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The Blue Wall, by Richard Washburn Child,

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THE BLUE WALL

A Story of Strangeness and Struggle

by

RICHARD WASHBURN CHILD

[Illustration: A PICTURE THERE AMONG THE LAW BOOKS]

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From drawings by Harold J. Cue.

BOOK I

THE PROBLEM OF MACMECHEM

THE BLUE WALL

CHAPTER I

THE HOUSE NEXT DOOR

What's behind this wall?

As I write, here in my surgeon's study, I ask myself that question. What's behind it? My neighbors? Then what do I know--really know--of them? After all, this wall which rises beyond my desk, the wall against which my glass case of instruments rests, symbolizes the boundary of knowledge--seemingly an opaque barrier. I am called a man of science, a man with a passion for accuracies. I seek to define a part of the limitless and undefined mysteries of the body. But what is behind the wall? Are we sensitive to it? You smile. Give your attention then to a narrative of facts.

How little we know what influence the other side has upon us or we upon the human beings beyond this boundary. We think it is opaque, impassable. I am writing of the other wall. *There* was a puzzle! The wall of the Marburys!...

Here I risk my reputation as a scientific observer. But that is all; I offer no conclusions. I set down in cold blood the bare facts. They are fresh enough in my memory. All seasons are swift when a man slips into age and it was only four short years ago that this happened--so marvelous, so suggestive of the things that we may do without knowing--mark me! the things we may accomplish--*beyond the wall!*

You will see what I mean when I make a record of those strange events. They began when poor MacMechem--an able practitioner he was, too--was thrown from his saddle horse in the park and died in the ambulance before they could get him to the Matthews Hospital. I inherited some of his cases, and Marbury was one of those who begged me to come in at the emergency. It was meningitis and it is out of my line. Perhaps the Marbury wealth influenced me; perhaps it was because the banker--of course I am not using the real names--went down on his knees on this very rug which is under my feet as I write. There is such a thing as a financial face. You see it often enough among those who deal with loans, percents, examiners, and the market. It's the face of terror peering through a heavy mask of smugness, and it was dreadful to see it looking up at me.... I yielded.

The Marburys' house faces the group of trees which shade the very spot where MacMechem's horse went insane. It is one of a block where each residence represents a different architect--a sort of display of individuality and affluence squeezed together like fancy crackers packed in a box. My machine used to wait for me by the hour in front of the pretentious show of flowers, tub-evergreens, glass and bronze vestibules, and the other conventional paraphernalia of our rich city successes.

It was their little girl. She was eight, I think, and her beauty was not of the ordinary kind. Sometimes there rises out of the coarse, undeveloped blood of peasants, or the thin and chilly tissue of families going to seed, some extraordinary example like my little friend Virginia. The spirit that looks out of eyes of profound depth, the length of the black lashes lying upon a cheek of marvelous whiteness, the delicate lines of the little body which delight the true artist, the curve of the sensitive lips, the patient calm of personality suggesting a familiarity with other worlds and with eternity, makes a strong impression upon a medical man or surgeon who deals with the thousands of human bodies, all wearing somewhere the repulsive distortions of civilization. The ordinary personality stripped of the pretense which cannot fool the doctor, appears so hysterical, so distorted by the heats of self-interest, so monkey-like!

Oh, well,--she was extraordinary! I was impressed from the moment when, having reread MacMechem's notes on the case under the lamp, and then having crossed the blue-and-gold room to the other wall, I drew aside the corners of an ice pack and gazed for the first time upon little Virginia.

When I raised my glance I noticed the mother for the first time. I might have stopped then to wonder that this child was her daughter, for the woman was one of those who with a fairly refined skill endeavor to retain the appearance of youth. I knew her history. I knew how her feet had moved--it always seems to me so futilely--through miles and miles and miles of dance on polished floors and her mouth in millions of false smiles. She had been *débutante*, *belle*, *coquette*, old maid. Marbury had married her when wrinkles already were at her chin and her hands had taken on the dried look which no fight against age can truly conceal; then after six years of longing for new hopes in life she had had a single child.

Just as she turned to go out, I saw her eyes upon me, dry, unwinking. But I know the look that means that death is unthinkable, that a woman has concentrated all her love on one being. It is not the appeal of a man or woman--that look. Her eyes were not human. I tell you, they were the praying eyes of a thoroughbred dog!

I knew I must fight with that case--put strength into it--call upon my own vitality....

The bed on which Virginia lay was placed sideways along the wall--as I have said--the Marburys' wall. I drew a chair close to it, and before I looked again at the child I glanced up at the nurse to be sure of her character. Perhaps I should say that I found her to be a thin-lipped person not over thirty, with long, square-tipped fingers, eyes as cold as metal, and colorless skin of that peculiar texture which always denotes to me an unbreakable vitality and endurance, and perhaps a mind of hard sense. Her name was Peters.

MacMechem's notes on the case, which I still held in my hand, set forth the usual symptoms--headache, inequality of the eye pupils, vertigo, convulsions. He had determined that the variety was not the cerebro-spinal or epidemic form. He had tapped the spinal canal with moderate results. According to his observations and those of the nurse there was an intermittent coma. For hours little Virginia would lie unconscious, and restless, suffering failing strength and a slow retraction of the head and neck, or on other occasions she would rest in absolute peace, so that the disease, which depends so much upon strength, would later show improvement. The cause of this case, he believed, was either an abscess of the ear which had not received sufficient treatment--probably owing to the fact that the child, though abnormally sensitive, had always masked her sufferings under her quiet and patience, or a blow on her head not thought of consequence at the time it had happened.

Well, I happened to turn the notes over and, by George!--there was the first signal to me. It was scrawled hastily in the characteristic nervous hand,--a communication from poor Mac, a question but also a sort of command,--like a message from the grave!

These were the words,--"What keeps her alive? What is behind the Marburys' wall?"

They startled me. "Behind the wall?" I said to myself. "Behind the wall? What wall?"

There were the scientific notes he had made! Then at the end a sane and eminent doctor had written shocking gibberish. "What's behind the wall?"

"Come here," I called to that grim machine, the nurse.

She came, looked over my shoulder at my finger pointing at the words, and her face filled with a dreadful expression of apprehension, all the more uncouth because it sat upon a countenance habitually blank. She did not answer. She pointed. I looked up. And then I knew that the wall in question was that blank expanse of pale blue, that noncommittal wall that rose beside the bed, at one moment flat, hard, and impenetrable, at another with the limitless depths and color of a summer sky.

"Turn up that light a little," said I uneasily. "What has this wall to do with us?"

"Nothing," said Miss Peters. "Nothing. I refuse to recognize such a thing."

"Then, what did Dr. MacMechem see?" I asked.

"He saw nothing," she answered. "It is the child who knows that something is beyond that wall. It is her delirium. There is no sense in it. She believes some one is there. She has tried to explain. She puts her hands upon that surface and smiles, or sometimes her face, as she looks, will all screw up in pain. It has a strange effect upon her."

"How?" said I. "You are impressed, too, eh? Well, how does it show? MacMechem was no fool. Speak."

The raw-boned woman shivered a little, I thought. "That's what causes me to wonder, Doctor," she said. "There *is* an effect upon her. She can foretell the condition of her disease. She seems conscious that her life depends on the welfare of something else or the misfortune and suffering of something else--beyond--that--wall."

"Poppycock!" I growled at her. "It's a pretty pass when sane medical men in their practice begin to fancy--"

"Sh--sh!" she said, interrupting me sharply. "See! Now the child is conscious! Watch!"

I drew back a little from the bedside as Virginia stirred, but I could see the milk-white lids of her eyes--eyes, as I have said, deep and blue and intense like the wall behind her, with their long black lashes. Her slender body shook as if she was undergoing the first rippling torsions of a convulsion. Her face was drawn into such an expression as one might imagine would appear on the face of an angel in agony, and then, gradually, as some renewed circulation relaxed the nerve centres, her breath was expelled with a long patient sigh. And this I noticed,--she did not turn toward us, but with an almost imperceptible twist of her body and the reaching of her little hands she sought the wall.

I confess I half believed that she would float off into the infinite blue of the plaster and be lost in its depths. I found my own eyes following hers. I felt, I think, that I too was conscious of some dreadful or marvelous, horrible or inspiring something behind the partition; but in light of subsequent discoveries my memory may have been distorted. Besides, I have promised none but the cold-blooded facts and I need only assert that the little girl looked, moved her lips, stretched her arms, and then suddenly, as if she had sensed some agony, some fearful turbulence, she cried out softly, her face grew white, her upper lip trembled, she fell back, if one may so speak of an inch of movement, and lay panting on her pillow. The nurse, I think, seized the moment to renew the cold applications. Yet I, who had scoffed, who had sneered at poor MacMechem's perplexity, stood looking at that blank blue wall, expecting to see it become transparent, to see it open and some uncanny thing emerge, holding out to little Virginia a promise of life or a sentence of death.

My first instinct would have endeavored to shake off the question of the other side of that wall. I would, perhaps, if younger, have rejected the whole impression, declared the girl delirious, and would not now be reciting a story, the conclusion of which never fails to catch my breath. But mine is an empirical science. We deal not so much with weights and measures as with illusive inaccuracies. To be exact is to be a failure. To reject the unknown is to remain a poor doctor, indeed. The issue in this case was defined. Either the congestion of the membranes in the spinal cord was producing a persistent hallucination or else there was, in fact, something going on behind that wall. Either an influence was affecting the child from within or an influence was affecting her from without. I was mad to save her. Even a doctor who habitually views patients and data cards with the same impersonal regard may sometimes feel a call to work for love. And I loved that little child. I meant to exhaust the possibilities. As poor MacMechem had asked the question, I asked it.

I touched Virginia's hands with the tips of my fingers. Her eyes turned toward me, and again I was sure that no madness was in them. You, too, would have said that, awakened from the intermittent coma, the little

thing, though mute and helpless, was none the less still the mistress of her thoughts.

"You have not asked her?" I inquired of Miss Peters.

The woman, folding her arms, at the same time shook her head solemnly.

"No," she said as if she disapproved.

But I bent over Virginia. "I am the new doctor," I said. "Do you understand?"

She smiled, and, I tell you, no monster could have resisted that tenderness.

"What is there?" I whispered, pointing with my free hand.

Her eyes opened as children's eyes will do in the distress of innocence; her feeble hand moved in mine as a little weak animal might move. Her face refilled with pain.

"Something is there," she whispered.

"What?"

She shook her head weakly.

The nurse touched my elbow. I thanked her for reminding me of the chances I was taking with the little girl's quiet. I left instructions; then, perhaps not wholly at peace with myself, I crept softly down the stairs. I did not wish an interview with Mrs. Marbury. I did not wish to see that begging look on her face. I would have been glad to have escaped Marbury himself.

He was waiting for me. He waited at the bottom of the steps with that smug financial face of his--a mask through which, in that moment, the warmth of suffering and love seemed struggling to escape. He was plucking, from his thin crop, gray hairs that he could ill afford to lose.

I anticipated his questions.

"It is a matter of conservation of strength," I told him; "a question of mental state, a question of the nervous system. No man can answer now--beforehand."

He drew out his watch and looked at it without knowing what he did or why or observing the hour.

"By the way," said I, "who lives next door--in there?"

"Who?" he answered. "Why, the Estabrooks."

"A large family?"

"Two. Jermyn Estabrook and his wife. They were married six years ago and have lived there ever since. We know them very little. His father has never forgiven my objection to his membership on a certain directorate in 1890. The wife was the daughter of Colfax, the probate judge. They have no children. But perhaps you know as well as I."

"No," said I, studying his face. "I know nothing of them. Are they happy? Is there anything to lead you to believe that some tragedy hangs over them?"

For a moment he looked at me as if he believed me insane; then he laughed nervously.

"Bless me, no," he said. "Imagine a couple very happy together, surrounded by influences the most refined, leading a conservative life well intrenched as to money, the husband a partner and heir-apparent to an important law practice, the wife an attractive young woman who rides well and cares little for excitement. You will have imagined the Estabrooks."

"They and their servants are in the house?"

"Yes. Possibly Jermyn is away just now. I think I heard so. But I do not know."

His words seemed to clear away the chance of any extraordinary abnormal situation beyond the wall.

"What is the mystery?" he asked nervously.

I can hear the querulous tone of his voice now; I can see the tapestry that hangs above the table in their hall.

"Thank you," I said, without answering. And so I left him.

Outside, I stopped a moment to look up at that house next door.

It was October tenth. I remember the date well. The good moon was shining, for it has the decency to bathe with its light these cities we make as well as God's fields. It lit up the front of the residence so that I could see that, perhaps of all in the block, the Estabrooks' was the plainest, the most modest, with its sobriety of architecture and simplicity, and on the whole the most respectable of all. It seemed to insure tranquillity, refinement, and peace to its owner. I tell you that at that moment, with my chauffeur coughing his hints behind me, I felt almost ashamed for the fancies that had led me to find a mystery behind its stones and mortar.

And then, as suddenly as I speak, I realized that a window on the second floor was being opened gently. I saw two hands rest for a moment on the sill, some small object was dropped into the grass below, and my ears were shocked by a low cry of suffering with which few of the millions which I have heard could be compared!

It is always so, I find. We are ever forced by pure reason away from those delicate subconscious whisperings. I had sensed something beyond the wall, and as science, after all, is not so much truth as a search for truth, I would perhaps have done well to have retained an open mind. Instead, I had sneered at the whole idea. And to rebuke me the house, as if it were itself a personality, had for a fleeting second disclosed the presence of some hidden secret. The window was closed, and then I stood upon the deserted thoroughfare, the hum of my fretting limousine behind me, staring up at the moonlit front of the Estabrooks' home. You may be sure that it was with a mind full of speculations that I left the spot, asking myself as MacMechem had asked himself, what was behind the wall, what was the thing which was determining the question of the life or death of so lovable a child as little Virginia Marbury....

It is already raining. As I write again, the slap of it on the window makes one feel the possibilities of loneliness in city life....

It is hard for me to describe what a fascination there is in campaigning against death in those special extraordinary cases where the doctor becomes something more than a man of science and is also a man of affections. It is impossible to describe the irritation of being unable to act in cases like Virginia's--cases where the fight is made between strength of body and mind, on the one hand, and some deep-seated infection, like meningitis, on the other. I was more than anxious for the late afternoon hour when I could again go to the child. Her blue eyes, as deep and mysterious as the sea, called to me, if I may use that word. And there was

something else that called to me as well--the blue wall--blank blue wall beyond the bed.

I found Miss Peters there, sitting in the patient's room and the gathering gloom of dusk, her muscular hands flattened upon her knees in the position of a red granite Rameses from the Nile, looking out the window at the waving treetops of the park and the clouds of falling leaves which were being driven by the dismal October wind across the white radiance of the arc lamps. I thought that I detected upon her metallic face a faint gleam of pleasure.

"It has been a good day," she said, without rising and with her characteristic brusqueness. "Mrs. Marbury is glad that you have not suggested a hospital, and desired me to say so." Indicating the bed with its inert little human body she added, "Peaceful."

"The wall?" said I.

She smiled insultingly.

"You are interested?" she asked.

I scowled, I think.

"Oh, well," she said, moving her shoulders, "she has been talking to it,--whatever is behind there,--and, do you know, I believe it has been talking to her!"

With those deliberate movements which characterized, I suppose, the movements of her mind itself, she lit the light; under its yellow rays lay the girl Virginia, her long lashes fringing her translucent eyelids, her delicately turned mouth with lips parted, and an expression of peace about the whole of her body.

"At twelve to-day," said the nurse with her finger on the chart, "she went through apparent distress. Something seemed to give her the greatest anxiety. She even spoke to me twice. She pointed. She said, 'It is bad! It is bad!' with great vehemence. It was like that for more than an hour. Then suddenly she became peaceful. She went to sleep. I have not wakened her since."

Maybe I shuddered. I remember I merely said in answer, "Yes, yes, that's all right!" and bent over the sleeping child. In the next moment I was lost in wonder at the improvement which had taken place in twenty-four hours. The tension and retraction of the neck and head had relaxed, respiration had diminished, the lips were pink and moist, the spasmodic nerve reaction and muscular twitching had almost ceased. I felt that exultation which comes when instinct as much as specific observation assures me that the tide has turned, that the arrow of fate has swung about, and the odds have changed. Strange as it may seem to many persons, these turns are felt by the doctor at times when the patient is wholly unconscious of them, and often enough I have wondered if, after all, this does not show that the crises of life are not determined within ourselves, but by some watching eye and mind and hand outside of us. As I bent over the little Virginia some such reflection was in my mind.

Then you can imagine, perhaps, how startling, how much an answer to my unspoken question, was the sound which at that very moment came from the blue wall beyond the bed!

How can we analyze our sense of hearing? Do you know the sound of your wife's footsteps? When you were young, could you pick out the approach of your father by the sound of his walk? Yes. But can you tell how? Are you able to say what it is that distinguishes it from the sounds a hundred other men would make going by your closed door? No. And neither can I tell you why I recognized this sound.

All that I can say is this,--the wall was opaque, the sound so faint as to be hardly heard, and yet I knew, as

well as if the partition had been of plate glass, that the impact was that of a human body!...

There was something in this sound on the wall which drew an involuntary exclamation from me as the jar of forceps draws a tooth. And the sound of my voice, sharp and explosive, woke the child.

She stared up at me with that strange look of infinity--I must so describe it--infinity; then, as if she too had heard, she turned toward the wall.

"What do you see?" I asked near her ear.

She gave me one of her tender smiles and made a little gesture as if to say that she felt her inability to express something.

"It is there?" I asked, indicating the blank wall at last.

Her eyes sought that space of mysterious blue. Then she whispered, "Yes."

I must say that, though I knew no more than I had at first, I derived some satisfaction from the mere fact that for the second time Virginia had confirmed the extraordinary belief or fancy which had possessed prosaic MacMechem, the unimaginative Miss Peters, and, finally, myself. It seemed to justify positive steps in an investigation; after a further examination of the little body on the bed which offered still better evidence of an improvement in the course of the malady, I left the Marburys' door, determined to settle the question once and for all.

CHAPTER II

A MOVING FIGURE

It may strike you as absurd that I did not accept the possibility that Virginia was suffering from delirium. I confess that, after I had closed the house door behind me, I was for the moment convinced of the connection between congestion at the base of the brain and the abnormal fancy of the child. I had come to the house on foot, no vehicle was waiting for me, and I remember that when I started off I turned in the direction leading away from the Estabrooks' door.

The day had promised a much-needed rain; now the coming night threatened one of those angry tempests of the autumn. It was already dark and the street was deserted as if every one had hurried to find cover. The lighted windows suggested warmth and protection; but outside the dust and flying, rustling leaves, the dancing shadows on the pavements, the wail of the wind, the tossing treetops in the park, the musty odor of the death of the year all bore down upon the spirit and awoke that superstitious uneasiness which we inherit, I suppose, from ancestors who fled the storm to find shelter for their naked bodies in caves and hollow trees.

This wild and funereal scene and the proximity to the spot where poor MacMechem met his end brought him back into my memory, and again I found myself wondering, as he had wondered, and then I remembered the low cry I had heard issue from the window.

One feels at times that determination comes from without. You can almost imagine, then, that some part of your own self which exists outside your body has tapped you on the shoulder, spoken a command, and directed your action. Certainly I cannot remember why I turned around, nor can I recall why I went back toward the Estabrooks'. I do remember that it occurred to me that, if I should see the young lawyer or his wife, all that I asked of them about the other side of the blue wall would probably incline them to the belief that I was as mad as any hare of March. But even that thought did not retard my steps.

If I hesitated at the point where I again reached the Marburys', it was for good cause, for what I saw gave me no little uneasiness. Out of the shadow of the Estabrooks' entrance, where a high iron grilled fence curves toward the steps, there came, as if it were some wild and furtive animal startled from its shelter, a moving figure!...

I endeavor to speak with accuracy.... It was dark. Everything seemed to sway in the galloping wind--the trees, the shrubs, the magnetic arc lights and even the luxurious iron and stone inclosures before the line of houses. Furthermore the dust was blinding. In spite of all this, in spite of the fact that the vision was fleeting, I received the definite impression that this figure sought to escape unseen. It hurried away into the darkness, hugged the shadows, and took up a position in a place that would have been chosen by one who wished to observe secretly what I was about to do.

"Bah!" said I to myself. "Some loiterer. He cannot be connected with the Estabrooks' affairs."

Yet, for some reason, feeling that I was watched, I determined to walk away again, and as I went I looked along the ground in the manner of one who has lost something. The cross-street was near and I turned it. I thought after a moment or two of waiting under the wall of the corner residence that I heard receding footbeats on the pavement; therefore, having allowed a minute or two to pass, I retraced my steps. The figure was no longer anywhere in sight. Holding my hat so that the ugly gusts of cold wind would not blow it away, I walked up the white steps of the Estabrook home and pressed the electric button which projected from a bronze disk. This disk, so the sense of touch indicated, had at one time been one of those Chinese carved metal mirrors and was now set into the stone. I remember how it spoke to me of the extents to which the metropolitan architects and decorators will go to appeal to the whims and pretensions of the rich, who, after all, are out of the same mould as other men so obscure and wretched that the money spent for such a

capricious ornament would support a family of them for six months. Perhaps the irony of it is that, no matter how much wealth may protect one from the others, it can never protect one from himself. And then--I pressed the button again.

There were silk curtains within the long heavy glass panels on either side of the door, but had a light been lit within I could have seen it. The whole house, however, was dark, and only by chance did I catch the sly movement of one of the curtains and the glint of an eye, peeping out at me. Whoever its owner might be, he or she had crept across the tiled vestibule silently and was now behind the outer door conducting a covert investigation.

"An odd procedure for a house of a respectable, conservative family," said I to myself, and without hesitating I rang again.

A light in the ceiling of the vestibule glowed forth immediately and I heard the movement of heavy metal locks and latches; the door swung back and I found myself standing before a middle-aged woman dressed in the black-and-white garb of well-trained servants.

This woman had a face that one may find sometimes among veteran nuns--a strong and kindly face, patient and self-subjugated--the face of the convent. But, of course, old family serving-women may have this same expression, for they too are nuns in a sense; in household rites they renounce the world, and if the spirit does not sour, little by little, they take wordless vows and obliterate themselves in service. This woman who stood before me, with skirts and apron blown about her substantial figure by the chill wind that poured into the vestibule, seemed at first to be one of them. It was only when I perceived that her eyes were filled with some guilty fear, and that her hands were half raised as if to ward off some impending danger, that I began to suspect that hers was one of those masks which hypocrisy and deceit grow upon the countenance of evil souls.

"I wish to see Mr. Estabrook," said I.

"He is not at home. He is away."

"Mrs. Estabrook."

"She is not well, sir. She cannot see anybody."

These conventional answers seemed to put an end to the interview: if she had not spoken again, with that strange look of apprehension and terror rising to her eyes, I would have bowed and turned away. But her voice trembled as she moved toward me timidly and said, "Will you leave a message? Will you call again? Will you say--will you say--"

Her sentence failed like that. As it did, words sprang to my mouth. I looked at her accusingly.

"Yes," I snapped. "On the second story of the Marburys' house there is, of course, a partition. I called to ask Mrs. Estabrook what was on *her* side of that wall."

This information acted like dynamite. You would have said that it had blown to pieces some vital organ of the old servant. The color ran out of her face as if her head had lost its connection with her body.

"This is terrible," she choked. "Oh, 'tis awful! Who are you? Who can you be? Somebody has sent you."

She caught the edge of the door and pushed it toward me.

"I know who you are," she exclaimed. "You are somebody that is sent by *him*!"

With a final shove, then, she closed the crack which had remained, the locks moved again, the light in the vestibule went out, and I was alone on the step.

Such was the success of my first attempt to find an answer to MacMechem's question--to solve the riddle of the blue wall. But I realized, as I stood there, looking up into the gray sky of night with its wind-driven clouds, that the presence of some peculiar form of good or evil was no longer in doubt; that little Virginia, with the sensitive receptiveness of childhood, of suffering, and of her own endearing, unworldly personality, had not been wrong; that MacMechem, like a true physician, had not excluded the unknown and now was vindicated, and that there are sometimes strange affairs that baffle our feeble diagnosis of mankind....

This is merely a recital of the facts. I am not attempting to prove anything. I merely state that, as I descended the Estabrook steps and struck off into the park, the detective instinct which lies in every one of us had wakened in me. It may have been the reason for my turning around, after I had crossed the street, between the whirr and lights of two automobiles, and stood at the opening of one of the paths of the park.

The house I had just left met my scrutiny with a cold, impassive stare of its own--its look might have been the stare of the sphinx or of a good poker player. It gave no sign. My eyes traveled up to the roof, then back again to the ground, and only when my glance dropped did I see for the second time the lurking figure of the man.

"He was watching me from first to last," said I to myself. "He probably saw my little strategy of waiting around the corner."

Indeed, my first impulse was to walk rapidly over the way, head him off, and ask him his business; but I considered it unwise, and plunging into the shadows of the wailing trees, I walked briskly toward the distant lights that marked my district of the city.

You know, perhaps, the feeling that you are being followed. Without recognition of any definite sight or sound, you become more and more conscious of some one skulking in the shadows behind. Finally, you hear, in one of those moments when the wind catches its breath, the breaking of a twig, the disturbance among the dry leaves that have blown in drifts over the path, and you know that some one is there.

I admit freely that I felt I had involved myself in such a manner that some one wished to do me harm. If, on the other hand, he who followed sought to rob me, the situation was as bad. The park was deserted. One does not like to call for help unless certain of danger. And therefore, though I am no longer moulded for speed, I broke into a run.

I had gone but a few paces before the other discovered that I was in flight. I heard the rapid patter of his shoes behind me. In another twenty feet I heard his voice. It was not loud and it was cautious, but it reached my ears with a suggestion of extraordinary savageness.

"Stop!" it called with an oath. "I've got you. Stop!"

It was not a reassuring message, of course. I tried to run faster. A moment of this endeavor only showed me that my pursuer was gaining. I therefore stopped short, stepped into the heavy shadow of an evergreen, and waited for my new friend. Though it was dark I could see him as he came, and I assure you that it surprised me when I noted that the man was well-dressed and bore the appearance of respectability.

Just as he reached the spot in front of me, I saw him hesitate as if he had discovered that I was no longer running along in front of him. I knew that an encounter could not be avoided. Accordingly I sprang forward and drove my fist into his neck. Instantly I found myself grappling with him. I felt the watch in his waistcoat pocket as I pressed my knee into his stomach, and with my face near his I could see by the look in his eyes that my blow had staggered him and put him at a disadvantage. Some years ago I could deliver a heavy punch

and the knack had stayed with me. I threw my weight against him once more, bore him down onto the leaves and gravel, and found myself on top.

Both of us were panting; we were breathing into each other's faces when suddenly I saw his eyes open wide as if he had seen a vision.

"I know you now. You are the doctor!" cried he. "Stop! Tell me, for God's sake, what's wrong with my wife!"

"Your wife?" I cried, dumbfounded. "Who are you?"

He struggled to his feet and leered at me. His face twitched with emotion.

"I am Jermyn Estabrook," he gasped.

You may imagine my astonishment when, after struggling with a man who had pursued me through the dark paths of the park like one who sought my life, he whom I had never seen before should now appeal to me as if I could lift him from the depths of some profound despair. He had cried out that I must tell him what was wrong with his wife. I had never so much as set eyes upon her. He had said he was Jermyn Estabrook. And though, with my face close to his, I could see that he was covered with bits of dead leaves and mud and the sweat of his desperate struggle, I felt that he told the truth.

