Afterward you went down to the rathskeller, and sat there all alone drinking stuff you didn't need. It roused my apprehensions. I feared things were going badly with you, and I thought I'd give you a chance to unburden your soul to me, Hood, the enchanted hobo——"

"For sheer cheek——" began Deering hotly.

Hood lifted his hand deprecatingly.

"Please don't!" he remarked soothingly. "With the tinkle of a bell you can call your man and have me bounced. I repacked my bag after taking a bath in your very comfortable guest-room, and we can part immediately. But let us be sensible, Deering; just between ourselves, don't you really need me?"

His tone was ingratiating, his manner the kindest. Deering had walked the streets for two days trying to bring himself to the point of confessing his plight to one of a score of loyal friends—men he had known from prep-school days, and on through college: active, resourceful, wealthy young fellows who would risk much to help him—and yet in his fear and misery he had shrunk from approaching them. Hood, he was now convinced, was not a detective come to arrest him; in fact his guest's sympathies and connections seemed to lie on the other side of the law's barricade.

They had coffee in the living-room, where Hood, inspired by specimens of the work of several of the later French painters, discussed art with sophistication. Deering observed him intently. There was something immensely attractive in Hood's face; his profile, clean-cut as a cameo, was thoroughly masculine; his head was finely moulded, and his gray eyes were frank and responsive.

"It's possible," said Deering, after a long silence in which Hood smoked meditatively, "that you may be able to help me."

On a sudden impulse he rose and put out his hand.

“Thank you,” said Hood gravely, “but don’t tell me unless you really want to.”

Chapter 2

“So after all the bother of stealing two hundred thousand dollars’ worth of negotiable securities you *lost* them!” Hood remarked when Deering ended his recital.

Deering frowned and nodded. Not only had he told his story to this utter stranger, but he had found infinite relief in doing so.

“Let us go over the points again,” said Hood calmly. “You set down your suitcase containing two hundred K. & L. Terminal 5’s in the Grand Central Station, turned round to buy a ticket to Boston, and when you picked up the bag it was the wrong one! Such instances are not rare; the strong family resemblance between suitcases has caused much trouble in this world. Only the other day a literary friend told me the magazine editors have placed a ban on mixed suitcases as a fictional device; but of course that doesn’t help us any in this affair. I’ve known a few professional suitcase lifters. One of the smoothest is Sammy Tibbotts, but he’s doing time in Joliet, so we may as well eliminate Sammy.”

“No, no!” Deering exclaimed impatiently. “It was a girl who did the trick! She was at the local ticket window, just behind me. You see, I was nervous and after I bought my ticket it dropped to the floor, and while I was picking it up that girl grabbed my suitcase and beat it for the gate.”

“Enter the girl,” Hood muttered. “’Twas ever thus! Of course, you telegraphed ahead and stopped her—that was the obvious course.”

“There you go! If I’d done that, there wouldn’t have been any publicity; oh, no!” Deering replied contemptuously. “People don’t carry big bunches of bonds around in suitcases; they send ’em by registered express. Of course, if the girl was honest she’d report the matter to the railroad officials and they’d notify the police, and they’d be looking for the thief! And that’s just what I don’t want.”

“Of course not,” Hood assented readily. “That was Wednesday and this is Friday, and you haven’t seen any ads in the papers about a suitcase full of bonds? Well, I’d hardly have missed such a thing myself. What did the girl look like?”

“Small, dressed in blue and wearing a white veil. She made a lively sprint for the gate, and climbed into the last car just as the train started. The conductor yelled to her not to try it, but the porter jumped out and pushed her up the steps.”

At Hood’s suggestion Deering brought the suitcase that had been exchanged for his own, and disclosed its contents—a filmy night-dress, a silk shirt-waist, a case of ivory toilet articles bearing a complicated monogram, a bottle of violet-water, half empty, a pair of silk stockings, a novel, a pair of patent-leather pumps, all tumbled together.

“The young person left in haste, that’s clear enough,” remarked Hood, balancing one of the pumps in his hand. “‘Bonet, Paris,’” he read, squinting at the lining. “Most deplorable that we have both slippers; one would have been a clew, and we could have spent the rest of our lives measuring footprints. Very nice slippers, though; fastidious