"I have never been to your home but once in my life," I said. "You were watching me on that occasion--to-night. That is plain. I did not go in."

"I have made a mistake," he gasped. "I'm sorry. I have been through torments beyond telling. Something is going on--some ghastly, horrible tragedy within my own walls."

The word caught my ear; I gripped his shoulder.

"Listen, Estabrook," I cried. "It is no time for us to mince matters. I am attending Marbury's little child. It is an odd form of meningitis. I am fighting to save her. Do you understand?"

He shook his head stupidly as if worn dull by mental agony. "What of her?" he asked.

"What of her, eh?" I cried. "I'll tell you! I'll tell you! She is affected--perhaps her life or death depends upon--something--or somebody--that is behind the wall--the blue wall--something in your house next door. Come! Let us go back there. Let us force this thing. It is your home! Enter it!"

"I can't!" he cried, thrusting his fingers upward.

"Can't!" I roared at him.

"No," he said. "Not yet. I have promised her. She has my word."

"But think, man, what may be going on there!" I said.

"I have sworn not to pass the door," he said obstinately. "Heaven knows I am nearly crazy for light upon all this. But I must keep my word!"

As if to lend emphasis to his exclamation, a gust of wind roaring through the trees of the park brought the first deluge of rain--a cold, stinging downpour of the wild autumn night. Estabrook shivered. I could see that he was a man, badly tired, unnerved, and still dizzy from the blow I had given him.

"Follow me," said I roughly. "You need warmth--stimulant. And I want your story, Estabrook."

He looked at me with an empty stare, but at last nodded his assent, and without another word between us, we came to this house and into this very room.

He sat there before the fire--burning then as it is now--and as the warmth penetrated his trembling body, he seemed to regain his self-composure.

I saw then that this young man, well under forty, did not lack distinction of appearance. His head was carried upon his strong neck in the masterful manner of those who have true poise and strength of personality. His hair had turned gray above his ears, and his well-shaven face carried those lines that the grim struggles of our modern civilization gouge into the fullness of youth and health.

"I must tell somebody," he said, while I was observing his features upon which the firelight danced. "I have never dreamed that I would come to such a pass. But you shall hear my love story. You may be able to throw some light upon it. Contrary to the notion of my friends, who consider me incapable of adventure, my experience in the affections is one that offers opportunity for speculation--it would appeal to a great detective!"

I leaned forward quickly. Such a statement from any man might awaken interest, but Estabrook was not any man. He represented the essence of conventional society. He belonged to a family of well-preserved traditions, a family whose reputation for conservative conduct and manners of cold self-restraint was well known in a dozen cities. They were that particular family, of a common enough name, which was known as the Estabrooks Arbutus. Jermyn had had a dozen grandfathers who, from one to another, had handed down the practice of law to him, as if for the Estabrooks it was an heirloom.

"Perhaps I had better tell you from the beginning," said he, drawing the back of his fine hand across his forehead. "For it is strange--strange! And who can say what the ending will be?"

I counseled him to calm himself and asked that he eliminate as much as possible all unnecessary details of his story. I shall repeat, then, as accurately as possible, the story he told me. I will attempt to write it in his own words....

BOOK II

THE AUTOMATIC SHEIK

CHAPTER I**A WOMAN AT TWENTY-TWO**

Some men do not fall in love. I had supposed from the beginning of my interest in such things that I was one of these men. I did not doubt that all of us have an inherent tendency, perhaps based upon our coarser natures, to love this or that woman thrown in our way by a fortunate or unfortunate chance. But the traditions of our family were strong; I had been educated by all those who were near to me in earlier life to look upon marriage, not as a result of natural instinct so much as the result of a careful and diplomatic choice of an alliance. I had been taught--not in so many words, but by the accumulation of impressions received in my home and in my youthful training--that one first scrutinized a woman's inheritance of character, wealth, and position, and as a second step fell in love with her.

This cannot be called snobbishness. It is prudence. And I followed this course until I was nearly thirty years old. If the test of its success lies in the fact that I had never had more than a temporary affection, sometimes stimulated by the curve of a bare shoulder and sometimes by the angle of a bright mind, then it had successfully kept me from the altar.

And yet you shall see that at last I reversed the order of our traditions; you shall see, too, that it resulted in one of the strangest of courtships and a tangle of mystery of which the rest of the world knows nothing, but which you have adequate proof threatens my happiness and the ghastly end of which may now be skulking within the walls of my house.

The wild weather of this night, with the howl of the wind and the rattle of dead leaves driven against the blinds, is in extraordinary contrast to the day of beautiful spring sunlight when I first set eyes upon her who was Julianna Colfax.

It is not necessary to tell you who her father was, because you have probably many times toasted your feet before the grate in the club with him.

He was a master of human interest, as grizzled as that old Scotch hound which became his constant companion after Mrs. Colfax died, and his contact with all those hosts of men and women, for whom he administered justice so faithfully for more than twenty years, had stamped on his shaven face sad but warm and sympathetic lines. All men liked him and those who knew him best loved him heartily. Under his gruffness there was a lot of sentiment and tenderness. After his reserved moments, when he was silent and cold, he would burst forth into indulgences of fine, dry humor, like an effervescent fluid which gains in sparkling vigor by remaining corked awhile. It was commonly said--and often said by Judge Graver, of the Supreme Court--that old Colfax remained in the comparative obscurity of a probate judgeship simply from an innate modesty and a belief that he had found his work in life in which he might best serve humanity without hope of personal power and glory. Gaunt, tall, stoop-shouldered, gray, walking the same path each day,--home, court-house, club, neighbors, home,--with a grapevine stick as thick as a fence-post in his hand--such was her father.

Exactly seven years ago the first of last June, on a spring day when I believe every bird that dared came into the city to make his song heard, I came up from downtown and dropped off a surface car before the gleaming white pillars of the new probate court building. My pocket was stuffed with a lot of documents in that *Welson vs. Welson* litigation, which I had just succeeded in closing.

Behind those swinging green doors which flank the big bench is the judge's retiring-room; pushing the crack there wider, I was able to peek in, and saw at once that the old atmosphere of Judge Colfax's study had not remained in the old dingy court-house, where the dismantlers' picks were already breaking up the ancient mortar, but had followed the personality of the man into these new pretentious quarters. The retiring-room

already gave forth an alluring odor of law books and document files, the floor already had been forced into use to bear up little piles of transcripts of evidence, tin document boxes and piles of books, open at reference pages, occupying obscure corners. The Judge's black silk hat was in its familiar place, resting with the opening upward, on the old black walnut desk which its owner had affectionately brought with him, and which made a strange and cynical contrast with the mahogany woodwork and new rug.

"Come in," he said, and with one of his long-fingered hands he made a gesture toward the opposite side of the room and spoke my name and that of another.

She was there! I had never seen her before. She was there. I had no thought of her ancestry, her wealth, or her position. She was there, and into my throat came something I had never felt before, into my face a suffusion of hot blood, into my lungs a long-held inhalation of breath.

Sometime you may see her. She has changed a little. But then she was twenty-two, and the simplicity of her attire seemed to be at once the propriety of nature and the infinite skill of art. She wore a black gown, without ornamentation, and a black hat of graceful form. Not a harsh or stiff fol-de-rol was about her anywhere. You will pardon me for this detail. But, oh, she was so different from the others. She was a picture there among the law books.

The most attractive thing there can be in a woman is that combination of youth, innocence, glowing health, modesty. The perfect skin, with its grapelike, dusty bloom which shows where the collar droops at the front of the neck, the even lashes, from under which the deep eyes gaze out at you half timidly, the brave, honest uplifting of a rounded chin, the undulations of fine lungs, the almost imperceptible movement of restrained vigor in a poised, delicate, graceful figure, the gentleness and tenderness of a voice which at the same time suggests refinement and decision and strength, the absence of any effort to make an impression, either in manner or dress,--these are rare and beautiful attributes in an age when female children hatch out as artful women without the intervening period of girlhood. After all, the best men of us will not choose one of these modern maidens who imitate the boldness of the character and dress of the adventuress or the stage and opera favorite. It has become a tiresome feature of our modern life with the insidious faculty of corrupting the manners even of families who know better. She was so different! And in that moment I knew her superiority as a woman. I could not speak.

We exchanged no words. Yet as we looked at each other in the manner of children, the Judge, I thought, sensed a significance. When my eye sought his, I found a cloud upon his stern face, but immediately, as if he had tossed a haunting thought aside, he laughed.

"Julianna," said he, "this is the Mr. Estabrook who is as insane as I. That is, he devotes no end of time and energy and seriousness to the game of chess. We have never yet met each other on the field of battle. Some afternoon, here in this room, however--"

She did not allow him to finish; she said hastily that she must witness the contest.

"Then at my home," he said, beaming at me. "To-morrow will you come to dinner?"

I remember that Julianna had raised her eyes, that they were smiling, and that I received the definite, convincing impression that I was looking at a girl who never had given her love away. I tell you that one feels a truth like that by instinct, and that a woman wears not only her spotlessness, but also her purity of thought, like a faint halo. Yet at that moment I knew she was glad that I had accepted the invitation: there was a blushing eagerness in her eyes, upon her lips, in the movement of her graceful hands. For the rest of the morning I was half dizzy with the mad sense of triumph, of conquest--that strange onslaught of the emotions which gives no quarter to the disordered phalanx of reason.

I must admit that when I met Judge Colfax on the court-house steps the next afternoon to walk home with him, I had not given a thought to his daughter's forebears or security of place in the social structure. In fact, the social structure had vanished; an individual had, at least for the time, filled its place.

I even jumped when the first sentence the Judge addressed to me began with her name.

"My daughter plays an excellent game herself," he said, as if in explanation of her interest. "In fact, I may say, with an old man's modesty, that there are only two persons in this city who can win from me consistently. She is one."

"And the other, sir?" I asked as we turned our faces toward the hot stare of the late afternoon sun.

"The other," he said, "is an automaton. I have named it the Sheik of Baalbec. But I believe he calls himself the Player of the Rolling Eye."

It is impossible for me to say why the mere mention of the fanciful name of an automatic chessplayer should have caused me to feel a peculiar uneasiness--the sensation of apprehension. I am not susceptible ordinarily to the so-called warnings of voices from within. And yet I suppose the Judge saw a look of inquiry on my face, for he drew out his large, old-fashioned gold watch, which he carried in his trousers pocket, with his keys.

"We will stop there," said he. "There is time. The automaton has a corner of the lower hallway in the old Natural History Museum. It's not far out of our way, and if you will start with a problem I will give you and play with him, it will afford me an opportunity to measure you before our game this evening."

Such were the circumstances which brought me into a mystery not yet solved, the ending of which I fear to guess. In a modern era, when it is commonly supposed that skeletons no longer hang in closets, that day after day brings commonplace occurrences or, at the best, trivial abnormalities to be explained to-morrow, that romance is dead, it is strange that Fate should have picked me, when, by custom and my own desire, I am aloof from all things turbulent, morbid, and uncanny, to play an unwilling part in so extraordinary a drama, or, possibly, a tragedy.

At any rate, that day found me face to face with the half-human personality which the Judge had named the Sheik of Baalbec, and whose eye has cast an evil cloud upon my life.

Of course I do not know whether you are familiar with the old Natural History Society and its musty exhibit. A controversy about a curator in 1873 had caused the formation of the new American Institution of Biology. A few old men continued thereafter to support the ancient Society by annual subscription, and when they died, one or two of them, acting from stubborn partizanship, left the museum tied up with trusts and legacies, preventing the sale of a valuable city property and yet not furnishing enough to keep the building in repair or dust the case containing "Beavers at Work." Finally the old museum, once the pride of the municipality, had come down to the disgraceful necessity of letting its lower floor to a ten-cent exhibition of respectable waxworks, the principal attraction of which was the automatic chessplayer, which a year before my visit had gained suddenly a reputation for playing at times with the skill of a fiend. I faced the mechanism that afternoon for the first time, little realizing the intimacy, if I may use the word, which was to spring up between it and me.

The representation of a squatting Arab, robed in red Oriental swathes and with a chessboard fastened to its knees, sat cross-legged on a box-like structure. Upon dropping a coin into a slot in the flat top, two folding-doors in front of this box would open for a few moments, showing a glass-covered interior, which, as far as the back of the box, was filled with a tangle of wheels and pulleys, seeming to preclude the possibility that a human being could hide therein. As soon as these doors closed, a flat space in the chest of the Sheik opened, with a faint purr of machinery to expose internal organs of metal levers and gears.

The effect of this last exposure was extraordinary, and in all the time I knew the Sheik, I never got over it. The moment this cavity in his chest opened, he was an impersonal piece of mechanism; the moment it closed, however, the soul, the personality of a living being returned, and it seemed to me that the brown, wax skin of his nodding head, the black hair of his pointed beard, the red of his curved, malicious lips, the whites of his eyes, which showed when he moved with a squeak of unoiled bearings in his neck, and even the jointed fingers of his hand, with which he moved the pawns in short, mechanical jerks about the board, all belonged to a human body, containing an individual intelligence.

This was my feeling as the Judge arranged the chess problem on the board above the gilt-and-red Turkish slippers on the feet of the thing's shapeless cotton-stuffed legs, and briefly described the point to be gained by the Sheik in the series of moves which he was to begin and the success of which I was to combat. The creature made its first move in its deliberate manner and then I stepped forward.

I ask you to believe me that, as I did so, the whirring of wheels within the contrivance stopped, and at that moment I heard a human throat inhale a long breath with a frightened gasp! It was as if the balanced glass eyes of the figure had recognized me or seen in my coming an event long expected.

For a moment I hesitated, then made my move. The figure hesitated, made another. I studied the situation before my second attempt, and then was surprised at the absurd mistakes made by the automaton, who, in his next moves, was playing in slipshod fashion, as if preoccupied. I now had the advantage, and believed that I should win. My triumph was short-lived, however; my opponent awakened to his danger, and yet perhaps my first warning of the final move came when the Judge laughed heartily, clapped me on the shoulder, and pointed toward the board. Another turn made it plain to me. I had lost.

And at the same moment the infernal Sheik lifted his head with the clicking of gears, stared at me, drew down one papier-maché eyelid in a hideous wink and rolled the other glassy eyeball in a complete orbit of the socket, and as soon as this evil, mechanical grimace had been accomplished, the head fell forward, the door in the being's chest opened once more, showing the moving wheels, and again the creature seemed to become soulless.

"He always rolls his eye at you when he wins," explained Judge Colfax as we went out into the sunlit street again, and he patted me on the shoulder in gentle banter.

"I believe I do not like your Sheik machine," said I, laughing nervously. "I felt all the time as if a hidden pair of human eyes were on me--as if there was a personality behind it all."

The Judge chuckled.

"But you forget," said he. "Of course there is a person--some man--or woman. I have often wished to have a look at that person, Estabrook."

As you will see, I have had cause to feel as he did on that memorable night--memorable because I first sat at table with Julianna--with Julianna, whose magnificence was not boldness, whose spirit was not immodesty, and whose gentleness did not rob her of either her beauty or vivacity.

Though it seems to me that to-night, in the depths of anxiety, I find myself in love with a new and deeper feeling, there can be no doubt that, as I looked at her across the table, I thrilled with the thought that she might one day be my wife, and felt that delicious and painful ecstasy when her deep eyes met mine and her lips smiled back at me the encouragement of a modest woman who does not guard too closely her own first interest in an exchange of ardent glances. I had then forgotten most fully the theories of my training.

I remember now that she wore a gown of soft and ample drapery and of a dark green, suggestive of the colors

in the shady recesses of a forest. I was charmed by the shape and subtle motions of her white hands, the quality of the affectionate attitude she maintained toward her father, the refinement of her voice when she answered my comments or addressed the old serving-maid.

About this serving-maid I must speak. On that occasion her ample form moved about in the shifting shadows outside the brilliant glow of the flickering candles, like a noiseless ghost, hovering about a feast of the living. But I liked her, because, when she looked toward Julianna, she wore that expression of loyal affection which perhaps one never sees except upon the faces of mothers or old servants. She had been in the Judge's family even at the time of the death of his wife years before, and she had looked as old then as she does when I see her in my own home now. The old woman's name is Margaret Murchie. You will see that she, too, is involved in this affair.

How I noticed her at all that evening, or how I kept up an intelligent conversation with Judge Colfax, I cannot explain. I only know that I finally found myself sitting with my knees under the table with the long thin legs of the Judge, and a set of chessmen, carved exquisitely from amber and ivory, on the board before me, and that when the old man was called to the telephone and announced on his return that he must go out to the bedside of a friend, I was overjoyed that I might have some rare moments in conversation with Julianna.

I observed, however, that this prospect did not please Judge Colfax as much as it did me; there was an awkward moment in which he looked from one to the other of us with the same expression as he had worn when he had observed my interest in his daughter in our first meeting. Then, as on the former occasion, his optimistic good-nature seemed to rise again above whatever apprehensions he may have had. He smiled until all the multitude of wrinkles about his eyes were showing.

"Estabrook," said he, "we have bad luck, eh? But I can offer a worthy substitute. Unless you find that you must go, you may discover my daughter to be as worthy an opponent as the Sheik of Baalbec."

Of course I recognized the significance of the words, "unless you find that you must go," and my first instinct was to offer some lame excuse and take my departure. Immediately I turned toward Julianna, but she, instead of coming forward in the manner of one ready to say good-night, idly turned the pages of a book on the old table, and then, walking across the room, stood near the chessboard with the pink glow of the droplight upon her face, and looked up at me, saying as plainly as words, "Stay."

From the ordinary woman this would not have affected my intentions; it would have been nothing. From her it was a piece of daring. From her it seemed a sacrifice of dignity for my sake. I met her glance, and then turned politely toward the Judge, who stood in the wide door, his tall hat resting under his arm and his searching eyes looking out from under the bushy brows.

"Thank you for the suggestion," I said.

"I will be out late," he answered, his deep rumbling voice directed at me. "Good-night."

"Good-night, sir," I said cheerfully.

Then for the first time I was alone with Julianna, and she was directing at me, as I stood before her, one of those perplexed little smiles--those rare perplexed smiles which indicate, perhaps, that for the first time in a woman's life she does not understand her inner self, and yet is sure that some joyful thing hangs where she can reach it if she will. It is the last smile drawn from childhood.

"Shall we play?" she said.

"No," said I.

"I am glad."

"Then you do not like the game?"

"Yes, when I play it with father, because it interests him. And he prefers to play with me because he says that I am youth."

"His youth, too," I suggested.

She nodded seriously. "Yes, I think so," she said. "We see so many old people, and balls attract me very little. Our companionship is very close even for father and daughter. I surprise myself by talking so to you, but that is it--and we have established a little kingdom of our own--a walled kingdom which no one else can enter or destroy."

Upon hearing these words, pronounced with that soft ring of determination which gave her the one touch of imperiousness she possessed, my heart fell. It was as if she had warned me that she had dedicated herself to him.

And then suddenly the fact that she had so spoken to me, who had known her so short a time and said nothing but commonplaces to her, seemed to take on new significance. I thought it plain that she was erecting a defense against her own self and was admitting, by her denial, that her fortresses were for the first time in danger. She had had her choice in conversation and she had chosen to speak not of general matters, but of herself. She had done so with charming awkwardness, and I felt as if the world of all my happiness were resting on the bare chessboard between the round and healthy forearms that leaned there, and between her graceful hands, whose intrinsic beauty was not marred by any ring.

"One might well envy the Judge," said I.

She looked up at me quickly.

"Will you close those long windows for me?" she asked, after a moment, pointing toward the back of the room. "At the front of the house we are level with the street; at the rear, however, the old walled garden is almost another story below us. It is damp, I think, even after a spring day as tender and sunny as this has been."

I hastened to do her bidding.

"There is a tangle of old-fashioned flowers in our little city inclosure," she called after me. "The Judge likes it that way--as mother used to like it. There is a balcony with an old wistaria vine just outside the window."

"And the moon," said I under my breath.

The pranks that fate plays--or whatever one chooses to call the strange domination of our chance happenings--are wonderful and at times seem malicious. I am certain that it brought me onto the iron-railed balcony just beyond the French windows at the beat of that second.

The old garden, though small and flanked by the ugly backs of city houses, seemed to hold within its brick inclosure a world full of white liquid moonlight. Shrubs, however, which had grown in disorder under the walls, threw dark and steady shadows across the patches of lesser vegetation. The tops of early blossoms and nodding grasses showed beyond these spaces of blackness. Suddenly, as I looked down, I heard a click like that of a gate-latch, and a second later I saw, projecting from one of the fantastic patterns of shade, a round disk of shining surface.

There are moments when the sight is puzzled to determine the character of such an object. I could not make out the nature of this bobbing, moving circle that followed along the irregular line of wall shrubbery. Then, when it was nearer, I saw in a flash that it was the top of a silk hat. I could see, too, the stooping shoulders of the man who wore it, I could see that he was proceeding cautiously as if he feared to attract attention, and at last, when he paused beneath the balcony, I could see a face with an anxious expression that turned upward toward me. I drew back behind the thick-leaved vine; for the man was Judge Colfax.

Of all persons he was the last to act as if he sought concealment in what he did, the last to be guilty or wear the appearance of guilt. Had he been a stranger, I might have assumed that he had come to make a call below stairs, but the fact that it was my host, a judge of probate, with a reputation for lifelong honor and refinement, filled me with the keenest curiosity. I gripped the old iron railing with my hands and leaned over.

The Judge waited for a moment before a door opened slowly somewhere beneath the balcony and a stream of artificial light escaped through the crack and for a brief second lay like a piece of yellow ribbon across the grass. Then he was joined by some one whose voice I recognized as that of Margaret Murchie.

"I came back," I heard him whisper, "because I saw that you had something to say to me. Julie is observant. I couldn't speak to you in the hall, Margaret. What is the matter? What did you indicate by the signs?"

"It's him, sir," she answered. "This thing we have feared has come."

"You cannot mean it!" he exclaimed.

"How could we expect different, sir? The heart of her is like that of other healthy young girls. I could tell by the look on her face, sir. The like of it has never been there before. 'T is given to some one to have his way with her, Judge. I think it's him."

They were talking of me!

"He would have to be told," said the old man. I could see the top of the silk hat shaking. "And she would have to be told!"

"It is awful, sir!" she answered, wringing her hands. "But I'd never spoil it that way for anything."

"You forget the other!" he said sternly.

"Lost," she argued. "The time has gone by. It was not a human, sir. I could never mention her name--beautiful thing she is!--with that other."

"I know--I know," whispered the old man distractedly.

"Well, then, let things run their course. God will not let harm come of it."

"Blood," said he.

For a moment there was no sound. The one word seemed to have decided all questions and to have called for silence.

"In case of my death--" the Judge began after a while.

Margaret Murchie uttered a little cry.

"I have left a paper where she will find it," he finished. "I can do nothing more now. Perhaps--perhaps it will not be a crisis, after all. I think if I had the chance again, I would send him to his doom."

With these words he raised his clenched fist and walked rapidly across the grass to the arched exit leading to the alley. The click of the latch told me that he had gone.

You may imagine my state of mind. As I endeavored in those seconds to wrest some meaning from the tangle of words I had overheard, my thoughts were tumbling over each other so fast that I had forgotten the doubtful part I had played as an eavesdropper. I had heard a reference made to me as one who had brought some new complication into the affairs of that household which heretofore I had regarded as the most spotless and quiet in the city, but which now I found had some dark and mysterious menace hanging over its peace. Was I the one, after all, to whom they had referred? They had spoken of some one else and whispered strange phrases. It was all a blank puzzle to me.

Perhaps under different circumstances my caution and dislike of all that is unusual or doubtful would have led me away from the house, planning never to return. But there is in me a certain loyalty. I do not quickly cast my lot or my reputation with that of another; when, however, I have done so, I do not quickly withdraw. Extraordinary as it may seem, I felt myself already bound to Julianna. Perhaps I already loved her desperately.

Whatever may have been the case, when I turned back into the room I looked into her gaze with an expression of solemnity which my emotions intended as an outward sign of my continued devotion.

I must have presented then a ridiculous, sentimental appearance. She laughed the moment she saw me.

"You like our balcony," she said. And then, as if she had discovered the cause of my seriousness, she added, "also our spring moonlight."

I nodded.

"It is an unusual spot for the middle of a metropolis," she went on. "It is filled with a tangle from which years ago I used to imagine fairies and gnomes and Arabian marauders might step at any moment."

"Tell me more," said I.

"There was a little basin and fountain there when I was a child. But when it did not flow, yellow slime collected at the bottom, and when the water was turned on and trickled from one basin to another, it gave forth a mournful sound that made one think of deserted villages, and moss growing on gravestones, and courtyards where there were moonlight murders."

"You have a keen imagination."

"The keenest!" she exclaimed. "Why not? It has grown up with me. And the only trouble is that it causes me the greatest restlessness. My fate is like all others. I am exactly what I would not be. Sometimes I long to enjoy all the wildest of respectable adventures."

"I should think you would keep that a secret from the Judge. He, above all, is a man of settled habits. His greatest genius has been to make romance out of the commonplace sequences of life."

She sprang up and walked to the mantel.

"That is true," she said. "I never show that side of me to him. He would not know what strange spirit moved me. I inherited none of it from him or my mother. I never show that side to anybody."

"Except to me," I said mischievously.

"Except to you," she affirmed without a smile. "But sometimes I feel like a wolf in lamb skin."

"At those times I take a brisk walk," I said.

"I do, too. I walk around the Monument nearly every afternoon at five, with father's dog. Usually at that hour he is at the club."

"Shall I recognize you then by a shaggy, Scotch hound?" I asked.

"By all means," she said, laughing wholesomely. "I suppose in the novels they would call that a secret meeting."

In spite of the light manner in which she had spoken, she had lowered her voice a little when she heard a step in the hall. Margaret entered, as I have seen her so many, many times since, to collect the little coffee-cups.

The old servant, I felt without seeing, did not take her eyes away from me while she was in the room; so conscious was I of being the subject of her observation that I could find but few words to carry on the conversation. The very effect--that of an intimate dialogue interrupted--was produced in spite of my desire to avoid it, and when she left, Julianna had changed her mood. Finding, perhaps, that I was content to listen, she employed a delicate piece of strategy to place me in her father's lounging-chair where I could watch her as she leaned back among the pillows, and in a voice, more soothing than any I had ever heard, described to me in quaint phrases the character of six imaginary persons who might among themselves make up a world, with all the traits of personality which we find in our own. From this piquant attempt, she emerged to plunge into a light discussion of heredity.

"I can see a trace of the Judge in your belief," said I.

She admitted that he had been her teacher, that they often discussed such things. It needed no denial from Julianna, however, to know that her convictions about the power of inherited tendencies had come from her own thought. Her mind, unlike her manner, had little submissiveness, and, furthermore, she recited several cases from her own shrewd observation.

Can I attribute my entranced interest on that occasion to her brilliance? To this day I do not know. I would have been content to sit there without my pipe, without a cigarette, listening merely to the brook-like flow of her voice and looking at the play of expression upon her beautiful, sensitive face.

I could feel, I thought, the warmth of her hand still lingering in my own after I had gone down the steps, and I turned my face into the night breeze on the avenue, glad to be alive, conscious of my health, my strength, my youth and my courage, oblivious to the traditions of the Estabrooks and intoxicated with a longing for her personality the moment I had left it.

Not before the next morning did the haunting thought of something queer and strange lurking behind the Colfax home rise to cause me doubt.

"It is nonsense," I thought. "Chance events, chance words, and my own suspicious mind have united to produce an unreality. The Judge, naturally enough, is jealous of such a daughter. Who would not be under the same circumstances? An old man would be beastly lonely in that comfortable but ancient house, even if they had removed the garden fountain with its mournful trickle. The world has no such picturesque and abnormal situations as those which have come into my mind. And Julianna has all that any one could ask. Above all the vital fact is that she is no other than she!"

Perhaps for the sake of good taste I waited two days in painful restraint before I left my office to walk around the Monument at five; certainly my delay was not because I could pretend to foresee that a ghastly mystery was waiting to seize me and drag me in with its unseen tentacles.

CHAPTER II

A PLEDGE TO THE JUDGE

There is a peculiar honesty about true affection for woman. It is for the flirtations, the light and frivolous intimacies that a man smooths his hair, picks out his scarf, and purchases a new stick. Somehow it seems to me that a gentleman of natural high honor will always present his average self to the one woman. That he should be attentive is natural, that he should be affected is repellent to my notions. Perhaps it was for this reason that without preparation I closed my desk and walked up to meet Julianna, as I would have walked home to my own bachelor quarters.

She was waiting for me!

"I have been expecting you," said she, with her hand upon the dog's grizzled head, and in that frank and simple statement there was more charm than in all the false feminine reserve in the universe.

"I did not come before," I told her, "because I felt that you might believe me presuming too much."

"Why?" said she in the manner of a child.

I could not answer. I merely gazed at her. She was half leaning, half sitting on the retaining wall of the park, and her skin, which was flecked with the shadows of new maple leaves above her, was lighted not only by the yellow rays of the afternoon sun, but also with the bright colors which her brisk walk had brought to the soft surface. I assure you, she made a pretty picture.

"I would have been glad to see you yesterday," she said slowly, marking with the toe of one shoe upon the gravel. "You have been one of my father's younger friends a long time."

"There is nothing the matter!" I cried.

"I can't tell," she said. "He is old, you know, and I can explain it in no other way."

"He is not ill?"

"No. But if, for instance, his physician had told him he had not long to live, and he felt something give way within him--that might cause it."

I suppressed the anxious note in my voice as I said, "Cause what? You have not said, Miss Colfax."

She laughed. "That is true. I haven't, have I?" Serious again, she went on. "He seems worried. Something seems to follow him about--some thought, some apprehension, some worry."

"It is a new difficulty somewhere that has come up in the trial of a case."

She shook her head.

"Let us walk," she said. "No, it is not that--nothing ordinary. A word from me and he would explain. But this time when I ask, he merely smiles and says, 'Nothing, Julie, nothing.'"

"Can it be that I am the cause?" I said before I could stop myself. "Has he found out that we--"

"I told him," she said, "that we--"

She stopped there, too, and looked at me.

"No," she went on. "It is something else. He went out for a stroll night before last. Usually he is gone a half-hour at least. But this time he had hardly had time to go down the steps before I heard his key in the door again and the feet of 'Laddie' on the hall floor. I ran out to ask if he had forgotten anything, and it was a dreadful shock to me."

"Tell me," said I, touching her fingers with my own.

"In the first place, the dog was acting as I have never seen him act before. I noticed that, the first thing. He was cowering and slinking along as if he feared the most terrible punishment. But that was nothing. It was father who made me draw back. Even in the dim light I could see that he was white--oh, so white! I thought he had been taken ill suddenly and was weak. And yet one hand was clutching his big cane and the muscles and veins stood out on the back as if he were raising the stick to defend himself."

"He was ill!" I cried.

"Yes, I think that must have been it. He was ill. And since then he has brooded so--particularly when he does not know I am watching him. Margaret has noticed it, too. She has spoken to him as I did and he has laughed her fear away, I suppose."

"Perhaps, after all, it is nothing--just as he says," I suggested, turning toward her as we walked.

"Perhaps not," she said. "I am sure you are a good and cheerful friend to say so. Nevertheless, I have been worried and restless and this afternoon I long for amusement. Can't we do something queer and extraordinary--go somewhere--do something?"

I thought her requirement a difficult one to fill at five o'clock in the afternoon, walking through the old, dull, and worn-out part of the city, where we found we had arrived without purpose in our journey. More than that, I am naturally of conservative tastes; the bizarre, the bohemian, and the unconventional forms of amusement have never beckoned to me. I am not an adventurer by choice.

"We have less than an hour before us," I said to her. "And I am at a loss to suggest--"

There I hesitated. A thought had come to me. I saw her eyes dance with expectancy--with that expression of eagerness that lights the faces of those to whom the world, with all its goodness and badness, beauty and ugliness, tranquillity and turbulence, is still unexplored.

"The Sheik of Baalbec!" I exclaimed.

"The Sheik of Baalbec!" she repeated. "I have heard so much of him, but have never seen him. That is just the thing!"

"You shall try your skill with him," I said. "You shall meet him face to face, look into his evil glassy eyes, watch his brown fingers move on mechanical levers, see his lungs and heart of geared wheels and little pulleys and--"

"And what?" she cried.

"Battle with him--wit against wit--skill against skill--and win!"

"You seem to bear the Sheik a grudge," she said, and as we went up the steps of the old Natural History

Building, where romping children of the tenements scattered banana peels and papers, she repeated the remark.

"I've taken a dislike to the automaton," I said. "It is an uncanny creature. It gives me the impression of an evil soul attached to a lot of metallic gears. Personally I should be glad to have the opportunity of tearing it to pieces and seeing it scattered on the ground--a heap of red cotton rags, hair stuffing, and broken levers."

My earnestness, however, only caused her to tilt her rounded chin in air and laugh as only she can laugh. Having persuaded the girl at the ticket office that the dog with us would do no harm, we had already entered and were passing through the exhibit of figures.

"Possibly you feel the same way toward this waxy Bismarck who looks so much more like a brewer than a general," said she, "or toward this Catherine of Russia who, I understand, was not a very refined queen, and who here shows it by wearing a ruff that should have gone to the laundry a year ago or more."

"No," I replied. "If they let me alone, it matters not to me when they are melted down for candles. My enemy is the fellow in the corner there with the group of country persons around him. Perhaps we shall not have a chance to play a game with him this afternoon."

Fortunately, however, just as we came up toward the gloomy corner, there was a shout of bantering laughter from those whom, offhand, I should have called Aunt Lou, Cousin Becky, Brother Bob, and Milly Snagg, and we saw that the automaton had just dispatched his opponent--the fifth member of the party, a well-bronzed countryman, with a shaved neck and prominent ears. The mechanical eye had drawn down its brown lid in a hideous wink, much to the discomfiture of the champion of some rural village.

For the second time I deposited the coin in the slot, whereupon Julianna, with great delight, watched the opening of the front of the box, the exposure of the internals of the figure, and the jerky motions of the Sheik as he extended his mechanical arm over his lifeless legs to make the first move.

"I like him," she said, and stepped forward toward the chessboard.

Thereupon a strange thing happened. Some part of the contrivance gave forth a sound as if a wheel had been torn from its socket; a whirring sound continued for a moment, then finally the air was filled with a ghastly shriek.

I defy any man to say whether that shriek came from the rasp of an unoiled metal bearing or from a human throat. That it proceeded from the automaton there was no question.

It was followed by a stillness not only of the automaton itself, but also of ourselves.

"Look at his head!" roared the countryman, who had, with his party, lingered to see more of the marvelous creature. He pointed to the figure, and when my eyes followed his gesture, I saw that the Sheik's head had fallen backward like a thing with its throat cut. As I stared, there came a slight noise from the box and out of the slot my coin flew back as if it bore the message that there was no more playing that afternoon.

"Well," said I to Julianna, "apparently the show is over."

She did not answer. I put the coin in my pocket.

"It is too bad," I said. "The Sheik has broken something important in his cosmos."

Again she failed to reply, and I looked up. She was staring, I thought, at the floor.

"What is the matter?" I asked.

"Look at the dog!" she whispered.

He was cringing, cowering, with closed eyes, flattened to the ground, and sniffing softly, in an agony of terror!

It was dreadful to see so noble a beast in such a state, and probably more shocking to Julianna who had affection for him than to me.

"I cannot understand Laddie's acting that way," she said in a vexed tone. "He has done it twice now in the last two days. What can have happened to him?"

"He is very old, isn't he?" I inquired.

"Yes," she said, and a little coquettish smile flitted across her face. "He is older than I am. Come, Laddie. Come here, sir. What's the matter, old pal?"

"Age," said I. "There has never been a dog grow old in our family that he didn't sooner or later develop a kind of second puppyhood. I have seen them do all manner of inexplicable things, and one old, toothless, wire-haired terrier used to snap at his shadow on the wall."

"I should hate to have him die," said Julianna when we were on the street again. She put her arm about his shaggy neck and I wished that I were he.

At her door I took off my glove. It was done unconsciously, but she saw it--she took off one of hers. Then she laughed and put her hand in mine.

After that walk I became the victim of all the mental follies which descend upon a man so thoroughly in love. My work suffered. I found myself at one moment reading down a page of digests of cases prepared for me by my assistants; in the next, I would be sitting again in Judge Colfax's easy-chair, and before me I could see Julianna's smiling lips, reflecting the lamplight upon their moist surfaces. In her name I would drive myself to my task again, and then, without knowing when the transition occurred, I would be standing on a gravel path dappled with sunlight and the dancing shadows of maple leaves, and she would be standing before me again with the breeze moving brown-and-gold strands of hair at the edge of her firm white neck.

It is doubtful whether I thought of Judge Colfax, or chess, or the strange meeting in the garden, or the Sheik at all. I wondered about nothing save the question of how soon I could say to Julianna what lay in my heart to say to her. Therefore it was necessary for me to review in my mind many things when, upon waking a morning or two afterward, I found, among the letters which my man had brought to the chair beside my bed, a note from the girl herself.

I did not know at first that it was from her: I had never seen her writing before. I remember that I said, "Who can this be?" and that I studied the outside for several moments before I opened the envelope.

"My father," it said, "has not been very well, I think. I wish that you could make a point of calling on him at the court-house some afternoon this week. I want to know if the change in him rests partly in my own imagination. You could determine this at once. I would be so grateful. J. COLFAX.--P.S. Why not induce him to ask you to dinner. His indiscreet daughter would be delighted. J. C."

This was the sort of note that she would write: it was not hysterical, and yet it conveyed to me the urgency of her request; it was not frivolous, and yet in its postscript it was boldly mischievous. It accomplished the result

she wished. She had wanted me to make up my mind that I would see the Judge before night and to see her as soon as possible. I determined to do both.

All day long it rained, drawing a wet shroud of gloom over the pavements, the granite walls of the buildings, and the adamant perspective of the streets. Standing in my office window, I could see the flow of black umbrellas moving up and down town, like two torpid snakes. But though I am ordinarily sensitive to the effect of a long drizzle, it failed on that day to depress me. Life had freshened. There was romance in it, possibilities, dreams. Instead of complaining to myself that the sky had lowered until its opaque rotunda seemed to touch the tops of the higher buildings, I rejoiced as I went uptown and looked out the cab window at each open square, that the cold spring downpour had freshened all the vegetation and brightened these city fresh-air spaces as if by magic. When I found myself in the Judge's study, my mood could not have been more cheerful.

I had expected to find him in the despondency which Julianna had described to me; instead, when I had a chance to study his expression before he knew I was there, I came to the conclusion that his thoughts, whatever they might be, were pleasant thoughts and not the anxious thoughts of one who is harassed by secret apprehensions.

He was a fine picture of a man, sitting there above his old desk, his long hands spread out upon an open book, the lines in his shaven face expressing a life of faithful service, gentleness, humor, and self-control, his blue eyes as bright as those of a youth, looking out at some picture which his imagination was painting on the opposite wall of the room. I stood watching him a moment before I stirred.

"Ha!" he exclaimed as soon as I had made my presence known. "Estabrook, you are the very man I wanted to see!"

"I had imagined it," I answered. "What more?"

He blinked his eyes. "Wait a moment, you rascal," he said, brushing the sleeves of his black coat. "Take a cigar, sit down a moment. Let me collect my thoughts. I must say I hesitate to launch too quickly a subject with which I have not dealt for a good many years and one, if I remember rightly, I treated with considerable awkwardness on the former occasion."

"When was that, sir?" I asked.

"When I courted my wife," he said solemnly, looking for a moment at the floor.

"Perhaps, if I am not mistaken, you would have come to me, by and by," he went on with the wrinkles gathering at the corners of his eyes. "Perhaps it is better for me to speak with you now anyhow. I am well along in years. My physician tells me that my cardiac valve--or whatever the blame thing is--is weak."

"He told you recently!" I exclaimed.

"Bless you, no. More than two years ago. I haven't been near him since, except to taste of some old madeira he keeps on his sideboard. No. I can't quite explain why I am anxious to speak of this matter so soon, so hastily. I only want to ask one or two impertinent questions which you will forgive in a man who has grown, as to certain matters, as fussy as an old maid--or a mother."

"Why, I will answer gladly enough," I said awkwardly. I thought I knew what was on his mind; my tongue grew large in my mouth.

He was pacing up and down the room then, but finally he stopped and laughed and grew solemn again.

"Darn it, my boy," he said. "I know you. I like you. I just wanted to know if you had ever been engaged--in the broad sense--engaged to a woman--with promises to fulfill. I just wanted to ask."

"No," said I.

"There!" said he. "I knew it all the time."

"Was there another question?" I asked.

"Why, yes," he said. "Why, yes. I believe I did have another. Now, what was it? I had another question. It was awkward, too, if I remember. I had another."

We both laughed then.

"Yet it seems so strange for me to ask these questions now, doesn't it?" he went on, fingering the pages of a book on the desk. "It is so early and a good deal more natural for you to speak to me than for me to speak to you. But, good God! there is a reason if you only knew--a reason. Let us say, for instance, that I might not be here then."

"Ask it, sir," I said.

"Why, I was only going to say that, in case you should succeed,--I doubt if you do succeed,--but in case you should succeed in causing her to love you, there would be no withdrawal on your part. Little Julie--my little daughter! Neither of you has known what it means yet. And, Estabrook, when she does, it must not go wrong. I know her well. She will never love but one man. He must not withdraw when he has won her!"

I started to speak angrily.

"Wait!" he cried, with his hands clenched. "He must not be shaken from her by anything--anything for which she is not to blame herself--no matter how strange or terrible--anything. Nothing will come. I know it. But that must be promised me--to stand by her, no matter what misfortune might descend upon her."

"What could?" I asked in a trembling voice.

"Nothing," the Judge said. "It is not in God's character to allow such a thing. When you love her, Estabrook, my boy, you will not ask me that question in answer to mine."

"No," I said at once. "There need be no doubts between us, sir. It is not necessary for either of us to answer."

His whole countenance lit up as if my words had fed his soul. I should be sorry to have wiped from my memory the impression of that old man's look, as, without taking his eyes from my face, he reached for his hat.

Yet, to-night, when I, for perhaps the last time, realize again the presence of some infernal, undefined evil, I wonder that I should have been so great a fool and so willingly have neglected even the prudence of a lover. I wonder that I made so blind a bargain. I wonder that I did not ask him, before it was too late, what his conversation with Margaret Murchie in the garden had meant and what secret it was that lurked like a clawed creature of the night, ready to eat away, bit by bit, the happiness of an innocent man.

CHAPTER III

THE TORN SCRAP

When I left Judge Colfax that day, the only questions in my mind concerned Julianna. To her I had said nothing in so many words of my love, and yet I knew that if the Judge had read my growing sentiment surely, she must have seen it even more clearly. I tried to interpret her friendly, playful, girlish acceptance of my affection as an indication that she, too, felt an increasing fondness for me--a fondness which went beyond that given to a trustworthy friend. But I could not forget that her father, when he had so strangely anticipated my request for his consent, had described her as one whose yielding would be sudden and complete--one to whom love would come in sweeping torrent of emotion--one with whom love would thereafter stay eternally. If this were true, she did not love me yet, I reflected. And with a falling of hope, I remembered that the Judge had expressed, for what reason I did not know, his own doubt of my ability to win her.

These were thoughts well adapted to hasten my lovemaking. I made a point of walking to the Monument the next afternoon. I did not meet her there, or on the way along the edge of the park, and I found myself suddenly haunted by the hitherto unconsidered possibility that, as summer was coming on, I might expect at any day that she would leave the city to visit friends or go with the Judge to some resort.

It rained again the following day, and though the downpour ceased in the late afternoon, great gray banks of clouds hung threateningly above the city. Nevertheless, tormented with the notion that we might at any time be separated for several weeks, I went again to the Monument to seek her.

She was there. Nor did she seem at all surprised that I had come.

"I am full of energy to-day," she said, smiling a welcome. "Let us take a long walk together."

"Good!" said I. "I will tell you about your father. As you know, I called on him Thursday afternoon."

But from the Judge she quickly turned the subject to discussion that was wholly impersonal, and it was the same on the following Monday when I saw her again. Had it not been for the expression in her eyes with which she greeted me, listened when I talked to her and bade me good-bye when I left her, these would have been depressing meetings for me, because I thought that I could clearly see that she was holding me at arm's length with that natural art of a good, true woman--an art which needs no practice.

Imagine, then, my surprise, on this second occasion, when we had reached her door, when she had asked me to have tea and I had been forced to plead a previous engagement, when she stood there before me smiling, rosy, the form itself of health, beauty, and vivacity, and when her glance was raised to meet mine, I suddenly saw her smile fade and I thought her eyes were filling with tears.

She laughed, however--a little choking laugh--and looking down so that I could not see her face, she said, "I have liked these walks and chats with you better than any I have ever had." And so she bade me good-night.

Only when I had gone from her did I recall that she had spoken as if our companionship was not to continue, as if, for some cause unknown to me, there was to be an end of our intimacy. The thought made me stop stock-still upon the pavement.

"And yet," thought I, "might it not be--that she meant only to show that she is willing to continue our relationship--perhaps forever?"

Loving her as much as I did and wanting her--and no other on the breadth of the green earth--for my wife, this uncertainty was a torment which I could not stand. I remembered she had told me that the Judge walked each

evening after his dinner, and I am ashamed to confess that the next evening dark found me waiting on their street corner, like a scullery maid's beau, until I saw his stoop-shouldered figure come down the steps with the lank, grizzled "Laddie" behind, and heard the beat of his grapevine stick recede down the avenue.

Margaret Murchie let me in. Had I been a wolf she could not have glared at me more; it was evident that her shrewd old eyes, whatever hidden knowledge lay behind them, regarded me as a brigand, as a menace, as some one who had come to take a precious treasure of art from the drawing-room or the household goddess from the front hall. And as I sat in the study once more, on the comfortable easy-chair of the Judge, with the empty feeling in my stomach telling me that my nerves were on edge, as they used to be when I rowed on our crew and sat listening for the gun, I was sure that after announcing me she lingered beyond the curtains, covertly watching me.

Julianna did not keep me waiting long, and as she came through the door into the light, I could not help but notice the poise and grace which comes from inherited refinement and health, and is only imitated badly by self-consciousness and the pose of the actress.

"I'm so sorry you did not come a moment earlier," she said. "Father would have been in. Now, you and I--"

She seated herself in her place on the old-fashioned mahogany sofa.

"Do you mind?" I asked.

"No, I'm glad!" she said, and wriggled like a pleased child, yet so slightly that no one could have accused her of it.

"Do you like me?" said I, after a moment.

Her eyes opened very wide and looked into mine seriously--half amused, half frightened. At last she nodded in a matter-of-fact way; it was only because I could see her hands pressed against the arm of the couch until they were white and little blue veins had begun to show that I knew she was capable of the stoicism of an Indian, and that her nod was not matter-of-fact, after all.

As I have told you, I am not of an habitually romantic temperament. I was well aware of my unfitness to deal with a girl who, herself, had never known the processes of lovers, but the belief that she was trying to restrain her true feelings toward me ran through my brain like an intoxicating liquor. I would have taken the breadth of her shoulders in the crook of my arm, and pressed my face into the rich mass of her hair, and kissed her upon her white forehead, had I not suddenly recalled that never had I even phrased to her a sentence explaining my feeling toward her.

"Of course I do," she said at that moment. I remember how cool the words sounded.

I remember, indeed, every word of that evening, every detail of that room, every play of expression about her mouth, and I cannot go on without speaking of these things. They meant so much to me and have meant so much ever since!

At last, then, I told her.

"Julianna--" said I. "I have never called you by that name before. I have not seen you long. But I must disregard all facts of that kind. They may be important to some men and women. They are not of consequence to me. I have loved you from the first."

She gave a little cry, but whether it was of joy or surprise I cannot say. I only know that when I leaned

forward and took one of her hands in my own, she left it there as if it belonged to me of right, and with my finger tips upon her soft wrist I could feel the beating of her heart.

"I don't want to love any one else," I whispered desperately. "I want you. I want you to love me. I want you to let me take you."

I thought when I had said this and pressed my lips to the back of her hand and looked up at her again that her face was illuminated with wonder, joy, and supreme gladness, and that her eyes were filled with light reflected from some bright revelation. What, then, was my astonishment to observe that, as I looked, the color seemed to fade from her skin, her parted lips slowly compressed themselves, her eyelids fell like those of one who suffered pain or shuts out some repulsive sight! It may have been my imagination; but I was sure I felt her hand turn cold in mine and draw away as if to escape a menace. Her body stiffened as if preparing for effort or defense and she arose from her seat and stood before me.

So little did I understand the significance of her actions that I neither moved nor spoke.

She came toward me then and placed the tips of her fingers upon my shoulder affectionately, I can say--as she might have touched her father, and as if she meant to cause some unsaid thing to flow through the contact into my body.

"Please do not get up," she said softly. "Do not follow me."

There was strength in that command.

She walked toward the long windows at the back of the room, the windows which overlooked the garden, and pulling them open, stepped out onto the balcony. The vine there being in bloom, her figure was framed with the soft purple of the flowers, which, lit by the light from within and pendant against the black background of night, might well have been blossoms embroidered on Japanese black satin. With my head swimming, I watched the movement of her bare shoulders, from which her modest scarf had half fallen, until she turned to enter again.

"I shall not tell you that I am sorry that you have spoken as you have," she said, spacing her words so evenly that it gave the impression at first that she was repeating memorized sentences. "But I am young and no one else has ever done so. Perhaps I should have interrupted you and told you that my duty is toward my father, and that I am not sure of myself now, and that I am not ready to give myself to any other life. If this is true, it can profit neither of us to talk of love."

"Neither of us!" Again it seemed to me that she had disclosed herself. I stood before her and in a voice that shook with eagerness, I said, "You love me. At least you love me a little?"

She drew back.

"You do!" I cried under my breath. "I know it! You do!"

She raised her hands as if to keep me from her, and still retreated toward the hearth.

"You love me!" I said. The sound of my own voice was raising a madness within me. "Say it!" I cried. "Say it!"

She turned quickly away from me.

"You love me."

"No," she said. "I do not--love--you!"

I think for a second neither of us stirred; for a second, too, I could see that her body had relaxed as mine had relaxed. Then I felt the sting of wrecked pride--the pride from which I suppose I never shall escape. I can remember that I drew a long breath, made a low bow, which, though not so intended, must have been both insulting and absurd, and walked through the curtains into the hall. I looked back once and that fleeting glance showed me only a beautiful girl who stood very stiffly, like a soldier saluting, but who, unlike a soldier, stood with closed eyes and with her long lashes showing against a pale and delicate skin.

How miserable I was in the following hours, I cannot well describe. After I had returned to my own apartments I sat in my study without desire for sleep, staring with burning eyes at the silk curtains fluttering in the June night wind, until they seemed to be ghosts dancing on my window sills, and my straining ears listened to the hourly booming of the clock on the Fidelity Tower, until it sounded like the cruel voice of Time itself. Long after the rosy dawn I got up, drank some water, lit a strong cigar, and prepared to dress myself for the day's work. I can well remember my determination never again to expose my feelings toward any living soul and my constantly repeated assertion to myself that I had been hasty and indiscreet, that I did not in truth any longer love Julianna and had been punished for a breach of that reserve and caution which had been a virtuous characteristic of my ancestors.

With my teeth shut together, with a frenzy to accomplish much work, without a breakfast, and with sharp and perhaps ill-tempered commands to my assistants, I spent the morning in the preparation of cases for which trials were pending. By noon the heat of the day had become intense, the sides of the battalions of towering buildings across the narrow street seemed to become radiators for the viciousness of the summer sun, the voices of newsboys, the murmur of the lunch-hour crowd twanged a man's nerves, and I noticed for the first time the devilish song of the electric fan on my wall. As you have foreseen, I felt suddenly the wilting of my will. Tired, hungry, sleepless, I slipped down into my chair, and there seemed no happiness left in a world which did not include the girl I had left the night before.

I seized my hat and, clapping it on my head, I stopped only to sweep the papers into the desk drawers and hurried toward the elevator.

"There's somebody on the 'phone for you, Mr. Estabrook," said the switchboard girl. "They're very anxious to talk."

"Tell 'em I've gone home for the day," I called back to her and then went down and out of the building to the sunbaked street.

I knew that I should put food in my stomach, so I ate a lunch somewhere. I knew I should rest, but the thought of returning to my bachelor rooms suggested only a violent mental review of the events through which I had been. I was tempted to go to the Monument, but flung the idea aside as a piece of sentimental madness. Accordingly I walked toward the river front with its uninteresting and sordid warehouses, saloons and boxes, bales and crates of the wholesale produce commissioners. On that long, cobblestoned thoroughfare, with its drays and commercial ruffraff, its lounging stevedores, its refuse barrels, its gutter children and its heat, I went forward mile after mile, without much thought of where I went or why I chose such surroundings for my way, unless it was that the breeze from the water was welcome to me.

The late afternoon found me on an uptown pier, watching the return of an excursion steamer, proud with flags and alive with children, girls with sunburned faces and young men with handkerchiefs tucked around their collars and carrying souvenir canes. They disembarked down a narrow gangplank, like ants crawling along a straw. I reflected that all were, like myself, with their individual comedies and tragedies, the representatives of the countless, forgotten, and ever reproducing millions of human gnats that through unthinkable periods of time come and go. I had seen none of them before. I would see none of them again. Instead of being a

depressing notion, I found this a cheerful idea; I welcomed the evidence of my own insignificance. I laughed. I even determined to amuse myself. If nothing better offered, I made up my mind I would visit the Sheik of Baalbec, and, by pitting my skill against his, prove that I could exclude, when I wished, the haunting thoughts to which my mind had been a prey.

"The Sheik, then," said I, after a block or two. "It was he who ushered me into this affair. It shall be he who may say an end to it."

In the light of what followed, this sentence, murmured half aloud as I walked, has many times caused me to wonder at the prophetic voice with which we sometimes carelessly address ourselves.

I found the museum, except for the red-nosed attendant and the pale pink girl in the ticket window, deserted. The accursed automaton, I feared, would be closed for business, and therefore it was with satisfaction that I noticed that the coin slot was open, and that, having dropped in my tribute to genius, chess, and machinery, I heard the squeak of the moving mechanism and the brown, jointed fingers of the figure scraping across the board.

I cannot believe that the Sheik was playing his best game. At the end of a half-hour, when the machinery stopped to notify me that another coin was due, I had a decided advantage in position. Before another fifteen minutes, during which we both played rapidly, had gone, the issue was no longer in doubt and I stopped.

"Ha!" said I, aloud. "You will not wink at me this time. Is there any other game you can play better than you play this?"

The automaton was silent.

I cannot say what impelled me to suggest it, but I drew a piece of paper and a pencil out of my pocket and said, "Can you write?"

The door in the chest of the Sheik flew open then for a moment as if to expose his heart to me. Though I had put no coin into the machine, I saw the levers and gears start to move again, the door of that pulmonary cavity was closed and the brown fingers jerked their way forward.

"Not only can write, but is anxious to do so," I remarked, as I extended the pencil and laid the paper on the chessboard.

For a second or two I waited, as the hand of the mechanical creature wrote a few words: I remember that during those seconds I heard a clock somewhere striking six. I did not make any attempt to see beforehand what he had chosen to inscribe, for I assumed that it would be some empty answer to my bantering remarks. At last the pencil dropped upon the board and rolled under one of the cross-legged creature's red Turkish slippers, the whirr of the mechanism stopped abruptly, and I picked up the writing.

Having read the scrawl once I believed myself out of my wits. I could not credit my eyes. I could not gather my reason. I was breathless, transfixed!

I looked up at the face of the Sheik and found that, in place of the malicious wink with which he proclaimed himself a victor in a game of draughts, his glass eyes, with their whites in sharp contrast to his swarthy wax skin, were both wide open and set in a glare of such ferocity and malign hatred that they seemed to flash the fire of life and lighten the gloom of the corner with rays of evil.

I laughed. I forced myself to laugh, but it was with no mirth, and then, hesitating for a moment and seized by the temptation to tear the automaton to shreds, to discover what was within its exterior, I turned, crunched the

paper in my closed fist, and almost ran out through the lines of wax figures--the Garibaldis, the Jenny Linds, the Louis Napoleons, and the Von Moltkes--into the sunlight.

No man can blame me for my excitement or even my terror, for the Sheik had written, "You are in danger! Withdraw before it is too late, and never see the old man or child of his again!"

Had the time been the Middle Ages, or the place a strange quarter of the Orient, I might not have been so shocked at the knowledge which a tawdry machine, or the mountebank behind it, seemed to have of the affairs of persons against whom no charge of contact with the lower strata of life could be brought. But in our civilization, where nothing but the commonplace is to be expected, I was wholly unnerved.

"Come," said I to myself, having walked to the far side of the open square, "sit on this bench, unfold the paper, and use your intelligence to overcome the hysteria which last night's experience and this odd affair of the Sheik have aroused. Be sensible. This message is a matter to be explained, just as all things are to be explained by any one who is not the victim of superstitious fear."

This determination immediately cleared my reason. After all, there was nothing to solve.

"Whoever controls the mechanism has seen me with the Judge," said I, "and doubtless has heard him mention his daughter, and perhaps has observed the effect of her name on me. Furthermore, he, or, as the Judge said, the man or woman behind the Sheik, has even seen me with Julianna and might well have drawn conclusions. The message was written in ill temper or as a piece of malicious mischief. And there's an end to it!"

Whereupon I tore the scrap across the middle and, dropping it in the grass, I started toward my home.

The picture of that writing, however, was too clearly photographed upon my vision; it continually wrote itself on the walls of buildings, upon the pavement or across the sky. And as it did, little by little, it began to dawn upon me that the handwriting with which it had been executed I had seen before.

When at last, from the back of my mind, I recalled the occasion, I astonished those persons who were walking near me by stopping in the middle of the sidewalk as if stricken and uttering a sharp exclamation. My hand sought the contents of my inside coat pocket; among the papers there I found the note which Julianna, wishing me to see her father, had written me, and with trembling fingers I spread the sheet before me.

One look was all that was necessary, for it sent me hurrying back the way I had come; it was enough to cause me to kneel down on the grass in the gathering gloom that was filling the old square. Where I had sat a half-hour before, I now searched frantically for bits of torn paper.

I found both pieces at last, placed them side by side and compared them with the note in my hand. I have already told you that Julianna wrote a hand distinguished from others by subtle peculiarities. The message from the Sheik was written as she would write!

To believe, as I found I must believe, that she, with or without the knowledge of the Judge, would so far forget the obligations of her place in society as to operate a vulgar puppet in public, no matter how much it might interest or amuse her, was another shock to me. I am free to confess that, in spite of all my former assertions to myself that I had not loved her as much as I had supposed, this new development was the first that began to make me believe I had been blinded by mere infatuation.

"You have been moving in the dark," I told myself. "You have stifled your senses from a whole set of facts which tend to show that some unwholesome thing is sleeping on the threshold of the Colfax home. Perhaps, after all, Julianna and the Sheik of Baalbec are right. It has come out for the best."

And yet, hardly had I so thought than a strange sense of loneliness came over me, the dingy buildings about the square seemed like so many squatting personalities, depressed and brooding, and out of that gloomy picture came the image of Julianna, so fresh, so smiling, and so fair that for a moment I almost forgot that it was a creation of my fancy. It brought back to me my love for her. I remembered my promise to the Judge. I recalled her tenderness and purity, which I had felt so strongly that I had expected to see it about her like an effulgence. I cursed myself for doubting her. I looked upon the evidence of the scrap of paper in my hand as a piece of testimony brought against an innocent person. Not only with the instinct of a lover, but that of a lawyer as well, I determined to defend her from my own accusations.

I had not been without the necessity, once or twice in my practice, of calling upon experts in handwriting; now I remembered that one of them, a clever fellow named Jarvis, lived in an apartment not far from mine. It was the dinner hour. I believed I should find him and I was right.

"I have come on a peculiar errand," I explained to him as he appeared in his library, napkin in hand, "and if you are not through dinner, I will wait."

"No, no," said he, with easy falsehood. "I had just finished. How can I help you, Mr. Estabrook?"

"I wish your opinion on two pieces of handwriting," I answered. "It is unnecessary for me to tell you where I got them, you understand. The question at issue is, did one person write both, and if not, is one of them an imitation of the other?"

He flourished a powerful reading-glass in the professional manner those fellows use and gave the two specimens a cursory examination.

"The problem should not be difficult," he said, "since both were written hastily. In the case of the pencil, it is clear from the manner in which the fine fibres of the paper are brushed forward like grass leaning in the wind. In the case of the ink, the wet pen has gone back to cross a t or complete an imperfectly formed letter before the earlier strokes had time to dry."

"That would preclude imitation?" I asked.

"Why, yes. Offhand, I should say so--unless the one who made the attempt had practiced for years, or has the skill of imitation developed beyond that of any professional forger. But give me a moment, please."

I waited, tapping with my fingers on the chair arm.

He straightened up at last, with a sigh, then looked at me with his eyebrows drawn and a look of perplexity on his thin, cadaverous face.

"It's very odd," said he.

"What's very odd?"

"Well, Mr. Estabrook, these pieces were not written several years apart--at different periods of life, were they?"

"Why, no," said I.

"They are not the work of one person, then," he said, with firm conviction. "I would stake my reputation on that."

"Then one is an attempt to imitate the other?" I said, stifling a glad exclamation.

"That's the rub," said he. "And, to be frank, I might spend a month without being able to say which was the imitated and which the imitating. I would almost think you had stumbled on two specimens which, merely by coincidence, bore a wonderful resemblance to each other. It lies between that and the cleverest, most practiced forgery I have ever seen."

You may be sure that his decision gave me a sense of triumph; without speculating as to the truth, it was enough for me to know that Julianna had not, as I had at first suspected, been a party to this vulgar and melodramatic flourish. I berated myself for having entertained any doubt and now felt anew, and with aggravation, my affection for her. This outcome of my adventure with the Sheik, in fact, restored my spirit, made me forget my pride, and, as you will see, was enough to put me in condition to receive that which was about to befall me.

CHAPTER IV

THE FACE

My thoughts as I entered the portico of that building where I had my apartments were not only of Julianna, but were also in those channels where I have no doubt your own opinion of my narrative must run. I freely admit, as I then was forced to admit, that my lovemaking had been attended with many bizarre and abnormal happenings; yet at the time I sneered at the questions which rose in my own mind and bravely asserted to myself that the chances of winning Julianna were not wholly lost.

In the lower hall of the building in which I had quarters there were stationed until six at night a telephone operator and a doorman. Perhaps you have noticed that I tell you these matters in considerable detail, and I will continue to do this, because my natural dread of disclosing the intimate affairs of my life has kept me heretofore from sharing my story with any one, and now that I have lifted the cover and drawn the veil of my experience, I can only find justification, in so narrating the sequence of extraordinary events, by observing the strictest adherence to detail and accuracy in the hope that perhaps you, by the virtue of a fresh and unprejudiced viewpoint, may be able to unravel some of the tangle in which I am, even now, enmeshed.

As I have said, at six the telephone girl at the switchboard and the doorman, for some reason which I could never understand, were replaced by an old negro who served as both, and who was the most garrulous, indiscreet individual I have ever seen.

As if to affirm these characteristics he spoke to me the moment I had entered, in a voice which seemed to be adapted to a general address to the three or four other bachelors who were waiting in the frescoed vestibule for a conveyance.

"Yaas, sah, Mr. Estabrook, sah. De dohman lef' a message, sah. Der has been a lady waitin' foh you, sah, mos' all de ahfternoon. She comin' back, she say--dis evenin'. She sutt'nly act very queer, sah."

"All right," I snapped. "It's one of my clients."

"Um-um," he said, shaking his head. "I spec she ain't, Mr. Estabrook, sah. She mos' likely has pussonal business, sah!"

The others--Folsom the broker, and Madison, and Ingle the architect--had evidently dined well, preparing for a musical comedy, and they snickered without shame.

"Let my man know when she comes," said I, and without smiling hurried into the elevator.

I had no belief that the woman, whoever she might be, would come back after dark to call upon me. With my conflicting thoughts about Julianna, I forgot the incident. It was therefore with some surprise that I heard Saito, my Jap, arouse me from my sleepy reverie, to which exhaustion had reduced my mind, to tell me that a lady was waiting in the reception room downstairs.

You may understand the conservative nature of my life and habits more thoroughly when I tell you that the mere idea that a woman had dared to ask for me at my apartment in the evening caused me the greatest anxiety. As if to prove what dependence we can put upon our intuitions, I felt, on my way down, most strongly, that an evil event was about to take place.

Nothing could, I think, better illustrate the nonsense of attaching importance to these fore-warnings than to tell you that the woman who waited for me was Julianna herself!

My first instinct, before I had been seen by her, was to hurry her out of the garish little reception room, where, through the door which opened into the hallway, she might well have been seen by anybody; it was only when she greeted me and turned her face toward the tiled floor, and I saw that her shoulders drooped and that her hands hung down at her side, and that she stood like a guilty, punished, and remorseful child, that my wish to protect her was displaced by a mad desire to take her in my arms and comfort her.

"Julianna!" I cried. "What has happened? Is it the Judge? Tell me! Why did you come?"

She shook her head and lowered it still more, until the sweeping curve of her bare neck, from the fine hair behind her ears to the back of the lace collar of her waist, was visible.

I cannot say what gave me the courage, but I bent over her and kissed her there, softly.

She looked up then without the slightest indication of either surprise or reproach.

"I liked that," she whispered. "I didn't know how I was going to tell you, but now I can."

"Tell me what?" said I, in a choking voice.

"I love you," she said. "I could not let you go. I thought last night that I could carry it through. I thought my duty was to stay with father. But it isn't!"

"And you came *here* to tell me!" I gasped.

"Why not?" she said, with a catch in her voice. "I was afraid I would never see you again and I love you."

When I think of all the sham there is among women, I treasure the memory of that simple little explanation. It was delivered as a full answer to all the conventionalities from here back to the time of the Serpent. It was spoken in a low but confident voice, with her hands upon her breast as if to calm the emotions within, and was directed toward me with the first frank exposure of her eyes which were still wet with tears.

"I have been miserable!" she said. "A woman is meant for some man, after all. And if she resists, she is resisting God! It all has been shown to me so clearly. And I knew that you were the one. There's nothing else that makes any difference, and it sweeps you off your feet, so it must be nature, because it gave me the courage to telephone you and then try to find you and come here and wait and come again, and only nature can make any one go against all her habits and education. And I believe I'll call you Jerry, if you still--"

"Good God! Love you?" said I. "Forever!"

"Always?"

"Forever."

She gave her burning hands to mine, and oblivious of the old negro, whose eyes were upon us, we stood there, looking at each other in awe, very much frightened and very much, for that moment,--and I sometimes wonder if not in truth,--the centre of the universe.

"You belong to me, Jerry?" she said tearfully. "Now?"

"Yes," said I.

"Then I must go back quickly," she explained, after a moment. "I do not want father to know yet. I want to

prepare the way. I don't want you to speak with him for a week. I will tell him then. Perhaps you think it is strange. But Friday, when he knows, you may come."

She had a carriage waiting for her, and I walked with her to its door.

"I want to kiss you, Julianna," I whispered.

She looked up to see whether the driver could observe us. He could not. And then the mischief-loving quality of womankind appeared in her. She gave forth a glad little laugh.

"On Friday," she said.

The door slammed, and I thought, as I caught a last glance at her then, that she was a luminous being of dreams, lighting the dark recess of a common cab.

This impression recurred so often in those following days that at times there rose the uncanny suspicion that the woman who had visited me had not been one of reality, of flesh and blood, and beating heart and sweet, warm breath. Her smile, her voice, her personality had not seemed a part of real life, but almost the manifestations of a spirit which, timidly and with the hope of some reincarnation in life, had come to claim my vows. I believed that I knew well enough why Julianna, if it were she, had planned to avoid a sudden disclosure of our betrothal to the Judge, but, none the less, I fretted at the sluggishness of time, which, like a country horse, will not go faster for the wishing or the beating.

I wished, too, that she had said she would meet me in her afternoon walks to the Monument and wondered that, if she loved me, she was able to forbid herself a meeting, even though she had felt that good sense demanded a period of reflection and a readjustment of view, so that when we did see each other again, it would be with firmer minds and steadier hearts. I would have gladly foregone all this value of reserve and restraint for one look at her face, one touch of her sleeve, one word from her tender, curving lips.

And yet I was happy in those days--so painfully happy that I heard voices telling me that such happiness does not last, that ecstasies are tricks of fate by which man's joy is fattened for slaughter, that from some ambush a horrible thing was peering.

Strangely enough, these fears were connected in no way with the warnings which I had had from my eavesdropping or even from the definite threat which had come out of my grotesque experience with the Sheik of Baalbec. The piece of writing, which had begun, "You are in danger," I had dropped into a file of papers, and though I suppose it is somewhere among them now, I have never yielded to the temptation to look at it again. I may have thought of it merely to add to the opinion of Jarvis that the writing was not Julianna's, the apparently indisputable fact that, at the moment the warning had been written, Julianna was, by the word of the apartment house doorman, waiting for me in the little reception room. Furthermore, with my success in winning her, with the intoxication of it, I began to look upon the strange and unexplained matters which had so perplexed me as trivial illusions beneath the consideration of good sense. However much you may be surprised at my willful blindness, your wonder cannot equal that which I myself feel to-night.

And now, when I am about to tell you of that memorable Friday, I must impress upon you that no detail of it is distorted in my memory, that so clear and vivid were the impressions upon my senses that, were I to live to the age of pyramids, I could recall every slight sequence with accuracy. I say this because you are a physician and as such, no doubt,--and it is no different in the case of us lawyers,--have learned the absurd fallibility of ordinary human testimony, not excluding that which proceeds from the highest and most honorable type of our civilization.

The day, as I was about to tell you, had been saved from the heat of the season by a breeze which blew from

the water and once or twice even reached the velocity of a storm wind. A hundred times I had looked out my office window and a hundred times I had seen that not one speck of cloud showed in the sky. Yet all day long, while I tried to work, only to find myself all on edge with expectancy, I could hear the flap and rustle of the American flag on the Custom-House roof, which was straining at its cords and lashing itself into a frenzy like a wild creature in chains.

I am not sure that a dry storm of this kind is not freighted with some nerve-twanging quality. I have often noticed on such days a universal irritability on the part of mankind, and I have been informed by those who have traveled much that often a nervous wind of this kind, in countries where such things happen, precedes some disaster such as volcanic eruptions, avalanches, earthquakes, and tidal waves.

My own nervousness, however, took the form of impatience. I was absurdly eager to go at once to Julianna, and the fact that the hour for dinner had finally arrived, and that the remaining time was short, only served to increase my impatience the more. I could not assign any cause for this other than my wish to see Julianna, for now I knew in my mind and heart, by reason and by instinct, that the Judge had been right, that once having given her love she had given all, and, with that noble and perhaps pathetic trait of fine women, would never change.

At last I found myself at her door, at last she herself had opened it, and was smiling at me--as beautiful, more beautiful, than I had ever seen her. I remember that, with an innocent and spontaneous outburst of affection, she caught my hand in hers and tucked it under her soft round arm in playful symbolism of capture.

"You must not say a word to me," she said. "I have never been so happy! But he is in there. He wants to see you alone and you must hurry."

"Hurry?" I protested.

"I don't know why," she said, with a nervous little laugh. "I suppose it's because I want you to talk to him and come to me as quickly as you can."

Then, with a gentle pressure from behind, she pushed me through the curtains into the familiar study and I heard her feet scampering up the soft carpet on the broad, black-walnut stairs.

The Judge was sitting in his easy-chair beside the table. A book was open on his knees, a long-stemmed pipe was on the chair arm, and the gray and grizzled old dog lay, with head on paws, at his feet. Above him a huge wreath of thin smoke hung in the air. Had I been a painter, I should have wished to lay that picture upon canvas, because seldom could one see expressed so completely the evening of an honest day and of an honorable life, the tranquillity of home, the comfort of meditation, the affection for faithful dog, old volume, and seasoned pipe.

As he looked up at me, however, it suddenly seemed to me that he had grown old; behind his smile of warm greeting I fancied I could observe a haunted look, the ghostly flickering forth of some unwelcome thought held in the subconsciousness.

"Why, Estabrook!" he cried, when he had seen me. "Bless my soul, I didn't know you would be so prompt. I have understood that young men approached these interviews with reluctance."

"You forget, sir," I answered, knowing that he would have a jest at my expense, "that we made the arrangement in advance."

"We did! We did! That's a fact. But I had no idea that you would be successful, at least so soon, and if I may say it--so--so--precipitously."

"I plead the spirit of the age," said I.

"It's a spirit common to all ages, I take it," he answered, with a quirk of his judicial mouth. "Do I understand that you and my daughter have first become engaged and now wish my permission to see enough of each other to become acquainted?"

Perhaps he hit a centre ring with this thrust, for I could only stammer forth an awkward statement about being very sure of my feelings.

"They all are sure!" he said, with a good-natured cynicism. Then he smiled again and pointed toward the ceiling with a long forefinger. "Perhaps you may be pleased to know that she is very sure," he whispered.

I sat down.

"Yes," said he solemnly. "You are to be envied. I believe her love--as I have seen it grow in these weeks--is the sweetest thing that ever flowed from a human soul."

"You knew that she at first sent me away in the name of her duty to you?" said I.

He looked up at me, shut his book, patted the dog, and laid the pipe on the table.

"No," said he, with a break in his voice. "But I shall not quickly forget that you have been fair enough to her and to me to tell me that."

"May I have her?" I asked.

"Yes," said he. "Of course you may."

I hesitated a moment. Then I laughed. "She told me when you had said that to go to her."

I rose.

"Wait," said he. "That is not all. Before God, I wish it were."

I had not been watching his expression, but now, when I looked up at him, I saw that the gray look which I had fancied I had seen under his smile had now come out upon his face.

"Estabrook," he said, leaning forward toward me with his lips compressed, "sometime, perhaps years from now, perhaps never, but, if you choose, to-night--you may know what a problem I have had to solve, and what it will cost me to say to you that which I am going to say."

He had lowered his voice as if he wished to be sure that no one could overhear him, and now, when he stopped, he stood with his head turned as if listening to be sure that no one was in the hallway. No sounds came, however, except those of the dog, who whined softly in his dreams, and the complaint of the dry wind, which, instead of diminishing with night, had perhaps increased its intensity, and the rattle of the long French windows through which I could see the gnarled old wistaria vine clinging desperately to the iron balcony, its leaves tossing about as if in agony.

"I have sat on the bench for many years, trying with my imperfect intelligence to adjust the misshapen affairs of men and women," the Judge went on. "Never have I been forced to deal with so terrible a question as lies before me now--to-night."

For a long time, then, he was silent. Finally I spoke.

"Judge," said I, "how can I help?"

"I am afraid," he said slowly, and apparently avoiding my gaze,--"I am afraid that I must call upon you in a manner which will severely weigh upon you. Estabrook," he put his hand upon my shoulder. "I've done my best. Do you hear? I've done my best."

"I will never doubt it," I assured him. "Nor do you need to doubt me."

He looked at me steadily for a second; then he went to a drawer and, opening it, took out a packet of folded papers. It was evident that he had placed it there so that he could reach it easily.

I suppose that the gravity of his bearing, the trembling of his hands, in which these papers rustled, and the anxious expression with which he gazed at me, as if I were to decide some question of life or death, infected me with his unrest. I got up, paced back and forth, and finally sat down again facing his empty easy-chair, with my back to the long windows.

The Judge watched every movement I made, his eyes staring out at me from under the brush of their brows. At last, when I had seated myself, he came and sat in front of me, laid the papers on his knees and smoothed them with the palm of his shaking hand.

"My boy," he said, "I wrote these papers, not for you, but for my Julianna. Never has a man had a task so calculated to break his heart. She was not to read my message to her unless death came and took me, for while I lived, I felt that I might spare her. See! Her name is written across this outside page."

I could find no words to fill the pauses which he seemed obliged to make, for, as you may well believe, I felt the presence of a crisis in my affairs--in the affairs of all of us.

"But, my boy," he went on, "what these pages contain is now for you, if you so decide."

"Decide?" I managed to say. "What must I decide?"

"I will tell you if God gives me the strength to do it," he said. "It is about Julianna. It is written here. I have sealed it as you see."

"Something about her?" I cried.

He bent his head as if I had struck him from above.

"You may break the seal if you must. I have fought many battles to bring myself to tell you that you may read what is there."

I reached for the package.

"Wait," said he. "The contents of this document need never be given to her if she becomes your wife. Nor is it necessary for you to read what is there set forth if you only will choose not to do so. These are strange words between men in these modern times, Estabrook. But I have guarded my honor carefully all my life. And now, though the temptation has been almost more than I could stand, as you may believe some day,--or perhaps know in the next five minutes, which are walking toward us out of eternity,--yet I have determined that you should know everything if you chose."

"I do choose," I said firmly.

He shrunk back as if I had struck at him again.

"Think!" he begged. "No good can come of your knowledge. It cannot avert harm if harm must come. And more--be cool in your judgment, or you may ruin all of us."

"But, Judge Colfax," I cried out, "your proposal of choice is empty. One cannot reject or accept the unknown."

"It must be so," said he. "There is an astounding fact about Julianna which you do not know. About that fact I have written this message, so that when I had gone she might be prepared in case the worst--in case the worst--the improbable--the unexpected, the unthinkable--should come."

I caught the arms of the chair in the grip of my two hands and tried to think, but I could find no reason for my remaining, perhaps for a lifetime, in ignorance of some unseen menace to the woman I loved. I think that I was about to tell him that nothing could change my feelings for Julianna, or shake my faith in her, that it was right that I should become her defender, and that I, therefore, must know what hung so threateningly over her. Words were on my tongue, when suddenly the Judge bent his great frame forward and was in another second half kneeling on the floor in front of me, his hands clutching my coat. His face then was the color of concrete, and the dignity which he had worn so long had slipped from him as an unloosened garment falls.

"For her sake!" he whispered. "For her sake, don't go further. Let the thing be unspoken. My boy, don't dig up that which is all but buried forever. Listen to me, Estabrook. You trust me. And I, tell you that if I were in your place, knowing what I know--"

"Enough," I said, awed by his pleading. "Do you tell me that it is best for her and for me to make her my wife in ignorance of this thing?"

"God help me," he said, falling back into his chair.

He seemed to be thinking desperately, as if some voice had told him that only a moment was left for thought. At last he threw his long arms outward.

"Yes," said he. "I tell you that it is better for you and for her to know nothing."

"That is sufficient," I said. "I ask no more."

He shut his eyes as one would receive the relief of an opiate after long agony of the body and for some moments he remained so, his hands, from which the packet of papers had fallen, relaxed upon his knees. The starched white shirt he wore crackled absurdly with each long inhalation of breath.

In those moments a tumult of thoughts went tumbling through my brain, and as the seconds passed, I almost felt that it was the wind that howled outside which was blowing these thoughts over each other, as it would blow dry autumn leaves.

At last the dog rose, stretched himself, and, as if restless, sought here and there a new place to lie, and the sound of his claws upon the polished floor recalled the Judge from his almost unconscious reverie. He half opened his eyes and once or twice moved his thin lips. At last he spoke and into those commonplace words he put all the meaning which hours of ranting would have made less plain.

"I am grateful," he said.

When I looked up at him after lowering my head in acknowledgment of his thanks, I saw again that wonderful smile of benevolence, which, given to me once before in his office, I believe could only have been bestowed by one who had had a lifelong practice in love of humanity. Indeed, he only directed it at me for a moment, and then turned his face a little aside toward the back of the room, as if he wished to send that expression through the walls and spread over the whole world its beaming radiance.

You may, then, well imagine my surprise when, without a word or a motion of any other part of his body, I saw that smile fade from his face. It disappeared as if a blast of the night wind, entering the room, had dried it, crumbled it, and blown it away. In its place I now saw the terrible, eye-widened, and fixed stare which we recognize as the facial sign of some abject, unreasoning terror, or of death, after the clutch of some fatal agony.

"Judge Colfax!" I exclaimed.

I waited. I thought I saw his head move a little as if he had heard me, but with that motion there came a click, the sound of teeth coming together.

"You are ill," I said, half rising from my chair.

His lips moved, but the stare in his eyes remained the same.

"It has come," he said in his throat.

I jumped toward him. He did not stir.

"Judge!" I cried.

He did not answer. I waited, bending over him, not daring to guess what had befallen him, holding my breath. Then, cautiously, I moved my fingers before his eyes: they did not wink. I placed my hand over his heart.... It was as still as a rundown clock. The room itself was still. The wind had paused a moment as if for this.... The Judge was dead. And yet because he still sat there, his gray head resting on the cushions, and because he stared so fixedly before him, I could not grasp the fact of death. I had never met it face to face before. I could not honor its credentials.

For a moment I stood in front of the old man, with the single thought that our extraordinary interview had been too much for him: it never occurred to me to go for assistance any more than it occurred to me that death, unlike sleep, was a permanent thing, from which the Judge would never come back again. I simply stood there, awed by the presence of death, yet crediting death with none of death's attributes.

And as I stood, my attention became more and more fixed upon the Judge's stare. It did not seem to be a vacant gaze; on the contrary, it seemed to contain something. It seemed not only fixed; it seemed fixed on some object. It looked past me, behind me, and there, with all its terror and all its intelligence, it rested, motionless. It seemed to refute the notion that dead men cannot see; it seemed to affirm that dead men's eyes are not dead. Into that terrible stare I looked, fascinated, awed, hushed, motionless. Then, suddenly, I heard the dog.

[Illustration: LISTEN TO ME, ESTABROOK!]

The great Scotch hound had been snarling. He had growled, for I remembered it as a fact brought out of the background of my consciousness. And when I tore my eyes away from the Judge's stare, I saw that the dog was staring, too,--was staring, was drawing back his black lips, exposing his yellow teeth. Every hair on his back was erect, his nostrils were distended as if he were relying upon his sense of smell to determine the

nature of what he saw. Could there be any doubt that he, living, and his master, dead, still saw something--something which, because it was behind me, I could not see?

At first I did not dare to look. I felt some dreadful presence behind me--a presence upon which the lifeless man and the cringing, snarling beast had set their eyes, a presence which had wiped the smile from the Judge's face and tightened every nerve and sinew in the dog's lean body. I could hear the wind, and, in its lapses, the rumble of the city, I could smell the warm aroma of the Judge's pipe, I could feel my senses grow keener as I gathered my courage to look over my shoulder.

When at last, after that dragging moment's reluctance, I did so, I believed that I had looked for no purpose. The room behind me was empty. My nervous eyes searched the rectangular space, swept over the chairs, the tea-table covered with its display of rare china, the blue-and-gold Japanese floor vase, the brasses on the cases of books, the dark walls, the pictures, the gloomy corners filled with the mist of shadows, the rugs, the cornice, the draperies.

Then suddenly I saw!

Outside the long French windows, framed in the uncertain outlines of the old ornate balcony rail and the tossing leaves and branches of the vine, there appeared, as if it had come floating out of the liquid blackness of the night, detached from all else, a face.

No sooner had my glance fallen upon this peering countenance than I thought I saw a startled opening of its lips; it withdrew and was gone. I had merely caught a glance at it, yet of this I am sure--the face was white with the pallor of things that grow in a cellar, it was weak with the terrible drooping, hopeless weakness of endless self-indulgence; it was a brutal face, and yet wore the expression of timid, anxious, pathetic inquiry. It was a face that had come to ask a question. And though, because only the pale skin had reflected the light from within, I had not seen what might have appeared above or below, and though I may have been wrong, I received the impression that it was the countenance of an old woman.

Of course the moment I discovered this apparition, upon which the wild stare of the Judge in life and in death had rested, I ran forward. I thought as I did so that I heard the scrape of clothing on the iron balcony rail and the thud of a heavy object dropping on the grass below. Flinging open the glass doors, through which a torrent of wind poured into the room, and leaning out under the twisted branches of the vine, I tried in vain to penetrate the wall of blackness before me, and force my sight through it and down into the old garden, from which there arose only the rushing sound of the dry wind in the shrubbery. All the universe seemed made of black and hissing chaos. Out of it came blasts that combed through my disheveled hair and drove fine dust into my eyes. But of the messenger of death, who had peered in the window for a moment, and then withdrawn, nothing could be seen.

I turned back, feeling suddenly, for the first time, the emptiness of body which occurs, perhaps in sympathy with the emptiness of death, and as I turned, I found myself in the position of the thing that had looked in at us. The stare of the Judge was still fixed upon that spot, so that for a moment I received the impression that he was gazing at me. The dog still whined softly, cowering close to the floor.

I went to the middle of the room: I stood there gathering my wits. I heard a clock strike somewhere in the kitchen region below, from outside the window came the rattle of some conveyance, louder, louder, softer, softer. A passing boy whistled; I heard Julianna's step above me; I heard the dog licking his paws unconcernedly; I heard the curtains flap in the wind that filled the room; and finally its ironical little scream as it lifted from the desk the last opinion the Judge ever wrote and scattered the loose sheets all over the room. It brought in the dank smell of the garden.

"I must tell her," I said aloud, and the old dog, senses dulled by age, wagged his tail. "I must tell her," I

repeated, and toiled up the soft, carpeted stairs.

She was waiting for me in her own room, standing under the soft light from a hanging, well-shaded, electric lamp. I see her there, clearly, with the smile fading from her face as she read my own. Indeed, it was not necessary for me to speak; before I had gathered courage to do so, I saw her bosom swell with a long breath. She inhaled it jerkily, as one who is suddenly shocked with a deluge of icy water. I saw the color fade as the smile had faded before it, and when I had nodded to indicate that she had guessed the truth, stepped forward, fearing that she would sway off her feet.

"No, Jerry," she said, with her hands held tight at her sides. "I am all right. I had expected this some day soon. It is hard to believe, but has not come without warning. His heart--his great, loving heart--had--worn out. I do not want you to come with me. I am going down--alone."

I moved my dry tongue in my mouth: a word of the strange circumstance of his death was there. But her courage--her steady body, her squared shoulders, her firm mouth, her eyes which showed her agony, but no sign of weakness, and her soft voice as she said, "Wait for me here"--restrained me. I pressed her fingers to my lips and as I saw her go out, I felt that perhaps never would the opportunity to tell the story I have told to-night come again.

CHAPTER V

AT DAWN

I think it must have been nearly a half-hour--though the minutes were themselves hours--before I, waiting in the upper hall beside the window, through which the arc lights from the street threw jumping white patches on the ceiling, heard the sound of the old dog's claws on the floor below and her little catches of breath as she came up.

At the top she buried her face for a moment on my shoulder.

"I love you more than ever," she whispered. "I want you to stay.--Call Margaret and do what you can. I will come to you by and by."

With these words she pressed my forearm in the grip of her strong fingers and, entering her own room, shut the door.

I found, when I did mechanically as she had bade me do, that Margaret, with the instinct of an old servant, which is sometimes as keen as that of an animal, had already sensed the presence of some crisis and prowled about in her soft-footed way until she had discovered the truth. She was lying at the bottom of the stairs, her face buried in her hands and her broad back rising and falling with slow and silent tides of grief. Julianna and her father were together the old woman's life. One half had gone.

"Come, Margaret," said I softly.

"Very well, sir," she answered after a minute, and rising, straightened her cap, preparing for duty like a broken-hearted soldier. And so she went on in that next hour or two, telephoning, directing, arranging and doing with me all those necessary things. In spite of her labors she seemed always to be at my elbow, a ceaseless little whimpering in her throat. Her spectacles were befogged with the mist from her old blue eyes, which, like the color of old china, had faded with wetting and drying in years of family use, but she did not again give up to her grief.

Therefore, when at last we looked at each other in the hall in one of those moments when, at the end of a task, a mental inventory is taken to be sure that all is done, I was surprised to see her expression change suddenly, to hear a cry of dismay escape her, and to observe her trundle herself toward the library door in grotesque haste.

When, following her, I went into the room, I found her thick fingers pulling open drawer after drawer of the desk, and turning over the papers they contained.

"It was here, Mr. Estabrook. Oh, my God! Mr. Estabrook, I saw him put it here!" she cried.

"What?" I asked, with a glimmer of memory.

"The papers. They was marked for her, but she mustn't ever have 'em! I'd rather they should pluck me from my bones, sir! And I saw him put 'em here!"

"He took them out again," I cried, touched by her contagious fear. "He died with them on the floor beside him. I know what you mean. The blue seal."

"Yes, the blue seal!" she cried in recognition, and stumbling across the room she fell upon her knees, reaching under the old easy-chair and the desk, patting over the rug with her hand, turning up its corners, searching

with her face bent down, like a devotee of some strange sect, muttering to herself.

"She must never see," she exclaimed monotonously. "Poor child, she must never see. It is worse than death--a hundred times. Oh, what has he done with that terrible package!"

Suddenly, throwing herself upward and backward, until the upper half of her body was erect, and with a small object held up to my astonished eyes between her forefinger and thumb, she uttered a cry of despair and rage. She had found a piece of the sealing wax with which the packet, once offered to my eyes, had been fastened!

"It's too late," she wailed miserably. "Do you see that? The girl has read it. She would not let me in her room. It's too late!"

There was no keeping back the question.

"What was in it?" I cried. "What was written there?"

I saw her old mouth shut as if she meant to show me that I need expect no disclosure from her.

"I don't know, Mr. Estabrook," said she.

In her eyes, perhaps distorted by the strong lenses of her glasses, I saw the challenge of stubbornness. I felt myself growing wild with a desire to break through the unwholesome mystery which had entangled me, and overcome by any means the silence of this woman. She had arisen. She was within my reach. And I believe that I put my hands upon her, catching her two round and fleshy shoulders under my curved palms, shaking her to and fro with the excess of my excitement. In that moment before I spoke to her, she looked up at me, surprise and terror written on her face.

"Tell me!" I roared. "You know this horrible, hidden thing. Confound you, tell me!"

Her expression changed. I saw surprise become craftiness and fear, distrust. I saw in her eyes the beginning of that hate which I believe has never, since that irresponsible moment, diminished.

"You had best leave go of me, Mr. Estabrook," she said calmly. "You would not act so if the old Judge was alive and here. Nor his daughter, sir!"

The rebuke, you may believe, was enough.

"I'm sorry," I said.

The old woman, however, wrung her hands and looked toward the room above as if to indicate to me that nothing was important but the fact that Julianna had possession of the Judge's *post-mortem* message.

"Let her tell you if she will," she cried. Then covering her face with her fat hands, as if to hide some terrible picture of the imagination, she stumbled forward out of the library.

I have often wondered since, as I wonder to-night, when those spectres have arisen again, what that old servant meant. At the time it never occurred to me that but one thing could happen. I had the utmost confidence in Julianna, and indeed, without thinking much of my own troubles, I passed that long vigil in the library only with regret that I could not wrest away from the true and noble woman who had promised to be my wife, all the terrible grief which, alone in the chamber above, she must have been suffering. For the first time, I think, in all my life, which, by training and inherited instincts, had been devoted, I might say, to the welfare of the Estabrook name and of myself, I felt my mind--and even my body--filled with a strange and

passionate desire to be the instrument of good, not for myself, but in the name of others and perhaps in the name of God. My eyes filled with tears, springing not so much from grief as from belief in myself, not so much from weakness as from strength. I called upon an unknown force that I felt to be near me and directing me.

"Save her from misfortune," I said aloud in that silent room. "Protect her. Comfort her."

The old dog, as if he now understood, raised his head and licked my hand. I realized then that the wind had died down, and, looking up, I saw that the balcony and garden were lit by the pale rays of the morning moon, that the stars shone clearly again through the still air, and that the odor of flowers, nodding below the window, perfumed the Judge's study. The pipe, with ashes tumbling out upon the table, by curious chance had not been moved from the place where he had laid it down.

It seemed to me that I had dreamed restlessly, that the old man had not left the room, and then, when this fancy had gone, I almost believed that he had come back as he used to do when he, in his absent-minded way, had left something behind. With my heart full of him, I got up and reaching for the pipe I dropped it into my own pocket.

At last the oil in the lamp had been consumed. The burner flickered, gurgled several times, snapped, and went out; but the failure of this light served to show that morning was near at hand. The rectangular squares of the window panes now appeared luminous with the first gray flow of the east. It seemed to me that the time had come when Julianna should no longer be alone with her own thoughts; with soft steps I climbed the stairs and softly I turned the knob of her closed door. If it had been locked, it was so no longer; it yielded to my gentle, cautious pressure. The crack widened. Then, for a moment, unseen and unheard, I stood on the threshold looking in.

She was no longer dressed as I had seen her, for now she was clad in the soft drapery of some delicate Oriental silk, which, if she had been standing, would have fallen from the points of her shoulders in voluminous folds to the floor. She had unloosened her hair; it had fallen in a torrent of brown and golden light. I could not see her face.

Her back was turned toward me, for she was sitting on the floor facing the hearth in the middle of the frame of old lavender-and-gold tiles which marked the fireplace. Her hands were pressed to her temples as if her head no longer could be relied upon to retain its contents, her fingers moved this way and that through the hair above her ears, and, in strange contrast with the glimmer of early day beyond the white curtains, an uncanny flickering light burned on the hearth, painting the delicate pallor of her shoulders, neck, ears, and hands with an outline of fire. It was a picture to give the impression of a beautiful sorceress crouching to perform some unholy rite.

"Julianna!" I exclaimed softly.

She turned about as one caught red-handed in guilt, and in doing so, moved far enough to one side to expose the last remnants of written sheets of paper, which flames were rapidly consuming. A moment more and these were crisp ashes which whirled about the hearth with a soft rustle before they fell into heaps of sooty fragments. Whatever the Judge had written with infinite pain had now been destroyed. And as I looked into her eyes, I saw, too, that infinite pain had attended their destruction. Her expression had in it horror, shame, apprehension, and excruciating grief: never had I believed that a face, naturally so innocent and so happy, could have been so distorted with mature and terrible emotions as hers had become in the hours that had passed.

"Julie! my Julie!" I cried.

For answer her fingers reached out toward me in mute appeal, her body followed, and, crawling to my feet, she clutched the air as if trying to reach my hands with her own, and then fell forward, flat upon the floor, unconscious. If in that moment she appeared a groveling thing, it was only for a moment. Before I could stoop to raise her, she had regained her senses with two or three sharp inhalations and a fluttering of her eyelids, had thrust my hands from her and struggled to her feet.

"Go!" she whispered, retreating. "It is unthinkable! Go! Never come near me!"

"No--no--no!" I said. "Julianna, tell me! What has happened? It is not you who speaks!"

"No," she answered. "It is not I."

"I say it is not you who say these things," I repeated. "Who, then?"

"My father. It is his voice. It is his message. And what he has been, I am. There is no other way."

I moved toward her.

"Tell me this terrible menace behind us--this thing that threatens us--that works its evil upon us. I will not believe that any fault of it is yours."

"It is mine because it is his," she said, with a return of her wonderful self-control. "But no one shall ever hear of it from me--no--Jerry--not--even you."

"He offered to show me that message," I said. "I refused to see."

Another little cry issued from her compressed lips.

"You were willing not to know?"

"Yes."

She went into a corner; without taking her eyes away from mine, she wrung her hands, again and again.

"Why did I ever see you?" she whispered. "Why did I ever love you? Oh, go, while I am strong! Go, while I know that you must never ask for me again! Go, before I bargain with my conscience."

"You cannot send me away," I said. A thousand hidden horrors would not have daunted me then. "Will you treat my love for you so? Has your own gone so quickly?"

She shuddered then as if cold steel had been run through her body.

"I am lost," cried she. "I am lost. I cannot do more. Promise by your love of me,--by your love of God,--never to ask me of those things now ashes on the hearth--never to so much as speak of them to me--till eternity."

"What then?--I promise," I said.

"Then I will as solemnly swear to be as good and faithful, as true and ever-loving wife as God will let me be," she said softly; "and may He forgive me for what I do, because I love you."

She held out her arms to me, begging to be taken into mine, and when I had touched her she fell back, with her limp body in the curve of my elbow, and, looking up at me, offered her parted lips to the first kiss I had

ever given her.

CHAPTER VI

THE MOVING FIGURE AGAIN

Such was a betrothal, sir, so extraordinary that had my natural repulsion for the unusual permitted me to have told it before, it would have been with belief that others would think me a man deluded by his own fancies. And yet these are facts I have told you--cold and bare and sufficient to have proved to me that the adventure and romance mourned for by some men are not dead, but, were it only known, still flourish, concealed in the hearts and experience of such matter-of-fact persons as myself.

Our marriage, too, was not of the conventional sort. It took place a fortnight later without any of the celebration usual in such cases. The death of the Judge, the fact that Julianna had no other immediate relatives to act as her protectors, and that my own father, whose affection for me has always been of a rather cold and undemonstrative type, approved not only of my choice of a wife, but also of my plan for an immediate marriage, argued against delay. Furthermore, Julianna herself, with a sad but charming little smile, again and again assured herself in my presence that she knew her own heart and that for her part there was no need to prolong a period of preparation.

Often, in those days, she spoke to me of her father, with the deepest affection, not as if he were dead, but rather as if his spirit still remained in the old house. She had one of those rare minds that reject the disagreeable superstitious affectations concerning death and that overcome hysterical grief. To be sure, for hours at a time she would suffer an extraordinary melancholy, and then, in my agony of curiosity, I believed that the spectre which had first appeared before her, the night of the Judge's death, was whispering to her again. True, however, to my solemn oath, which I have always kept, I asked her nothing, and she always emerged from these periods of meditation into moods of gayety and affection which were more charming than I can describe.

She would romp, mind and body, in all the freshness of youth, with the most entrancing grace of movement and with her natural brilliant play of thought.

"I belong to you!" she would exclaim, retreating before my advance. "Come--take me!"

Then, after I had captured her and she had looked up at me, wrinkling her nose playfully, she would suddenly grow serious, and from her smiling eyes tears of happiness would start, and then, for an hour afterward, she would go singing snatches of song through the house. So that more than once I saw Margaret Murchie stop her household task to listen, shut her old eyes and say, "Thank God for his care of her."

It need not surprise you that I tell you of her, for, as you may understand when I have told you all, I am now facing circumstances which, for some reason, have caused me to fall in love with her with a strange, new, and even deeper desire, and which raise the necessity for me to save her from some unrevealed menace and win her a second time.

The extraordinary fact in the light of this new situation is that our married life has been, until a year ago, as peaceful as could be. Whatever I might have suffered at first from the fact that I had been forbidden to know or ask of the past, these stings soon lost their power to disturb me. I was glad to forget them because I so hated all things which might tend to disturb the well-ordered life with which well-bred families retain their respectable position.

We found our tastes adapted to a common enjoyment of outdoor and intellectual pleasures, and we spent many hours each week, when alone, in reading the books which pleased us and in playing duets, in which I, being an indifferent player of the piano, contrasted my cold technique with the warmth and expression of her performances upon the 'cello. Indeed, we showed ourselves in these duets as in our companionship, for though

I loved her, I believe I may have fallen short in those attentions, those little demonstrations and caresses, upon which some women seem to be nourished. As for her, she remained unchanged by marriage or time. By her humor, her tender sympathy, her refreshing, unaffected ways, she won a large and devoted circle of acquaintance, composed of both women and men. If any of the former, however, desired intimacy, they always found a gentle resistance; if the latter, they were made to see that a fortress had been erected on the borderland.

Until a year ago we were very happy, I think. To be sure, as time passed without the coming of any child, Julianna suffered that peculiar grief which, whatever may be its severity, is like no other. The desire for children was not only in her heart and mind: it was also a keen, instinctive yearning. Quietly, and without inflicting upon me any of her distress over unfulfilled hopes of the past, she persisted in the belief that the gift she most desired would not be withheld from her forever. Other than this no cloud seemed to be creeping up our sky, and, indeed, it was only little by little that I realized that some peculiar change had taken place.

I may say to you, I think, that this strange influence came even more than a year ago. I have tried in my own mind to establish a connection between its beginning and an accident which happened at that time.

We had gone for a week-end visit to the Tencorts' farm in the Sweetbriar Hills, and much against my wishes, expressed, however, sleepily, Julianna had gone out at sunrise, chosen a rangy mare, saddled the creature herself, for the grooms were not up, and had ridden off across the wet fields, alone. Breakfast had already been announced when we heard the hoofs of the animal and caught glimpses of the horse's yellow neck and Julianna's plaid jacket, bobbing toward us under the arching trees.

"Your lady is hardly what one might call a gentle rider," said Jack Tencort. "As for me, I'm glad to see the mare in a foam for once, but I would not be pleased to have my own wife--Hello, she is using her right hand."

I, too, could see that Julianna's left arm was hanging by her side, and as she pulled up the panting mare below the porch, I noticed that her lips were white.

"I'm sorry to have forced your animal," she said, "but I was in a hurry to get back. Jerry! Please hurry. Help me off."

"What's the matter?" cried our host behind me.

"To tell the truth," she said. "I have had my arm broken."

"Thrown?" cried Tencort, looking for signs of mud or dust on her costume.

Julianna smiled gamely.

"That is a matter wholly between myself and the mare," she answered.

You know, of course, that in spite of her unconcerned answers the thing was serious. The great trouble, I have always thought, was that no good surgeon was within reaching distance; the country doctor who set the bones failed to discover the presence of some splinters at the elbow, which the injury had thrust up into and displaced some of the nerves and sinew there.

When we had come back home and Nederlinck, the surgeon, had discovered how the healing process had gone on, he told me that for many weeks my wife would have to suffer great pain from the readjustment of the irritated nerves. For two months he did what little he could and then left the rest to time.

Julianna suffered silently. She complained little, but I could see a marked change in her. She became restless.

I have seen her pace up and down a room for hours, like a captured animal longing for the jungle, and remain at the dinner-table, after the time had come to go to our library for coffee, with her great round eyes staring before her until some one spoke to her. Her vigor disappeared. The moods which had followed the reading of the *post-mortem* message from the Judge returned; her little exhibits of affection and, I think, even her innocence of personality disappeared. The spectre, whatever it was, seemed present once more. At times I believed I saw in her beautiful face a look of guilt, of fear--the look of a soul in a panic. She became suspicious of her friends and withdrew from them more and more, at times with such awkward haste that it seemed as if she believed they were about to observe some fact which she must, at any cost, hide. Little by little, too, I believed that I detected signs that she was drawing away from me.

For some reason I have always dated the beginning of this change to that morning when Julianna went off to ride alone. Yet, if I wanted to be sure of bringing back to her face an old trace of her mischievous smile, it was only necessary for me to question her about the cause of her accident.

"I have promised the horse never to tell," she would say, putting her finger to her red lips. And I have never been able to decide whether she was concealing, playfully, some little folly or awkwardness of her own, or, behind her light manner, some more serious experience.

In any case, it was plain that some accursed thing had come between us. I found after some months that I must face this as a fact. We said little to each other from morning till night. When evening had come I did not go home, as I always had, with a little thrill of the old expectation which had never seemed to wear out. Instead I had a subconscious reluctance to enter a relation in which each day sympathy and understanding grew less and less. I began to suffer from a desire to demand from her a complete disclosure of all that had been hidden from me, and this temptation to break my solemn promise grew when, asking her on several occasions as to where she had been at this or that hour, I found that she was evading my questions.

At last it became evident enough that I had not been deceived in my increasing suspicions that something was wrong. One evening she burst into tears as she stood before my chair, and then falling on her knees, caught up my hands in her own and pressed them to her neck, cheeks, and forehead.

"Whatever happens, you will love me?" she cried out desperately. "Say you will! Say you will!"

"You know that," I said.

Perhaps I had answered as badly as I could, for it seemed to cause her the greatest pain.

"I wish you had not said so," she exclaimed, with a wild look in her eyes. "It is your goodness that hurts. Don't you see what comfort it must be to a woman to have her husband cruel to her--beat her--abuse her!"

I drew back from my wife, astounded.

"Stop!" I said, with the first show of stern authority I had ever made since I had known her. "It's time for you who dare to speak like that--to tell--"

"No! No!" she cried. "For God's sake, don't forget your promise. If you do we are lost--I am lost."

She sprang up and away from me, and with her bare arms crossed over her face and her hands over her ears to shut out all sounds, she ran from the room.

This, sir, was seven weeks ago, and for many days following she would sit and look at me constantly, until, feeling her eyes, I would raise my own to find her face drawn as by a weary period of sleeplessness. At these moments it seemed to me that she was trying to make me understand, just as a faithful dog tries at times to

communicate his thoughts by the expectancy, the love, or the pleading shining from his eyes. How much would I now give had I been able to do it!

Within the space of a week she brought to me the suggestion and the plan, which I, being driven to desperation by the impending wreck of our happiness, was mad enough to accept without foreseeing the punishment I would have to suffer through giving for the second time a solemn word of honor.

I think on that morning Julianna was more like her old self than she had been for weeks. Her apartments, though separate from my own, are entered from mine by a narrow door. I had prepared for breakfast,--which we do not have served in our rooms according to the degenerate modern custom,--and then had gone to find her, with the thought in my mind that, whatever she suffered or feared, it was my duty to help her as best I might. I had promised myself to be cheerful, yielding, and as entertaining as possible.

She was sitting on the side of her bed when I came in. The whiteness of the linen and the pale blue of her morning gown served to bring out the delicate color of her skin. I was so delighted with this indication of renewed health that I opened my mouth to express my admiration.

She was quicker than I.

"You find me attractive this morning," she said with a sad little smile. "I am glad. I wish that I might be attractive to you forever and ever.--I mean my shoulders, my arms, my hands--free from wrinkles or fat or dryness."

"I'd love you now if you were to assume the shape of a Chinese dragon," I said seriously, "--or the Sheik of Baalbec."

The truth was that I had almost forgotten this latter creature, the automaton. Apparently she had, too, for at first a puzzled look came to her eyes, then she smiled up at me with a bit of her own individual coquetry.

"You are making love this morning?" she said in a gay voice. Yet it seemed to me that in it was a trace of eagerness, shrewdly directed toward a concealed purpose.

"I am going to ask you to go away, Jerry," she went on timidly, but still smiling.

"Go away? When? For what purpose?" I exclaimed.

"Just go away for me--for my sake," she answered, straightening her body, raising her head, and looking squarely at me with some of her old strength. "You can go to live in a hotel. You can explain that you are forced to do so for some business reason. You can say that I have gone away."

She must have seen the flush of my anger, for she raised her hand.

"Don't!" she pleaded. "I know very well how unreasonable I may seem. But if I have earned any gratitude or respect or love from you, just give me what I ask now and give it to me blindly--without question."

Her eyes held my own as she said these words and I knew she had cast her spell over me.

"What do you propose to do for these three weeks?" I asked roughly.

"I shall stay in this house," she answered, spacing her words. "Margaret will stay, too. The rest of the servants I shall send away. But of this I want to be sure--you must not come to find me for three weeks. God only knows what would happen if you did."

"You are insane!" I cried out, with my hand gripping her round wrist. "It's that which has hung over us."

She shook her head.

"Worse," said she.

Then, as if to assure me that she had not lost her reason, she recalled the months which had just gone and described, as I could not, the change in our home, our life, ourselves.

"It is for you!" she broke out finally, as if she were no longer able to be calm. "For you and for our future I am begging you to do what I ask."

"Tell me this," said I, stirred by seeing her tremble so violently. "Has something come to you out of the past?"

"Yes," she said, reaching behind her for the wall. "Ask nothing more. It has come out of the old, old past. For the love of all that is good, promise to do as I say."

"And then?" said I.

"Come back to me. I shall be here--then."

I bowed my head.

"On your word of honor," she commanded.

"On my word of honor," said I, and turned away.

I had scarcely done so, however, before I felt her arms about me, the impact and the clinging of her body. Close to me, plucking at my fingers, my sleeves, my wrist, her body shaking with her sobs, she covered me with caresses like those given at some parting for eternity.

"You--are not--in danger of death!" I exclaimed, holding her away from me at arm's length.

"No, I cannot believe that," she said quietly. "Such as I am, I shall be when you come back."

With these words she pushed me gently from the room; I found myself looking into the broad white panel of a closed door. I stood there a moment, dazed, then going to my chamber, I, with my own hands, packed a large kit bag, preparing to do as she had asked. It was only after I had reflected on my promise that I went again to speak with her. I knocked. There was no answer. I tried the latch. The door was locked.

Without eating my breakfast and with a strange conflict between my trust in my wife and the memory of my experiences since I had known her, I left the house and have not passed its threshold, though it is two weeks to-morrow morning since I left it.

Do you wonder, sir, that I have suffered all the torments which anxiety can devise or imagination, with its swift picture-film, may unroll before one's eyes? I have stifled as best I could these uncertain terrors. By day, when I have plunged into my work at the office, at times I have been able to shut my mind to the everlasting rehearsal around and around, over and over again, of the facts which I have told you to-night; but when night has come, I am the prey of my own thoughts. For six days, in spite of my exaggerated fear of scandal, I have prowled like a ghost before my own house, lurking behind trees, watching my own door like a ten-dollar-a-day detective. Dodging the policeman who would know me, I have kept my eyes for hours on the dim light that sometimes burns in my wife's room, and when I have seen the shadow of some one passing and

repassing behind the drawn shade, I have felt my heart in my throat, and have scarcely been able to restrain myself from calling out into the night air, "Julianna! Julianna!"

Finally, I must tell you one thing more. I had believed that perhaps the crisis which had come to her had done so independently of any personality but mine or hers. I was wrong. To-night, unable to remain inactive any longer, and by the accumulation of restraint made desperate, I rung up my house on the telephone. No answer was returned. The feeling that my wife, in danger, was calling upon me, swept over me until, had I been open to such beliefs, I would have felt sure that across the affection and sympathy between us, as across wires, the message came.

I walked hastily from the hotel into the park, taking the path which I had used in the pleasant June days when I had met her at the Monument. You know the kind of night it has been. Therefore when I reached the border of trees opposite my house, I hardly thought it necessary to seek the screen of the shrubbery; the arc lights were throwing the dancing shadows of tree limbs across the pavement, the rush of the wind drowned the noise of footsteps, and the street was deserted, I thought, except for the clouds of whirling dust that passed downtown like so many huge and ghostly pedestrians. I saw that a dim light shone through her blinds and that the house was the picture of peace, suggesting that the walls contained comfort, happiness, and the quiet of a peaceful family. So the fronts of houses lie to us!

At the very moment that this thought came, I saw from my position under the shadow of a spreading oak, which has not yet dropped its leaves, that I was not the only person who was observing the light behind the blinds. A figure was standing not more than a hundred feet away from me, peering out from beyond one of the light poles. It wore a vizored cap, I thought, and its head rolled this way and that on top of its spare, bent, and agile body. Now and then, however, it ceased this grotesque movement to gaze up at the window. One would have said that this creature was less a man than an ape.

I am not a coward. "Here," thought I, "is a tangible factor. My word of honor to Julianna is not broken if I seize this customer, whatever he may be, and make him explain the part he is acting." I stepped forward immediately, but he saw me before I had made two steps. From my bearing and the place where I had concealed myself, he knew at once, I suppose, that I had been watching him, for, turning with a swift motion, he plunged into the shrubs and evergreens behind him. That the thing was as frightened as a rabbit, there can be no doubt; the single little cry it gave forth was not a scream. You would have called it a squeal! In a jiffy I was after him, tearing through the branches among which, with a sinuous twisting of his body, he had just slid; a moment later I reached the open lawn again. The man had vanished.

I knew well enough that he was hiding, probably flattened on the ground, among the evergreens. At another time, on a quiet evening, listening for his movements or even his breathing, might have told me where he lay, but now the wind and the rattle of dead leaves made it necessary for me to use my eyes in my search. Therefore I went back through the bushes, kicking at dark shadows with my foot, my heart thumping with the excitement of the hunt.

As I reached the street again, I looked up toward my house, and there, at the front door, I saw a crack widen and a black figure of a man come out and down the steps. It crossed the street, and when it had gone into the park, I followed it. You know what happened; this second man was you.

And now I ask you, Doctor, man to man--For God's sake, tell me what you know!

BOOK III

THE DOCTOR'S LIMOUSINE

CHAPTER I**A SHADOW ON THE CURTAIN**

Such was Jermyn Estabrook's story. I have tried, in repeating it, not only to include all the details given by this desperate young man, but to suggest also the coldness and accuracy of his speech. Why? Because the very manner of narration is indicative of the man's character. He belongs to the dry, dessicated, and abominably respectable class of our society. Pah! I have no patience with them. They live apart, believing themselves rarities; the world is content to let them do it, because theirs is a segregation of stupidity. And Estabrook, though he had fine qualities, belonged to them.

Nothing could have indicated this more clearly than the emphasis he put on his fear of scandal, the smug way he spoke of his word of honor, and the self-conscious blush that came into his handsome face when he mentioned the name of Estabrook. Why, even the menace to his beautiful Julianna was not quite sufficient to cause this egotist to forget his duties toward himself! So if he had not acted with such nobility of spirit during the remainder of our adventures begun that night, I could not sit here now and write that I learned to be very fond of him.

At any rate, Estabrook asked me what I knew and I told him all that I have written--about Virginia, that she seemed to feel the existence of something the other side of her bedroom wall, about MacMechem's notes on the case, the game of life and death I was playing, my conversation with the old servant, and for full measure, I told him where I had learned to place a blow behind a gentleman's ear. It is necessary to deal with men as excited as Estabrook without showing the nervousness that one may feel one's self.

When I had finished, he jumped up from his chair, and, clasping his hands behind his back, in the manner of lawyers, he walked twice across the room.

"Why, don't you see?" he cried. "All that you have told me simply adds mystery to mystery, apprehension to apprehension, fear to fear. And it strikes me that, though my own experience has been bizarre enough, your observations and that of this other doctor who is dead are even more fantastic. What do you hope to accomplish by telling me this gruesome, unnatural state of affairs?"

"I hope to make you act," I said, putting a chair in his path. "We are sensible men. There are, no doubt, explanations for all occurrences. Our limited mental equipment may not find them at once. But the first thing to recognize is the one important fact; neither of us doubts that your wife is in some grave danger. Personally I believe that if you are not mentally deranged, she is! In any case, it's your duty to go to your house. Force an entrance if necessary. It cannot be done too soon!"

Estabrook clenched his hands as he heard me, but after a moment he began to shake his head doggedly.

"Can't you see that it would mean publicity?" he asked.

"Better than losing her," I argued, feeling certain that he would yield.

He did, in fact, cry aloud, but nevertheless he shook his head.

"Impossible," he groaned. "I've given her my solemn promise!"

I suppose I've a reputation for being short of speech, often frank, and sometimes profane. I then allowed myself in my rage to be all three. It was to no purpose. Estabrook would not consent to tearing the cover from his affairs in any way which would cost him the breach of his confounded words of honor.

"You are a madman!" I exclaimed in my vexation. "The death of your wife may be entered against you. What folly!"

"Doctor," he answered quietly, "I want your help and not abuse. Your storming will not accomplish anything. You are the only living soul to whom I have confessed the presence of a skeleton in my married life, and I want you to help me. I have been told repeatedly that you are a man of courage, steadiness of nerve, scientific eminence, and high ability."

I could not disagree with him.

"The next thing, then, is Margaret Murchie, the servant," I said.

"What of her?"

"She knows something," said I. "You have heard how she talked to me, how she tried to conceal her excitement, how she treated me as a spy, how guilty she seemed, and you have indicated that you, as well as I, believe that she knows what is at the bottom of this."

"Yes, yes," cried Estabrook. "I am sure that she knows. But what then--what then? What can we do?"

"My dear fellow," I said, "why 'we'?"

He threw up his hands and sprang out of his chair again.

"I beg your pardon," he answered with a look of chagrin. "I've been under a strain, I suppose, and I forgot that you have nothing at stake."

"Not so fast, Estabrook," I said. "Take another nip of the brandy. I prescribe it for you. And not so fast. I have a good deal at stake."

"What?"

"My case," I said.

He looked at me with admiration.

"Furthermore," I went on, "I feel a certain brotherhood with you, young man. You are the first person with whom I've rolled on the sod for many years. I have punched you in the neck. You are now my patient and my guest. You have confided in me. You have made an unconscious appeal to me for help. Above all, I am one of those old fogies you have mentioned, who secretly mourn the dying-out of romance. Here!--a glass!--to adventure!"

Estabrook smiled sourly, but he drank.

"Thank you," he said. "I appreciate your spirit and, permit me to say, also your attempt to make me treat this terrible affair in a spirit of sport. But old Margaret is the superlative of stubbornness. We cannot expect to go to her to obtain information. I have lived in the house with her for more than six years. Can I say whether she is a saint or a crafty villainess? No. I know no more now than when I shook her in my anger on the evening the Judge died. She has never addressed me of her own will since. She will give up nothing to me. You have tried her already."

"I am less conservative in my ideas," I answered. "Since we are in this field of turbulence and mystery, let us

be turbulent and mysterious. All that you say is true. Therefore, we must force the truth from Margaret Murchie."

"You mean to induce her--" he began.

"Stuff!" said I. "The thing I mean is assault and battery. The thing I mean is kidnapping. You may believe in clapping your hand over her mouth and struggling with her, while we take her out. Personally I prefer a cone containing the fumes of a liquid called cataleptol, fortunately well known in my profession, while still a stranger to criminals."

But the careful Estabrook shook his head.

"You are not serious?" said he doubtfully. "Do you plan for me to take part in this?"

"There must be two," I said. "And once we have the lady in this room, I will be willing to guarantee that she will tell all she knows. I cannot ask my chauffeur to go with me, for I trust him about as implicitly as I trust a rattlesnake. Which makes me think--can you run a car?"

Estabrook was weakening. He nodded. I looked at my watch and found that it was after eleven. I drew the curtain and saw that sheets of rain were still being blown slantwise across the foggy radiance of the arc lights. There is a trace of the criminal in me. Perhaps all men feel it at times. Just then, observing the wildness of the storm, I felt the joy of a midnight misdoing, even more than my desire to find the answer to MacMechem's question.

"I shall be glad to know how you propose to gain a second admittance," said Estabrook, when, after tripping over the wet cobblestones and bending our shoulders to the drive of the cold rain, we had groped through the black alley to the dimly lit garage. "I'll also be glad to know why you suppose you can draw a statement from the old woman."

"My dear fellow," said I, "there is the cause of many of your troubles! You are always wanting to see your way to the end. And the way there often must be cut through a trackless waste of events that haven't happened."

"In light of my experience it seems to me that your statement is unreasonable," he muttered peevishly; "but since you are satisfied, I will be, too. If I understand your plan, however, while you sit dry and comfortable within this machine, I am to ride outside, wet to the marrow."

At this remark the sleepy garage attendant rubbed his eyes, filling them with the sting of gasoline, swore, and forgot to submit my new chauffeur to the inspection of his first surprise. He drew back the door and we trundled out into the water-swept thoroughfare.

The rain, which had begun with a thin drive, had now settled into one of those sod-soaking, autumn downpours, commonly called an equinoctial storm. Estabrook was showing the effect of his nervous strain by driving the machine through it with a recklessness of which I disapproved, not only because we had twice skidded like a curling-stone from one side of the asphalt to the other, but also because I did not wish undue attention attracted to our course. The windows in front of me and to the right and left were covered with streaks of water and fogged with the smoke of my cigarettes which, in my pleasurable excitement, I smoked one after the other; therefore everything outside--the spots of light which lengthened into streaks, the shadows, the other vehicles, the glaring fronts of theatres in Federal Circle--formed a ribbon of smutched panorama, the running of which obliterated vertical lines and made all the world horizontal. At each crossing we jumped, landing again to scoot forward to the next, where, through the opening of side streets, came the faint sound of whistles in the harbor; and still, Estabrook,--confound him!--to my cautions bellowed through

the speaking-tube, paid no attention.

With shocking suddenness it occurred to me, for the first time, seriously, that I had no assurance that this man who drove me was not a maniac!

I reviewed the meeting with him, the tale he had unfolded, his distraught actions. I am fairly familiar with psychopathic symptoms and my summary of all that I had observed in him indicated clearly enough that he was as sane as any one of us. But for the first time in my life I realized the feeling of uncertainty about a physician's diagnosis which a patient must endure. A doctor delivers his opinion as a matter of self-assertion; the layman receives it as a matter of self-preservation. Riding in that flying car, I found myself in both positions. As a physician I was wholly satisfied with my conclusion; as a man I found myself still in doubt and picturing to myself a wild ten-minute ride, which I had no power to prevent, ending in a chaos of broken glass, twisted metal, clothing, blood, and flaming gasoline.

"MacMechem met violent death the moment he became curious as to the other side of the blue wall," I thought, with a twinge of the superstitious fear which touches prowlers as well as presidents, professors as well as paupers.

We were whirling around a corner then, and through the glass and over Estabrook's broad shoulders, I believed I saw again the treetops of the park.

"At least he knows where he lives," said I to myself as we drew up to the curb.

"Good!" I whispered to him, when I had stepped out into the swash of the rain. "Frankly, I hardly enjoyed it. You drive like a demonstrator."

"I'm a ruin of nerves," he answered, shivering. "I'm afraid I'm a poor assistant for you, anyway. What do you want me to do?"

"Just climb inside there where it is warmer," I said, clapping him on the shoulder. "I'll be back in a minute."

"Back in a minute?" he repeated as if dazed.

"From the Marburys', if you don't mind," I explained.

He leaned back against the cushions, disregarding the fact that with every nervous movement water ran from him as from a squeezed sponge. "Oh, I forgot your patient," said he, with a twitching mouth. "But, for God's sake, don't keep me waiting long!"

I shook my head in answer; then ran, rather than walked, up the Marburys' steps; indeed, that night taught me how active a corpulent old codger can be if the need comes.

Miss Peters evidently had been at the window in her night vigil, watching the storm; she opened the door.

"Well?" said I.

"The tide has turned."

Under the hall light I looked up at her stony, expressionless face. The Sphinx itself was never more noncommittal.

"What do you mean?"

"I supposed you knew," she whispered. "I supposed that was why you came back to-night so late."

I exclaimed in a hoarse and savage whisper. I was furious. This time I had fought with disease not only, as in a common struggle, with carnivorous Death, but as a hardened sinner whose heart has suddenly opened to a child.

"Virginia is dead!" I said, glaring at her.

She never changed the coldness of her tone.

"No," she said. "She is going to get well."

"Confound it!" I growled, under my breath. "How do you know?"

"The blue wall," she answered with a sneer.

"Bah!" said I, starting up the stairs. "We shall see."

As I pushed open the door, I observed that the nurse had procured a red silk shade to screen the single electric lamp on the table. The yellow rays were changed to a pink, reflected on the wall, sending their rosy lights into the depths of that bottomless blue; the breaking of a clear day after a spring rain has no softer mingling of colors. For a moment I looked at the chart, then with new hope turned toward Virginia herself.

Either the new tints diffused by the lamp deceived the eye, or the little girl's pale skin had in fact been warmed by a new response from the springs of life. She was sleeping quietly, her innocent face turned a little toward me and in the faint, illusive smile at her mouth, and in the relaxation of her beautiful hands, I read the confirmation of Miss Peters's prophecy. I, too, believed just then that Virginia would not die, and that, as so rarely happens in this disease, her recovery would be complete.

"It is a wild night," said the bony nurse when I had tiptoed out of the room.

She seemed to be wishing to draw from me an opinion on the extraordinary rally the child had made. That was her way; she always invited discussion of a subject by comments about something wholly irrelevant.

"We shall see," I answered again. "A relapse might be fatal. To-morrow--we shall see."

"It is raining hard," she said as she turned the latch for me.

"Yes," said I, "and the treatment till then must be the same. Who knows--"

"Who knows?" she repeated.

A blast of wind and water and the closing of the door seemed to deny an answer. I found myself on the steps again, looking into the staring eyes of my car, and, with a sharp jump of my thoughts, wondering how we were to accomplish the work we had come to do. I descended, however, and when I had reached the door of my limousine, I saw Estabrook's drawn face pressed close to the glass. It was the sight of him that gave me an idea; it was his first words that, for a moment, drove it from my mind.

"Look! Look!" he said to me. "Look at her window!"

I had merely noticed that a new, bright light shone there; now, in a quick glance over my shoulder, I saw a shadow on the curtain--the shadow of a figure standing with its arms extended above a head, thrown back as if

in agony.

"Is it your wife?" I asked in a hoarse whisper.

He took my wrist in the grip of his cold hand. "My God, Doctor, I don't know," he said. "It looks--its motions, its attitudes, its posture!--it looks like the thing I saw outside the Judge's window!"

CHAPTER II

MARGARET

Well, now,--his words made me shudder! I confess it with some reluctance. Of course a doctor comes in contact with enough real horrors. They become ordinary. It is those undefined, doubtful things which run fear through the veins like a drug. Nevertheless I caught myself in time to conceal my nervousness.

"Here, here, Estabrook!" I said in a sharp, businesslike tone. "We didn't come to watch drawn curtains. The question is, did you bring your keys?"

Without asking me questions, he handed them over.

"Now, understand me," I said, for I could see that in truth he was in no condition to offer much assistance. "My advice is for you to take these keys and walk into your own house."

"I can't do that," he said irritably. "I've told you I can't do it--and why I can't."

"Then understand me further," I said when a shriek of wind had gone off down the avenue. "I have debated this question and decided that we must not disturb your wife. She has warned against that, and perhaps it is better to assume she is not insane and take her warning."

"Yes, yes," he cried. "That is right."

"I shall not parley with Margaret Murchie," I went on. "Move a little! I have something I want to reach under the seat. There!--I shall not ask her to come. She will have no choice. It will all be over before she has time to cry out. And you must be ready to help me carry her into this car."

"The law--" he began.

"Oh, I know that," said I. "But it is a choice of doing this, or nothing. Any other course either makes you break your confounded, nonsensical word of honor, or else raises a noise that will bring the reporters around like so many vultures. It is your affair, after all. Shall I stop here?"

Again, as I spoke, I felt the pleasurable thrill of adventure which I had supposed had gone with my youth.

"You want me to wait here till you signal?" he asked.

"Yes."

"As you say!" he agreed. "The old servant knows. She must tell. I can't stand it any longer. She must be made to tell."

I nodded. He indicated the proper key with a touch of his forefinger. Whereupon, crossing the sidewalk again and ascending the Estabrooks' steps with as much unconcern as if they had been my own, I fitted the key softly and turned the lock.

The very instant that I tried to open the heavy door, however, I knew that a watcher who had been observing our movements through the silk curtains was behind it. I felt a resisting pressure. I heard a stifled scream. It was no moment for indecision. With an unbelievable rapidity of thought, I estimated the chances of the unseen person being armed, the hazard of his giving vent to an uproar which would bring the neighborhood about our ears. Then I threw my body against the door with all the force I could muster. It yielded suddenly;

with a crash it flew back against the tiled wall. I was precipitated forward and a second later found myself in the ridiculous performance of rolling around on the floor with what felt to me like a fat wash, consigned to a laundry. It was, however, a bundle from which choking imprecations and grunts exploded, and which for a turn or two was enlivened with upheavals of some strength. Well enough to laugh now, but at that moment, you may be sure, I was searching with my free hand for the person's mouth.

I had meant to be gentle: if I clapped my hand over the source of the little cries and protests, when I had found it, with something more than decision, you must blame the circumstances. I had expected to surprise old Margaret from behind and give her such a whiff of cataleptol that she would have suffered no inconvenience. Unfortunately I had not at first known that it was she whom I had encountered, and now there were obvious difficulties in the way of my applying my saturated gauze to her nose.

"Be still!" I commanded, trying to uncork my vial, with a single hand. "Be still. No harm will come to you."

Her reply was a well-placed thrust of her two old knees which nearly sent me through the glass. It placed me in a position, however, where I could, with a push of my foot, close the door and shut us into the vestibule, so that her clamor, which had broken forth again, might be muffled.

Furthermore, I now had my chance to unloose my anæsthetic. I can hear the squeak of that fat cork now; I can recall the pleasure of smelling those dizzy fumes as I thrust the gauze into her face. Time after time she succeeded in thrusting it aside with her clawing hands; time after time I succeeded in jamming it back again against her nose. The scene is not one I recall with pride, but my brief excuse must be that I do not like to have my undertakings fail. The delicacies of the best of us, moreover, depart at critical junctures.

However that may be, the important point is that finally I felt her struggles subside. Her hands no longer acted with intelligence; they moved about wildly in front of her face, as if to push away a tangle of cobwebs. Her head rolled to and fro; the gurglings, sputters, half-uttered cries of rage, ceased.

"Breathe again!" said I, with the habitual phrase of the surgeon administering an anæsthetic. "Breathe away--breathe away--Ah, now!--breathe--breathe--breathe!"

And at last she was still. I threw the gauze into the corner. I got up panting, for I am not built for exercise, and, panting still, I peeped out through the silk curtains to be sure that in our little adventure we had attracted no attention.

The wind-driven rain still swept down the streets under the iridescent glows of the arc lights, my car still stood like a forlorn, forgotten thing in the gutter. In one direction the wet perspective of the avenue appeared as empty as a street scene on a drop curtain. But when I turned my eyes the other way my heart gave quick response. Just beyond the iron fence stood a patrolman.

He had stopped and seemed to be looking directly at the door behind which I stood. I could see his two bare hands on the iron railing. They were very conspicuous against the rubber coat--wet, black, and shiny--which covered his burly figure, and he used them to sway himself softly backward and forward. It seemed to me that he was debating how to act, and I believe that I learned then, peeping through the glass, to what extent guilt and the desire for secrecy will sharpen the imagination.

I say this, because, almost at the moment that I felt sure he had taken a step forward toward me, I saw that not his face but his back was turned toward me, that his hands were behind him and that he had leaned for a moment on the rail, perhaps to look at the physician's green cross on my lights. A second later he ducked his helmet into the driving rain and, walking on, turned into the shadows of the cross-street.

I knew then I had no time to lose. I had been delayed; Margaret Murchie might regain her senses. And yet,

when I had signaled to Estabrook, when he, without a word, had come, and when I felt the excitement most keenly, I found myself impressed not with the necessities of the moment, but rather with the extraordinary grotesqueness of the situation.

"Take her about the knees," said I, and then touched his elbow. "Estabrook," I added, "this--mind you--happens in a twentieth-century metropolis."

He did not answer, because the old servant, dashed in her upturned face by a stream of water running from the coping, moved her arms feebly and uttered a groan.

"Quick!" said I. "Drop her and crank up the car. I'll do the rest."

He obeyed.

I dragged the burdensome weight of my victim, if you will so call her, and thrust it into the interior of the vehicle. Estabrook was already on the chauffeur's seat; as quickly as I tell it, the car had begun to pick up speed over the wet and slippery street. We flashed by a light or two and I saw that Margaret Murchie's eyes had lost their stare of unconsciousness.

"Margaret," said I, "you are all right. Be sensible. There is Mr. Estabrook in front."

She shook herself convulsively as if to throw off the remnants of the anæsthetic. Then she caught my sleeve.

"Oh, it's terrible," she cried. "Ye have taken me away from Julie! Bring me back to her, do you hear? You and Mr. Estabrook--What do ye want of me?"

"Quiet!" I said. "We want you to tell all you know."

"You want me to tell it? After all these years? And it's no fault of mine or hers!"

Suddenly she became excited again.

"Take me back!" she screamed. "You don't know what you do! Take me back to my Julie! She may need me sore enough!"

"Have sense," I said close to her ear. "We are going to the bottom of this. You must tell everything--everything from beginning to end."

She was silent for several seconds while we sped out toward the North Side.

"It's awful," she said finally. "And it has gone far enough. It's been more than I can bear. It's time for me to tell! If you, whoever you are, and Mr. Estabrook will hear, you shall have it all--the living truth of it--the bottom of what I know."

"Good!" said I. "And now we'll go to my house."

"No, no," she exclaimed. "There is no need for that. I would not be from the girl while these awful minutes is going by. Who can say what would happen? Oh, no, sir. Take your cab back to our door, and then--sitting on this seat--with my eye on that terrible house--and less need of any of us to worry--I can tell ye all from the first to the last."

In her voice was that sincerity of emotion which invites confidence.

"Very well," I said. "That is agreed."

And then, picking up the speaking-tube, I told the wretched man at the wheel. He swung us around; we turned back, and in five minutes more drew up again, according to my direction, not by the Estabrooks' door, but under the spreading limbs of the oak across from the Marburys' ornate residence.

"Take some of this, my boy," I said as he crawled, wet and trembling, into the interior. "It will be good for you, and for you, Margaret, too!"

"Oh, Mr. Estabrook!" she exclaimed when she had swallowed the stimulant, "I lied to you. I once lied to you very sore, as you shall see."

"Enough--enough!" he cried. "What of her--my wife? She is still alive?"

"Have no fear," replied the old woman. "It's not death that's with us, I'm believing."

The poor fellow wrung his hands.

"But, by the Saints, what I'll tell you now is true," she said, putting her hands first on his knees and then on mine. "Look! The light is shining on my face and you can read it if you like. Sure, I'm praying that you may use the knowledge to save us all."

"Go on," said the young man hoarsely.

And thereupon, in an awkward, jerking manner, which I can only hope to suggest in the repetition, she told a tale of strange mingling of good and evil. This was her story....

BOOK IV

A PUPIL OF THE GREAT WELSTOKE

CHAPTER I

LES TROIS FOLIES

I was born on the Isle of Wight. My father was a seafaring man. He owned his own vessel--a brigantine as sailed from the Thames to British South Africa and sometimes around the Hope to Madagascar.

Where he met my mother I never knew. He was Scotch and she was an Irish beauty, I can tell you. Looking back on it now, I believe she was of rich and proud people and that they had cast her off for her folly in marrying a man that was rough of cheek and speech, for all his ready good heart. She was as delicate and high-strung and timid, as he was brown, big, and fearless as to anything, be it man or typhoon. And yet it was she who could stick to one purpose as if the character of a bulldog was behind the slender, girlish face of her, while he was always making for this and that end, charging at life with head down, like a bull.

I can see the two of them now, walking together arm in arm, when he'd come back out of the sea; I can see them strolling off down along the old hedges of the garden, or sitting beneath the thatched roof of our cottage which had stood the wind sweeping off the Channel for more time than any one at Bolanbywick could remember. She looked like a child beside him, for his shoulders would measure three of the width of hers. It was from him I have my frame that once called to the eyes of men to see the figure that it held, though I say it myself. But from her I got many a trait that fitted me badly, because craftiness and stubbornness and a weakness for sentiment and the like of that, had best be in a body small enough to tame them.

The two of them loved each other completely, each in their way, but it was well that they had no other children. It was well, perhaps, that when I was seventeen I had grown strong and quick as a hound. My mother went with him then for her first voyage since her honeymoon, and it was the last ever seen of her or him, or the only property we owned, which was the vessel and a cargo of cotton ducks and sheetings for speculation, bound to the Gold Coast. Sometimes the sea opens its mouth like that, and the jaws close again.

There was no more education for me! My father's sister was a boarding-house keeper in London. I was staying with her then, and when the lawyer found there was no insurance, life, ship, or cargo, she was for setting me to work the next morning. Poor woman, she had slaved her life against dust in halls and cockroaches and couples who wanted rooms without references and the heart had gone from her, and when she died she left the best of two thousand pound to a clairvoyant and card-reader, who had robbed her week after week for ten years and more.

I took a place as companion to an old lady, going to Odymi in Hungary. It was there one of the doctors, who had seen my two bare forearms, spoke of my strength and told me that I could make good money as a rubber in the baths, and I was glad of the change from the old woman. I was proud and short of tongue and patience with her, and we were always snarling at each other. But time wears those edges off people, I can tell you!

It was there, at the baths, I fell in with the woman who called herself Madame Welstoke. She was an evil woman, and of the worst of such, because she was one who never seemed bad at first, and then, little by little, as she showed herself, you could get used to her deviltry and for each step you could find an apology or excuse, until at last the thing she had done yesterday seemed all right to-day and you were ready for some new invention of hers to-morrow.

Mainly she treated diseases by the laying on of hands, and the best that could be said of her as to that was she preyed on the rich and would take no patients she thought were short of at least fifty pounds to spend for her mumbo-jumbo and gimcracks. She would talk in a very smooth voice to those she got in her web--about the flow of vital energy and the power of positive and negative currents over the valves of the heart and circulation of the blood. She would roll up her eyes and complain of how the treatments, which consisted of laying her fingers on a person's temples and wrists, exhausted her, and at first I thought she really meant it,

and when her good, old motherly face was turned away, many was the time I laughed. And finally, when I began to see that most of her patients improved and some were cured, I stopped laughing, for there was the evidence before my eyes and no denying it.

Whether or no she had power to heal, I would have stayed with her. Her influence was like slow rot and the germ of it was deep-seated before you could even see that it was time to resist it. I was acting as her maid in private at first, and before other people, wherever we went,--Paris, Vienna, Berlin, Monte Carlo, and lots of places I have forgotten,--I was supposed to be her daughter who had joined her from New York. And it was all one to me, for I was drawing a fine pay and living very rich and I could see that the name and game of Mrs. Welstoke spelled prosperity.

All this, of course, was before I even saw the Judge, but I was getting my training, and learning how easy money could be made to come through a little fol-de-rol here and a bit of blackmail there, and introducing one class of society to another in the next place. It was easy to salve my conscience, because the old adventuress was curing many a poor sleepless or rheumatic creature who could spend money like dirt to get the result, and besides, she took an interest in me enough to make me wonder why, and she was always keeping her eyes open like a pilot to see that I didn't meet any man who might be after me. To tell the truth, she talked so much of the villainy of males and the horrors of marriage that finally I believed what she said and turned my young face away from all men, just as if good, timid, and bad were run out of the same mould.

We were in Paris when she showed her hand, and, strange enough, she chose to do it one afternoon when we were driving in the Bois with a thousand fine gowns and faces to distract the attention.

"The trouble, Margaret," says she, "is that our reputation runs on ahead of us. Here in Paris it is the same as at Vienna and Rome--we have much more than we can attend to. I can't put my hands on two fools at once, and I am always pained because I am American by birth, as I never yet told you before, and I hate to see five dollars slip by, as we say over there."

"It's too bad," I answers, "for there is no way to help it."

"Indeed!" she says. "I'm not so sure. I haven't made you my daughter for nothing. And I'm thinking of having you treat those who I can't."

"Me!" I cries, very surprised. "You know well enough that I have no power."

At this she leaned back on the cushions and nearly put her broadness on Midget, her toy lap-dog, sitting beside her. But she threw her head back and laughed her own natural laugh, as coarse as a fishmonger's and different from the ripples she could give when anybody was around.

"Power?" says she. "Child alive! I have no power, you simple girl. When I put my fingers on their silly heads, my hands might as well be resting on a sawdust pincushion in the Sahara Desert."

"But the cures?" says I, looking to see if the *cocher* could overhear us.

That question brought the laugh away from her, and for a minute she looked serious.

"Many a time, when I go to sleep of nights, I think of that myself," she says, patting my hand.

"I actually know no more of the reason for those cures than you. Nevertheless I know surely enough it's not me that cures them. No. I think it's their own wills. A bit of claptrap fools them into exerting their own minds on their bodies, and by the same token the fear of weakness will make the weakness itself. So the world rolls around, my dear."

It was those words of hers I have never forgotten. I've never forgotten, for one reason, because, when I began to play for patients and worked over them with the talk and flap-dash and monkey-shine, and got them to pay their money freely, then half the time they would improve and say they felt the flow of vitality, and some of them went away well and sound as biscuits, when, before they had come to us, they had had doctors and drugs and baths and changes of climate for nothing. I even knew some who would swear that Welstoke's daughter had more power of healing than the great Welstoke herself, and among them, too, was rich and terribly cultured people, who would come with veils in closed carriages and would be afraid their husbands would find out, and then, if they didn't pay the bill rendered, all that was necessary was to threaten suit to have them go into a panic and rush the money to us in a hurry. It is wonderful how easy a person drops into new views of what is fair and right when their surroundings change, and something else is wonderful--the fact that I, who sit here with the two of you now, a broken old housemaid, once had gowns as fashionable as any on the Continent, and that without a penny of inheritance or a single love affair.

"All is well with us," Welstoke used to say, "and all will be well if you have the sense to keep out of a match with some lying-tongued creature who, on his side, will believe nothing you say, and will cast sheeps' eyes at every plump blonde from Benares to Buffalo. Besides which, my dear, there never was one of them that didn't snore. Remember that and you are safe."

Indeed, I thought I was safe, as she called it. I believed that the affectionate natures of my father and of my mother had offset each other in me, for three years went by and never a thought did I give to love of man. And when it came, there was a flit of it like the shadow of a flying bird that comes and goes on the wall and is none the less hard to forget. It is so with all, I'm thinking, high and low, rich and poor; we see these shadows of what might be, and whist! they are gone again, as if to say we'd live again in another world and there is plenty of time in other lives than ours--time for the right head to lean on the shoulder that was meant for it and this hand to touch that!

Be that as it may, the thing happened the winter we were at Venice. Madame Welstoke was in her heyday then, with plenty of money to give dinners for the little crowd that was made up out of dark-brown society--the old men who'd tell of nearly reaching greatness and the like of that, with champagne running from the corners of their eyes and their voices cracking with all the bad-spent years. And there were fat, jeweled women, too, hanging on alimony or adventure, and middle-aged men from this country, who had left New York or Philadelphia for one reason or another of their own, and talked about rates of interest and whistled tunes that were popular in the United States in the seventies, and had a word or two for my shoulders.

"Be careful how you talk too much," old Welstoke would say. "It's a very fair presentment you make with a bit of rouge, and a hairdresser, and keeping your big hands under the table as much as possible. Whatever you do, listen, and be on your guard, if the conversation runs to letters or music. One way to be educated is to be silent!"

Perhaps she laid it on so heavy about my lack of "finish," as she called it, that when my one moment came to speak and say in my plain way a word or two, it gagged me in my throat and would not slide out.

In those days a French Jew, named Vorpin, had a place just off the Grand Canal, called "Trois Folies," and by waiting till mid-evening for dinner, we could find the café well-nigh empty. The truth was I went there often alone when a fit of depression was on me, and it was no wonder these fits came. A week of idleness, taken by a person who comes from my class, and should be working eight and ten hours a day, is a misfortune often longed for and seldom recognized when it has come.

Little did I think that evening, of which you will hear, that what happened there was to have its hold on Julianna Colfax, who had not then been thought of as coming into the terrible clutches of that which has followed us like a skulk o' night.

The café was long, and longer yet with its gilt mirrors on the white walls and its row of empty gilded chairs, and I found a table in the corner. Perhaps a man and woman or two was there, either too late or too early for the gayeties that went on. I have forgotten. I only know that the sound of lapping water came in through the lattice beside my table and a breeze, too, that cooled my bare neck and would not cool my head, which was full of thoughts of my days in the old garden in the Isle of Wight and my mother's song and the colored crayon of my father, looking very stern, and hanging over the green old china vases on the mantel.

I believe the first thing that made me look up was a crash of glass, of crockery, the exclamation of the waiters, and running feet.

"So here is where they boast of excitement?" roared a thick voice. "And yet a man must make it himself."

The waiters had surrounded him, whoever he was, and I could not see him then.

"Bah!" he cried, beginning to laugh like a stevedore. "I'm an American. Monte Carlo and all that! I'll pay, you frog-catchers! Take that! Ask the proprietor if that will cover the damage!"

A great explosion of squeaky French followed, a word or two of Italian. The waiters parted and this American stepped out. I had expected to see him taller, but his power was in the weight of his shoulders, the easy swing of his drunken progress down the aisle. The devil-may-care was in him--in his handsome, laughing, wild eyes--the look of a child mad with the promise of a world of pleasures.

"Pay?" he roared again. "I pay as I go! Live? I live as I like! Out of the way, dishes! You are here to-day; on the ashheap to-morrow! So with all of us."

With that he pulled off another tablecloth, sending the glassware rolling into splinters.

"Come! Collect!" he said, holding a fistful of notes in the air. "How much? How much? Quickly! I see mirrors down beyond! You lie, you mirrors! I'm walking straight! You lie!"

There was no stopping him. With a heavy crooked cane in his strong hand and the perspiration running from his handsome face, he staggered toward the spot where I was sitting. And yet, though he had raised his stick to strike the chandelier above the next table and had let out a yelp of childish delight before he saw me, I had felt no fear of him.

I can tell you, the effect of the meeting of our eyes was astonishing. I'm thinking there wasn't a muscle in his body that did not pull at him to straighten him up, to take off his hat, to bend him a little backward, as if he had thrust his face among thistles.

As I sat there, looking at those brown eyes of his and listening to his frightened, heavy breathing, I knew well enough I had come to a place where my road of life split and ran in two directions. There are things we know, not by thought or reason or culture, but by the instincts, I'm thinking, that Heaven has put into us along with the rest of the animals. And he knew it, too, perhaps, for he saw me leaning forward on my elbows and a little white and scared of something that can't be put into words at all, and it sobered him, I can tell you.

"What are *you* doing here?" he said, as though he had known me these six thousand years.

Silly fool that I was, the color came rushing up into my face and I feared to speak. Believe it or not as you like, I could see Welstoke's thin lips saying, "Though your nose and your eyes is very refined, it's your manner of speech as discloses you, my poor dear," and I was silent as a stone, for I thought him a fine gentleman.

"Do *you* disapprove of me?" says he.

I smiled, I suppose, but my lips only moved. And a look of pain came into his face.

"Somewhere else--some other time," he rather whispered. "God knows how. But you will remember Monty Cranch. It's not soon you'll be forgetting him, girl."

With that he turned and walked out of the place as straight as an arrow, and his words were true--as true as death. And though it was all many years ago, I can tell you, it seems to me now that I can hear the water lapping in the canal outside the lattice and see the wind nodding the flowers on the table that were mocking me--a nosegay one minute, and the next a bouquet for a tomb of something gone and buried. Nor from then to now have I opened these lips to tell living soul of that meeting.

Life kept on as it had been going, with many things sliding in and out, but they have nothing to do with what is hanging over us now. Welstoke and I finally came to America, however, and then luck began to turn. There is a great joke behind the scenes of the little dramas of each of us, and the old lady, who had laid her hand on many a twisted wrist or swollen elbow, began with a joint in her thumb and in six months' time was a hundred shapes with the rheumatism. She was all out of scandals and blackmail then, and lay in bed with her own self coming out, in evil curses for pain and her losses on 'Change, and slow horses, and she who had clapped thousands was caught herself by a slick brown man who called himself a Hindoo Yogi and treated her by burning cheap incense in a brass bowl, and a book of prayer that he called the "Word of Harmonious Equilibrium."

"You are all I have now," she would say to me after the cupboard was bare. "Whatever you do, don't get married, my child. These men are all alike. Some of them begin to get knock-kneed as soon as you marry them, and others have great fat middles. You have your choice in these offenses to good taste."

The old fox was wasting breath, though, for I had less notions for men than ever before. I had only to shut my eyes to see one, and though time had slid by fast enough, I could only see him as he was, standing half frightened before me in the Trois Folies. He never seemed to change. I thought he'd always be the same.

Besides, I was loyal to old Welstoke, if I do say it. I tried hard at first to keep our patients coming, but it would not go when the Madame herself was out of the business. I never understood how to hold the confidence of people, and then the only thing left to us was a complexion mask that the old lady had invented. It was a failure, at first, but after I had walked my feet off introducing it, we got a bare living from it, and I thought it would stand between me and starvation when Welstoke had gone.

Finally that day came, too, with the undertaker creeping around in his black, sneaking way, and I found when it was all over that she had secretly incorporated a face-bleach company and sold all she owned to it, complexion mask and all, and lost the whole of what she got on that year's Derby. I've understood from the boarding-house keeper that the last words she said, was, "Now I'm really plucked!" And that was the end of her.

CHAPTER II

THE HOUSE ON THE RIVER

There are times like that, when one's spirit is sick, sore, and lame, as if it was a body, and it goes looking for a place to lie down where nobody will disturb it, and it can feel its dizzy self going into a long sleep. I'll never forget how sick my soul was then--sick of all the false ways and selfishness and all the old scenes, and all big cities and the flow of faces on the streets and the memory of our elegant apartments in Paris, with their pale brocades at the windows and on the furniture, and sick of the sordid surroundings in the cheap New York boarding-house where the rheumatism had finally reached Welstoke's heart, and the paper was peeling off the walls. I had always swallowed the airs and graces of society people very hard, and many was the time I'd wish to drop back among people like my father's family, who didn't mind the smell of cooking and could get a night's sleep by laying a head on a pillow and weren't bothered by frills. So, though it was plain enough that nothing was left for me but to come down in the world, I was not sorry, after all. I could see in the mirror that the easy life I had led at first, and the worry and labor of foot that had come suddenly on top of it, had made me fat of body and yet drawn and old of face. My youth had gone, along with Madame Welstoke, and I had little regret for it or for her.

Business was dreadfully poor then, and for the life of me I could not get a hold on anything in the way of hotel housekeeper, or millinery, or doctor's office-maid. For every position that offered, which was few, there was a mob of women with their smirks and smiles and references in white envelopes that they were trying to keep clean as the days went by. Of course, I had no references at all, and small good would it do for me to tell of my past experience. Besides, as I've often thought since, the way I wore my hair and colored my cheeks, from the habits Welstoke had taught me, was overdone, as all women get to overdoing the thing sooner or later, and more particularly when they think their good looks is threatened by the bleaching and yellowing and drying-up of the wrong side of thirty-five. It's not a thing to help much in applying for work. Anyway, the short of it was that after six weeks I had no job, for all my walks in the heat to save carfare.

You have never felt the panic that comes when it seems as if Fate was chewing away the strands of the rope that holds you to self-preservation; it is a terrible thing and soon takes out of you all fancy notions. It grabbed me by the neck and bent my pride and sent me off praying to find a place through an employment agency. Cooking, washing and ironing was good enough for me the minute I found my last dollar staring up at me from the palm of this right hand. The fall had begun to come on, and, believe it or not, as you like, I dreamed and dreamed and dreamed of walking the streets at night, through the driving snow of winter and down to the wharves and the river, with its cakes of ice and its welcome. And when the first day I had gone to sit in the intelligence room and a lady--she seemed like a blurred picture to me and her questions were far away like the rumble of a train at night--had hired me, I took my alligator bag that was left out of the wreck of old elegance, and I stood up and tried to follow her like a dog till she stopped me.

It was only when I'd met her later and was on the train bound for a little town up the state, that I turned my eyes, kind of cautious, to see who it was had hired me. You could not call her pretty, by any means. She was tall and thin, and there was a prominent bone sticking out at the back of her neck. Her shoulders sloped, too, and looked as if they had been bent forward on purpose to squeeze her lungs together. Her skin was a bit too yellow and her teeth too large and her lips too shapeless. But the steel of people has nothing to do with the scabbard, I'm thinking. Bodies are many a time disguises, and there was only one place where that woman's self peeped through like a flower through the dead coals on an ashheap. It was her eyes.

I never have seen the beat of her eyes for loveliness. No, I never have seen two of them--gray they were--that could toss a God's blessing to you so easy. They gave the lie to her cold lips and made you forget the looks of her, because you knew she'd been made to wear ugliness to test the sweetness of her soul.

I saw 'em when, from all the falseness and worry, all the paint and powder and the mockery of big cities and the jest of money and all the worry and bitterness of the end of my adventures, I felt the relief of being nobody again and going in a home, whose ever it might be, and being where there was trees and hard work and fewer human faces streaming along and looking into yours, only to forget you forever. For the first time since the day I believed I'd never meet Monty Cranch again, my sight was all fogged with tears.

Probably she saw me. And if you'd know the kind of woman she was, I'll tell you that the first I knew, her thin fingers was on my big hands, and I looked up and there were those two eyes. The train was thumping along through the meadows, but I heard her say, "There, there," very soft and she never asked me one word about my past either then or ever after. That was her kind of charity, and may God rest her soul!

Oh, when I look back on that day, I wonder how evil thoughts ever came into my mind and how I could ever wish harm to the white house under the big elms in the centre of the town, where among the business blocks it stood very stubborn, and I wonder how I ever plotted wrong for her or him that was her husband and met us that day at the iron gate.

We saw him reading a paper on the wide porch--a young man then, with a big frame and a habit of looking out very solemn from under his eyebrows and over big tortoise-shell glasses. But he had boyish, joking ways of speech, as you know. He came down the walk between the plats of grass that looked like two peaceful, green rugs spread in the midst of all the noise and bustle of the town, and his long hands pulled up the latch and he smiled at the woman as if he loved her. And she said to me in a very proud and dignified way, "Judge Colfax, my husband."

That was the first time I ever set eyes on him, and in a quarter of a century, beginning as he was then, a judge of county court, and ending, as well you know, I never could see a change in his way of looking at life. Civilization moves here and there and along with it ways and means and customs and fashions and the looks of the buildings and the furniture, but there is a saying of the Judge that comes back to me now. "The way of vice, virtue, passions, and instincts of men is universal and everlasting," he'd say, and as for himself, his eyes were watching it all from too high a place for him to be jumping this way and that, like one of the sheep running with the flock.

It showed on the inside of the house then, as it did the day he died in this city. The look of it was the same then, with most everything that was in it used for comfort and not for show, though in those first days there was no end of ornaments, that was kept for memory's sake--a piece of coral as big as your head brought back by Mrs. Colfax's father, who had been a minister or something to Brazil, and spears from the South Sea Islands, and two big blue biscuitware jars from China that had been a wedding present to the Judge's mother from an importer of tea, who had courted her and been rejected, and documents in frames which I can't remember, except a commission in the army signed by a man named James Madison, and a college degree, and a letter written by Jonathan Edwards to a man dying of consumption. They were hard to keep clean, but I liked those things because they reminded a body of the fact that days had gone by when other people was living with their ambitions and loves, and snoring at night, and pain in their wisdom teeth, and all forgotten now!

Anyway, you'd never know they had wealth, they lived so simply, and Mrs. Colfax had even done much of her own housework. I was hired because a baby was coming, and you can believe it was a happy house in those days, with its peace and the sprinklers spraying water on the lawn in the last hot days of the autumn, and the leaves rustling outside the kitchen window, and the wife singing in her room upstairs, and the Judge looking at her as she sat across the table at breakfast, with his eyes wide open, because, whatever anybody else might think, he believed her the most beautiful looking woman in the world.

I was happy, too, speaking generally. The only trouble was the training that Madame Welstoke had given me. After a body has learned a little of being shrewd like a snake, a cat, or a weasel, and looking on anybody as

fair game for blackmail or threats or health cures, it is very hard to shut the cover down on them and never employ those methods any more. I liked the Judge and I might say I loved his wife, but there was still something in me that kept me watching for secrets or skeletons in the closet, and little did I know then how my chance would come.

The baby was born in January,--a daughter--and as beautiful a little creature as you would want to see, with red-brown hair and a pink mouth hard to beat. Of course I've seen parents fond enough of children, but never any so fond of one that their mouths were hushed as they looked at her. The truth was that, as for Mrs. Colfax, she was so bound up in the child that she suffered.

"Margaret," she said to me many a time, "a mother's heart has strange instincts and, I fear, true ones. There is something that tells me that little Julianna will never live."

"Hush, the nonsense!" I answered her, laughing at her white, frightened face. "Trouble enough you'll have with her teething without borrowing more from such things as Death! Look out the window, ma'am, at the snow that covers everything, and be thankful that we are not having a green winter."

"Something will happen," she said. And I believe it was her worry and nervousness that kept her from getting her strength back and wore her thinner and thinner. She would sit in her window that looked down the slope to the river, with Julianna in her lap, and gaze out at the melting snow, or, later, at the first peep of green in the meadows between the two factories up and down the valley, and at those times I would notice how tired and patient her face looked, though it would all spring up into smiles when she heard the voice of the Judge, who had come in the front door.

Then finally there came a night I remember well. It was about the full moon in the early days of April, but a wind had come up with a lot of clouds blowing across the sky. Maybe it was at ten o'clock--just after I had gone to bed, anyway, and had got to sleep--when I heard the screams--terrible, terrible screams. And I thought they were the screams of a woman.

I jumped up, threw open my window, and tried to look through the night toward the river. I could hear something splash once or twice in the water, and then all was still--still as the grave.

You know how a body feels waked out of a sleep like that. Though it was a warm breeze that blew and though I've never been timid, I was shaking like a sheet of paper. It was a minute or two before I could get it out of my mind that some one had been cut from ear to ear. Then I remembered that they had told me that rowdy parties were often boating on the water above the first dam, as the weather grew warmer, and when I listened and heard no sound of any one else in the house stirring, I began to think that my half-sleepy ears had exaggerated the sounds. And then, just as I was about to close the window, a cloud rolled off the moon, and for a second or two there was a great bath of light on the slope, and back of the stable, among the old gnarled apple trees. There were a lot of queer looking shadows among these trees, too, but none so queer as one.

This one shadow was different, for it was not still like the others, but went stopping and starting and scuttling like a crab over the grass--sometimes upright like a man and sometimes on all fours like a beast. At last it stood up and ran from tree to tree in a swaying, moving zigzag. I could see then that it was a man, but for the life of me I could not remember where I'd seen his like. Then another cloud slid over the moon and the night was as dark as velvet again.

You may be sure I passed a restless night. Perhaps the Judge saw it, for when he came in from his regular early morning walk the next day, looking very grave and solemn and troubled, he stared at me a minute before he spoke.

"Margaret," said he, "you look overworked."

"Oh, no, sir," I said, half ashamed to tell of my fright.

"I'm glad to hear you say so," he answered. "I was about to ask you whether you could add to your duties by taking full charge of Julianna."

"The baby!" said I. "Has anything happened to Mrs. Colfax?"

"No," he said, a bit excited, "but I'm going to send her away to-day. I trust it will be soon enough. The doctor has been advising it this long time. Mrs. Colfax is on the edge of nervous prostration, and the baby should be taken from her now and put in your care while she is gone."

I think I must have shrunk back from him. I remembered the screams. I could hear them again in my ears--terrible, terrible screams--at the river.

"While she is gone!" I whispered.

"Yes," said he. "What ails you? You have heard the plan before."

"But the haste, sir," I said. "What is this dreadful hurry about?"

"Not so loud," said he. "You will hear the news soon enough. I may as well tell you. But it must be kept from her at any cost until she is away. A dreadful thing has happened--happened in the night,--not two hundred yards from this house. A woman has been murdered."

"A woman!" I said. "Who?"

"Her name was Mary Chalmers," he said. "She was an actress. She and her husband and their baby had come up from New York. She was found this daybreak at the dam by one of the factory watchmen. There was an overturned boat. The baby had been left asleep in the boarding-house where they were staying, and the husband had been heard to say that he would take her rowing on the river. He had been drinking. He was caught trying to catch the early morning train, and was still so befuddled that he could only say over and over again that he had no memory of where he had been. He says he is not guilty and has sent for a lawyer. The coroner has gone to the dam. That is the story and my wife must be prevented from suspecting any of it. The man will probably be held. It looks badly for him, and the case, if tried, will come before me. My wife must be kept away until it is all over; she must not suffer the morbid worry."

"Did any one hear screams on the river last night?" I asked, biting my finger.

"Several heard them," he said, nodding.

I felt a great relief from that answer, for I had a dread of being called as a witness and then and there I made up my mind that, come what might, I would tell nothing. "What one sees to-morrow, and what one didn't see yesterday, makes the road easy," Madame Welstoke had been used to say, and I recalled her words and thought highly of their wisdom. And yet I have many the time, wondered whether, if I had told of the creature I had seen, scuttling like a crab over the grass in the orchard, I might not have prevented the grisly prank that Fate has played.

That afternoon my mistress, in spite of her gentle protests, was taken to the train by the Judge and Doctor Turpin, who I've always remembered as an old fool, trying to wipe the prickly heat off his forehead with a red-bordered silk handkerchief. One of the neighbors, clinking with jet beads till she sounded like a pitcher of ice water coming down the hall, went on the journey to the mountain sanitarium with Mrs. Colfax, as a sort of companion, and when all the fuss of the departure and the slam of the old cab doors and the neighing of the

livery-stable hearse horses was over, I was left alone with the baby Julianna and the Judge.

The child was laying on its fat little naked back, kicking its feet at me, when the father came upstairs.

"Please, sir," said I, "what is the news?"

"The inquest says drowning or blows on the head administered by a party or parties unknown," he answered gravely. "John Chalmers, the husband, acts like a heeled snake--violent and sinuous by turns. His lawyer has waived all preliminary proceedings and, as luck will have it, we have a clear docket to go to trial with a jury."

By afternoon the town was filled with reporters who had come up on the midday train. From the back windows you could see them walking along the banks of the river and talking with a man in a red shirt. And later I learned he was the one who had gone out in a rowboat and found the poor woman's silly hat, that, with its wet yellow roses and lavender veil, had floated around amongst a clump of rushes. With night the city papers came, full of accounts of the actress and how she had played in melodramas, until finally she had played her farewell in a tragedy of real life. One said her husband was going to prove an *alibi*; another said he had no memory whatever of where he had been or what he had done that evening; and still another paper said the woman had been seen to quarrel with him and join a mysterious stranger, who was described as being a hunchback of terrible ugliness. All three of those I saw said the mystery might never be solved, but that new developments were expected every minute by both the state police and the chief of the local department.

"Margaret," said the Judge that evening at supper, as I was waiting on him, "you must not be talking of this murder with any one. Remember that you are employed in my home. Furthermore, I have old-fashioned notions, and so, from now on, I have stopped the 'Morning Chronicle' from coming to the house and I don't want any newspapers brought in until the trial is over."

"And when will that be?" I asked.

"Soon, I hope," he answered. "The district attorney, I understand, has conferred with the police again this afternoon, and believes he has enough evidence to hang Chalmers and that no more can be gathered. For some reason the defense is equally satisfied. Do you understand now?"

"Yes, sir," I said. "There won't be much delay."

"Not much delay," he repeated over after me, and his voice shook as I never heard it shake before that minute.

"The beast!" I said.

"Hush," said he. "He must be found guilty first. But if he is--"

He stopped there, but I saw the light in his eyes and his long, tight-clenched fingers turning white under the pressure, and I knew, if he passed sentence on John Chalmers, what it would be.

That was the last word I ever heard from him before the trial was over, and I had to be running over to the neighbors for all the news I got. A reporter came to ask me one day if I had seen a strange man loafing in the meadows the evening the thing happened. He was a red-haired, freckled young man who kept pushing his hat, first to one side of his head and then the other, and talking first to one side and then the other of a pencil held in his teeth, so I could hardly hear a word he said. But he told me that, following the case from the beginning, he had been the one who had discovered that two weeks before the murder the man had insured his wife's life in his own favor and that before he had met and married her he had had a different name,--Mortimer Cross,--and been a runner for a hotel in Bermuda, and lost the place because, in a fit of anger, he had tried to knife a porter.

"The police haven't half covered this case," he said, with his green eyes snapping. "I've got more evidence for my paper than they can get for the State's case. I haven't slept four hours in forty-eight."

"Young man," said I, "how much do you get a week?"

He grinned.

"Twenty dollars," he said.

"You work like that for twenty dollars?" I asked.

"For twenty dollars!" said he. "What's the twenty dollars?"

"Well, then--" said I.

"It's the game!" he said. "But you don't understand."

"Don't I, though!" said I. And for days the old desire for adventure, for all the crooked ways, came back to me and made me as restless as a volcanic island, as Madame Welstoke used to say.

It was then I used to begin to hate the baby at times. I could have loved one of my own, and the feeling that this one belonged to some one else, and that I probably never would have the touch of hands that belonged to me, haunted me like a gray worm crawling through my head. Many a time as I would be dipping little Julianna into her bath, these thoughts would come to my wicked mind, and, drying her, I'd dust the powder over the pink body till the room looked like a flour-mill. I wished the trial would hurry to come and go, so Mrs. Colfax, who was writing such pathetic, patient letters about her baby, could return, and I laid many a curse on the fat doctor for making so much fuss about her nervous condition and for sending her away.

I could not go to the court and I had to pick up what I could of the trial, as it went on, from gossip and reading of papers in my own room after I had gone to bed. Sometimes I'd wheel Julianna down the street to the court-house, and then I'd see men with fingers raised as if they were all barristers, or imitating barristers, standing on the court-house steps and whispering and talking and laughing, and the sheriff, with a blue coat and mixed trousers and gray side whiskers, sitting on a campstool under the big elm tree, like a man at an old soldiers' home, and factory-girl witnesses, giggling as they went up and disappeared into the dark corridors, and the drone of voices coming out of the open windows, and perhaps the jury walking in pairs and acting very important, with a deputy sheriff taking them over to the Lenox Café for their lunch. The murder mystery had brought up a lot of curious people from the city, and I remember one--a woman with folds of skin under her chin and plenty of diamond rings--who wiped her eyes, pretending there were tears in them.

"Where is the court-house?" she said to me, just as if she could not see it. "*I was the woman's most intimate friend once.*"

That was the way with most everybody. They did not like the thought of the poor dead woman or the horror of it, but only the thought of being important and knowing something about it that the next one did not know. One girl in the town--a daughter of the biggest grocer and quite a belle--could imitate the screams she had heard and did it over and over, because she was begged by her girl friends, and so she was something of a heroine and thought for still another reason to be a good person to know.

The Judge was made of different stuff, I can tell you. We did not have many criminal trials in our family, so to speak, and I think it must have eaten well into his heart, for he was very silent and grave at meals and never laughed, except when he came up to play with the baby and ride the little thing, with its lolling head and big eyes, on his knee.

It took over a week to finish the trial after they had begun it. They had wanted to trace John Chalmers's history, but he would tell nothing of it himself, and his past was a mystery, and there was a feeling among those who discussed the case that this would be against him. In fact, every one said he was surely guilty. He had misused his wife's life; he was a drunkard and subject to fits of violence; he had asked his wife to go rowing on the river at a season when it was still cold; she had screamed; he was a good swimmer; there were signs of blows on her head; he had rescued himself, but not her, and he had tried to run away from the town without reporting her death. To be sure, he had been able to show that he had been drinking, and evidence was brought to prove that he had lost consciousness after getting out of the water, and that when he had awakened he had asked a sleepy milkman where the police station was and had been directed to the depot by mistake. According to his own story, the boat had tipped over when the moon was behind a cloud and he had lost all trace of his wife after her first struggle in the water. But people laughed at this story, and as for myself, I wondered who was the creature I had seen in the orchard, mixed up with the queer shadows and running from tree to tree like a frightened ape. Little knowing what was to happen, I wondered whether I should ever see John Chalmers, the accused man, before the law had made way with him.

I never doubted that the law would hesitate, till the day the Judge came home to dinner at six in the evening and told me that the case had been in the jury's hands for three hours already. How well I remember the long rays of the sun slanting over the slope, the songs of the wild birds that had sneaked into the trees along the green back yards of our dusty street, and how it came to me then that the world was too beautiful to be befouled by the hates of little men, whose appetites were no more important than the appetites of the caterpillars eating the green foliage. But I could see the hates of men reflected in the Judge's face.

"Surely they would not let him go, sir?" said I.

He only shook his head, and later he went out without once asking for the baby, and I knew when I heard the gate slam that things had not gone well at the court-house.

At eight o'clock that night I was on the porch when a man came tearing up to the fence, almost fell off a bicycle, vaulted the rail, and came running over the grass.

"Got a telephone?" he said.

"Yes," said I, with the answer frightened out of me.

"Gimme a match," said he. "I've gotter have a cigarette. Hold on, I got one."

He lit it. In the flare I saw it was the red-haired, freckled reporter and his green eyes was all alive again.

Before I could stop him, he had pushed his way ahead of me into the Judge's study and was at the instrument.

"A line!" he gasped. "I want New York."

He was snapping at his cigarette like a wild thing, and, along with his perspiration, ashes and sparks were dropping on the rug.

"Excuse me," he said. "I lost my prey!"

"What!" said I.

"Acquittal," said he. "The Judge was too damned conscientious in his charge to the jury.--Come on, there, New York! Confound you, come on! I've got to relay a message through to my paper."

"Acquittal?" I asked, trembling like a horse.

"Acquittal," he roared into the instrument. "This is Roddy. Five hours out. Interview with Dugan, juryman, local plumber. Says strict charge of judge did it. Prisoner gone down to River Flats with counsel. Drinking with Fred Magurk in kitchen barroom. Refuses to talk. Rest of story already gone by telegraph."

He turned around then and grinned as if it hurt him--as if he was trying to hide some pain. I had lit the lamp and you cannot begin to know how funny his white face looked under his bright red hair.

"Can I get a drink of water?" he said, choking, and then over he went face foremost into the morris chair.

I ran into the kitchen and what with the water splashing in the sink, I did not hear the Judge come in, and the first I knew about his being there was when I went back into the library. There he stood, with his tortoise-shell glasses in his long fingers, looking down at Mr. Roddy, sitting weak and blinking in his chair.

"Sorry, Judge, to faint away like a queen dowager in your library," said the reporter, with his everlasting American good nature. "But I came in to use the first telephone I could find. I was a little tired. My name's Roddy."

"Mr. Roddy," said Judge Colfax, holding out his hand, "I know of you very well and of your work on this case."

"Too bad!" said Roddy,--"the outcome?"

"I express no opinion," the Judge answered in a weary voice.

"The prisoner lost no time in finding liquor again," said the other. "He went to a bar before he went to his baby."

This reached the Judge. His eyes snapped. There was a low growling in his throat.

"Margaret," said he to me, "bring this gentleman some brandy. You will rest here a while, Mr. Roddy. I suppose you will not leave until the eleven-thirty train."

"Thank you. I'm played out," said the reporter. "I thank you."

And so it was that, with many a queer thought in my head, I sat in the kitchen rocker, listening to the mumble of their voices and waiting up to see if they should want me for anything. And so it was, too, that at last I found myself nodding with sleep, and started to go upstairs to bed.

Call me superstitious if you like, but I know well enough that some of us humans can feel the whisper of evil and terror before it reaches us. It spoke to me on those dark back stairs with the moonlight shining on the wall at the top, and I was brought up sharp and wide awake, when the air rang with it as if it was a bell.

"You're half asleep, you old fool," I said, feeling the sweat start out on my forehead, and I repeated it to myself when I was in my room and turning down the bedclothes.

CHAPTER III

A VISITOR AT NIGHT

A nice breeze was blowing in from the meadows, cooling the hot night, and finally, when I was laughing at my nervousness, I went to the window and leaned on the sill. It was a very peaceful scene, I can tell you, with that long stretch of grass and daisies and the water, and the light, carried through the factory yard up the river, bobbing along as the watchman passed one window after another. All but the apple trees! They seemed as horrible as ever, and a dozen times I thought I saw men without heads, or with long arms like apes, creeping and skulking from one shadow to another. At last I felt my eyes sore with staring at them, and I turned away.

Just then I heard the knocking at the back door. It was soft and careful at first and then a little louder.

"Some one from up the street to ask me questions," said I, feeling my way down the stairs, but then I caught the sound of something that I thought was the mewing of a cat. If I had had any sense I would have called to the Judge before I slid the bolt and opened the door.

The thing I saw was a little bundle of white clothing. At first it looked so white it seemed to give off a light and I thought it was hanging in the air. Then I saw two hands were holding it, and that it was a child.

"I want to see the Judge," said a thick, evil voice. "I've got a joke for him--the best joke he ever had played on him."

"And who are you?" I asked.

"Oh, he'll see me all well enough," said the man, with a heave of his shoulders. "I'm John Chalmers!"

I could not speak. I stepped back and he came in. He must have heard the voices in the study. But I can hardly say what happened. I only know that I found myself standing behind him and that I saw him put the baby into a chair and heard him cough.

The two men--the Judge and Mr. Roddy--looked up, and I never saw two such faces.

"Stare!" said the terrible creature. "Well you may! Go ahead and stare, for all the good it will do you. I know you both. Both of you wanted me hung, didn't you? You're clever men--you two. But I'm cleverer than you. The joke is on you."

"You came in?" asked the Judge in a whisper, as if he didn't believe his eyes.

"Yes, and I'd have come in the front door if the people, with their butterplate eyes, weren't watching me wherever I go. Oh, don't think I'm crazy with drink. No! I'm clever."

The Judge and Mr. Roddy had stood up and the Judge could not seem to find a word to say, but Mr. Roddy clenched his freckled fists.

"What yer want?" he said.

"I came to tell you," said Chalmers, "that the joke is on you. I didn't expect the pleasure of seeing you, Roddy, my fine penny-a-liner. But you're in this, too. The joke is on you. I've been acquitted."

"What of it?" the Judge said.

"I can't be tried twice for the same crime, can I? Didn't my lawyer tell me? I guess I know my rights. Ho, ho, the joke is on you, Judge. I saw your eyes looking at me for a week. I knew you would like to see me hung and Roddy there,--he nearly got me. But I'm safe now--safe as you are."

The reporter laughed a little--a strange laugh.

"You killed her, after all?" he asked.

"Yes," answered the other in a husky and cheerful voice. "I did. That's where the joke is on you. I did the trick! Me! And what have you two got to say? Who takes the bacon--me or you?"

"You don't know what you say," the Judge cried.

"Yes, I do," roared the man. "I tell you I did the trick and got tried once, and I'm free forever. There isn't anybody can touch me. I tell you the joke is on you, because I did it."

I could see Mr. Roddy's green eyes grow narrow then. He turned to the Judge.

"Is that so?" he asked. "He can't be arrested again?"

The Judge shook his head. I can see this minute how his face looked.

"Well," said Mr. Roddy, with a long sigh, "I'm beat! I've seen a lot of criminals in my day. Some were very clever. The joke is on me, Chalmers, for I'm obliged to say that you are the cleverest, slickest person I've ever seen, and you beat me! I've a lot of respect for you, Chalmers. Here's my fist--shake!"

The other walked to meet him and they clasped hands in the middle of the room. It was only for a second; for as quick as a flash, Mr. Roddy seemed to stiffen every muscle in his body. He pulled the other man toward him with one arm and shot out his other fist. It made a dull sound like a blow struck on a pan of dough. And the wretched murderer slumped down onto the floor like a sack of bran, rolled over on his back, and was still.

"There!" said Mr. Roddy, with his cheerful smile.

The Judge had jumped forward, too, with a shout.

"Just a minute, Judge," said the reporter. "Let me explain. You remember that I found out that two years ago our clever friend was at Bridgeport. That summer a girl was found in the park there--murdered. I was on the case. They never found out who did it. Have we or have we not just heard the confession of the man who killed her?"

"You mean to testify that this brute confessed to that other murder?" asked the Judge, choking out the words. "You mean to hang this man for a crime he never committed?"

"Why not?" asked Mr. Roddy. "It's between us and it can be done. It's justice, isn't it?"

"My God!" said the Judge. He began to bite his knuckles as if he was tempted sorely enough.

What made me step over to look at the unconscious man's face? I do not know, unless it was the design of Fate. White it was--white and terrible and stamped with evil and dissipation and fearful dreams. But there was a smile on it as if the blow had been a caress, and that smile was still the smile of a child who sees before it all the endless pleasures of self-indulgence.

I felt the years slide back, I saw the mask of evil and folly torn away. I was sitting again in a beautiful gown in the Trois Folies in Venice, the wind was blowing the flowers on my table, the water in the canal sounded through the lattice, a man was tearing tablecloths from their places, dishes crashed, and then I saw the fellow's smile fly and his face turn sober, and I heard his voice say, "What are *you* doing here?" as if he had known me for centuries. Because I knew then, in one look, that John Chalmers and Monty Cranch were one. I had met him for the second time--a wreck of a man--a murderer. But the mystery of a woman's heart--!

"Well," I heard Mr. Roddy say, "are we going to hang him?"

"No," I cried, like a wild thing. "No, Judge. No! No! No!"

"And why not?" he asked, glaring at me.

"It's against your oath, sir," I said, like one inspired. "And it's against honor to hang a creature with lies."

The Judge thought a long time, struggling with himself, until his face was all drawn, but at last he touched the red-haired reporter on the elbow.

"She is right," said he. "The incident is closed."

Something in his low voice was so ringing that for a moment none of us spoke, and I could hear the drawn curtains at the window going flap-flap-flap in the breeze.

At last the reporter looked at his watch. "Well, Judge," he said, with his freckled smile, "I'm sorry you can't see it my way."

"You want to catch your train," the master replied quietly. "It's all right. I have a revolver here in the drawer."

"Probably I'm the one he'll want to see, anyway," Mr. Roddy said in his cool, joking way. "Quite a little drama? Good-night, sir."

"Good-night," said the Judge, without taking his eyes from the man on the floor. "Good-night, Mr. Roddy."

I can remember how the door closed and how we heard the reporter's footsteps go down the walk. Then came the click of the gate and after a minute the toot of the train coming from far away and then the silence of the night. Then out of the silence came the sound of Monty Cranch's breathing, and then the curtains flapped again. But still the Judge stood over the other man, thinking and thinking.

Finally I could not stand it any longer; I had to say something. Anything would do. I pointed to the baby, sound asleep as a little kitten in the chair.

"Have you seen her?" I asked.

"What!" he answered. "How did she come there? You brought her down?"

"That isn't Julianna," said I. "It's his!"

"His baby!" the Judge cried. "That man's baby!"

I nodded without speaking, for then, just as if Monty had heard his name spoken, he rolled over onto his elbow and sat up. First he looked at the Judge and then I saw that his eyes were turning toward me. I felt my spine alive with a thousand needle pricks.

"Will he know me?" thought I.

He looked at me with the same surprised look--the same old look I thought, but he only rubbed his neck with one hand and crept up and sat in the big chair, and tried to look up into the Judge's face. He tried to meet the eyes of the master. They were fixed on him. He could not seem to meet the gaze. And there were the two men--one a wreck and a murderer, the other made out of the finest steel. One bowed his head with its mat of hair, the other looked down on him, pouring something on him out of his soul.

"Well, I'm sober now," said Cranch, after a long time. "I know what you're thinking. I know it all. I know it all."

"You are not human," whispered the Judge.

Can you say that certain words call up magic? I do not know. But those words worked a miracle. In a second, like something bursting out of its shell, the Monty Cranch I had treasured in my heart tossed off the murderer, the drunkard, the worthless wretch who had been throttling him and holding him locked up somewhere in that worn and tired body, and came up to the surface like a drowning man struggling for life.

"Human?" he said in a clearing voice. "Human? Am I human? My God! that is the curse of all of us--we're human. To be human is to be a man. To be human is to be born. To be human is to have the blood and bone and brain that you didn't make or choose. To be human is to be the son of another without choice. To be human is to be the yesterday of your blood and marked with a hundred yesterdays of others' evil."

He jumped up. The whites of his eyes were bloodshot.

"Am I responsible for what I am?" he roared. "Are any of us?"

The Judge looked frightened, I thought.

"Blood is blood," cried Monty, with the veins standing out on his forehead. "That's why I brought the baby here. I wanted to kill her. Blood is blood. There's mine in that chair--and it is me, and I am my father and he was his father, and there's no escape, do you hear? I wanted to kill her because I loved her, loved her, loved her!"

He fell back in the chair and covered his face with his hand and wept like a child.

I looked at the Judge and I could have believed he was a bronze statue. He never moved an eyelash. I could not see him breathe. He seemed a metal figure and he frightened me and the child frightened me, because it slept through it all so calm, so innocent--a little quiet thing.

"Well, Chalmers," said the Judge at last, "what do you mean to do? You're going away. Are you going to leave your daughter here?"

Monty's head was bowed over so his face did not show, but I saw him shiver just as if the Judge's words had blown across him with a draft as cold as ice.

"I'm going to Idaho," he said. "I'm going away to-night. I've got to leave the baby. You know that. Put it in an institution and don't let the people know who its father was. Some day my blood will speak to it, Judge, but half my trouble was knowing what I was."

"By inheritance," said the Judge.

"By inheritance," said Monty.

"You love this little daughter?" the Judge whispered.

Monty just shivered again and bowed his head. It was hard to believe he was a murderer. Everything seemed like a dream, with Monty's chest heaving and falling like the pulse of a body's own heart.

"You never want her to know of you--anything about you?" asked the Judge.

"No," choked Monty. "Never!"

"Every man has good in him," said the Judge slowly. "You had better go--now!"

Without a word, then, Monty got up and went. He did not rush off like the reporter. He stopped and touched the baby's dirty little dress with the tips of his fingers. And then he went, and the front door closed slowly and creaked, and the screen door closed slowly and creaked, and his shoes came down slowly on the walk and creaked, and the iron gate-latch creaked. I went to the window and looked out one side of the flapping curtain, and I saw Monty Cranch move along the fence and raise his arms and stop and move again. In the moonlight, with its queer shadows, he still looked like half man and half ape, scuttling away to some place where everything is lost in nothing.

"We can't do anything more to-night," said the Judge, touching my shoulder. "Take the child upstairs."

"Yes, sir," said I.

"Stop!" he said huskily. "Let me look at her. What is in that body? What is in that soul? What is it marked with? What a mystery!"

"It is, indeed," I answered.

"They look so much alike when they come into the world," he said, talking to himself. "So much alike! I thought it was Julianna."

"And yet--" I said.

He wiped his tortoise-shell glasses as he looked at me and nodded.

"I shall not go to bed now," said he. "I shall stay down here. Give the child clean clothing. And then to-morrow--"

I felt the warmth of the little body in the curve of my arm and whether for its own sake or its father's, I do not know, but my heart was big for it. In spite of my feeling and the water in my eyes, I shut my teeth.

"To-morrow," I said.

How little we knew.

How little I knew, for after I had washed the child, laid it in the big vacant bed, and blown out the candle, I remember I stood there in the dark beside little Julianna's crib with my thoughts not on the child at all. It was the ghost of Monty Cranch that walked this way and that in front of me, sometimes looking into my eyes and saying, "What are *you* doing here?" and other times running up through the meadow away from his crime and again standing before a great shining Person and saying, "What I am, I was born; what I am, I must be."

I went downstairs once that night and peeked in through the curtains. The Judge was at his desk with his hands folded in his lap and his eyes looking out from under his heavy eyebrows, as if he had the puzzle of the world in front of him and was almost afraid. I thought of how tired he must be and of what a day it had been for all of us.

At last a board squeaked on the stairs, reminding me of the late hour and my aching body and burning eyes. So I went up to bed and tossed about until I fell asleep.

I know I could not have slept very soundly. Little matters stick in the memory if they are connected with such affairs. And so I remember half waking to hear the slam of a blind and the howl of a wind that had sprung up. Things were rattling everywhere with every gust of it--the curtains, the papers on my bureau, the leaves on the trees outside, and I pulled the sheet over my head and thought of how my father and mother had gone down at sea, and fell into dreams of oceans of melted lead hissing and steaming and red.

I think it was the shout of some man that woke me, but that is neither here nor there. The house was afire! Yellow, dancing light and smoke poured under the door like something turned out of a pail. With every puff of the wind the trees in the orchard were all lit up and the flames yelled as if they were a thousand men far away and shouting together. Between the gusts you could hear the gentle snap and crackle and the splitting of sap in wood and a body's own coughing when it tried to breathe in the solid mass of smoke. There were shouts of people outside, too, and the squeaking and scampering of rats through the walls. Out of my window I could see one great cloud of red sparks. They had burst out after a heat explosion and I heard the rattle and tinkle of a broken window above the roar of the fire.

Of this terrible element I always had an unreasoning terror. Many a sleepless night I spent when I was with Madame Welstoke, and all because our rooms might happen to be high up in the hotel where we had put up. You can believe that I forgot all and everything when I opened my door and found that the little flames were already licking the wall on the front stairs and smoke was rolling in great biscuit-shaped clouds through the leaping pink light. I could not have told where I was, whether in our house or city or another. And I only knew that I could hear the voice of my old mistress saying, "Remember, if we do have trouble, to cover your face with a wet towel and keep close to the floor." It was senseless advice, because the fire, that must have started in the Judge's study, kept blowing out into the hall through the doorway, and then disappearing again like a waving silk flag. I opened my mouth and screamed until my lungs were as flat as empty sacks.

I might have known that the Judge, if he were still in the library, was not alive, and I might have noticed, as I went through his sleeping-room to climb out on the roof of the front porch, that he had not been to bed at all. But it was all a blank to me. I did not remember that there was a Judge. Fire and its licking tongue was after me and I threw myself off the hot tin roof and landed among the hydrangea bushes below. In a second more I felt the cool grass of the lawn under my running feet, and the first time that I felt my reasoning power come to me I found myself wondering how I had stopped to button a skirt and throw a shawl around my shoulders.

There were half a dozen men. Where they had come from I do not know. They were rushing here and there across the lawn and vaulting the fence. They did not seem to notice me at all. I heard one of them shout, "The fire alarm won't work! You can't save the house!" Everything seemed confused. Other people were coming down the street, running and shouting, sparks burst out somewhere and whirled around and around in a cloud, as if they were going up into the black sky on a spiral staircase. The walls of the grocery and the Fidelity Building and the Danforths' residence across the street were all lit up with the red light, and a dash of flames, coming out our library window, shriveled up a shrub that grew there as if it was made of dry tissue paper.

"How did it start?" yelled a man, shaking me.

I only opened my mouth and looked at him. He was the grocer. I had ordered things from him every morning.

"Well, who was in the house?" he said.

"The Judge," I said.

"The Judge is in the house!" he began to roar. "The Judge is in the house!"

It sounded exactly like the telephone when it says, "The line is busy, please ring off," and it seemed to make the people run together in little clusters and point and move across the lawn to where the sparks were showering down, and then back, like a dog that wants to get a chop-bone out of a hot grate.

Suddenly every one seemed to turn toward me, and in a minute all those faces, pink and shiny, were around me.

"She got out!" they screamed and shouted. "Where's the Judge? Any one else?"

"The Judge and the baby!" I cried and sat down on the grass.

"No!" shouted the depot master. "The Judge is all right. I just met him walking over the bridge after the freight had gone through. It wasn't twenty minutes ago. But you can't save a thing--not a stick of furniture. The whole thing is gone from front to back on the ground floor already!"

"Here's the Judge now! That's him running with the straw hat in his hand," a woman shrieked, and ran out toward him with her hair flying behind. I could see his tall figure, with its long legs, come hurdling across the street. I could see his white face with the jaw square and the lips pressed tight together.

"You!" he said, bending down. "Yes! Where's Julianna? Where's my baby?"

My head seemed to twist around like the clouds of pink smoke and the whirl of hot air that tossed the hanging boughs of the trees. The crackle and roar of the fire seemed to be going on in my skull. But I managed to throw my head back and my hands out to show they were empty.

"God!" he cried.

The world went all black for me then, but I heard voices.

"Stop, Judge! Don't go! You'd never get out."

"Let go of me!"

"He's going into a furnace! Somebody stop him!"

"Look! Look! You'll never see *him* again."

I opened my eyes. Judge Colfax's long lean body, with its sloping shoulders, was in the doorway, as black as a tree against a sunset. I saw him duck his head down as if he meant to plough a path through the fire, and then a fat roll of smoke shut off all view of him.

"They're both gone--him and the baby!" roared the depot master. "Lost! Both lost!"

The woman with the flying hair heard this and ran off again, screaming. I listened to the piercing voice of her and the roar and the clanging of bells. Horses came running up behind me, with heavy thuds of hoofs, and voices in chorus went up with every leap of the fire. It was like a delirium with the fever; and the grass, under

my hands where I sat, felt moist and cool.

Then all of a sudden the shouting and noise all seemed to stop at once, so there was nothing but the snapping and crackle and hiss of the flames, and a voice of a little boy cried out:--

"The Judge is climbing down the porch! He's got something in his arms!"

"It's the baby!" yelled the depot master, throwing his hat on the ground. "He's saved the baby!"

I began to cry again, and wondered why the people did not cheer. There was only a sort of mumble of little shouts and cries and oaths, and the people fell to one side and the other, as the Judge came toward me.

"Come, Margaret," he said.

I looked up and saw he was all blackened with smoke and soot, except where the sweat had run down in white streaks. His face was close to mine.

"Come! Do you hear?" he said. "I don't believe she's hurt, but we must see. We'll go across to the Danforths'. There is nothing to do here. I've got Julianna!"

Just as if the fire was answering him, there came a great ripping and roaring, as if something had given away and collapsed. A tower of flames shot up out of the roof--a sort of bud of flame that opened into a great flower with petals. It was horrible to see the shingles curl and fall in a blazing stream down onto the ground, as if they were drops of hot metal.

It stupefied me, perhaps; I cannot remember how we went to the neighbor's house or who welcomed us or how we got into the room on the second floor, with a candle burning on the bureau. I noticed how small and ridiculous the flame was and laughed. Indeed, I think when I laughed, I woke up--really woke from my sleep for the first time.

"I went for a walk," the Judge was saying. "I had a headache. I couldn't sleep. I moved the lamp onto the card table. The curtain must have blown into it. We must thank God. We were lucky, very lucky!"

He was pacing up and down there like a caged animal.

"I'm thankful Eleanor, my wife, wasn't at home," he went on, talking very fast. "She has always been so delicate--had so much sorrow--so much trouble. A shock would kill her--a shock like that. My God, we were lucky!"

I got up and pushed the tangled hair back from my face.

"It's all right," he went on with a thick tongue. "Julianna is all right--the little rascal is smoky, but all right. Blow the candle out. It is getting light outside. It's dawn."

The child on the bed kicked its pink feet out from under its long dresses and gave one of those gurgles to show it was awake. The sound made me scream. I had just awakened from my stupidity.

"The other child!" I cried.

"The other!" he said. "What other?"

"The one he left," I whispered. "I had forgotten her."

"My God! so had I. I had only one thought," he cried out. "Only one thought! And now Chalmers's wish has been granted. His--has--gone."

He sat down in a wicker rocking-chair and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand.

"I never thought," he said again. "I didn't see it anywhere. I didn't look for it. I found Julianna in the middle of the bed."

"Bed!"

[Illustration: IT MUST BE JULIANNA]

That was the only word I had. The light of sunrise had come. The shouts in the street were far away.

"Why, yes," the Judge said. "I--did--I found--"

He stopped, he walked over to the infant and swept it into his arms. He took it to the window and held it up to the light as a person looks at a piece of dressgoods.

"Why, it must be Julianna," he whispered.

Then I heard noises in the back of his throat; he could not catch his breath at first, and when he did, he gave a low groan that seemed to have no end. The baby stared up at him and laughed. It was Monty Cranch's child.

CHAPTER IV

A SUPPRESSION OF THE TRUTH

It was I who took it out of his arms and I who watched him go to the bed and fall across it face downwards, and hide his eyes like a man who cannot stand to see the light of day. If Fate ever played a fiendish trick and punished a square and upright man, it had done it then! I did not dare to speak to him. I did not dare to move. I laid the happy, gurgling baby in my lap and sat there till I felt that every joint in my body had grown tight in its socket.

Once they rapped on the door. The Judge did not move, so I opened it a crack and motioned them away, and sat down again, watching the light turn from pink to the glare of full day, and then a path of warm summer sunlight stretch out across the rug and climb down the wall till it fell onto a basin of water sitting on the floor, and the reflection jumped up to dance its jigs on the ceiling.

I heard the Judge move often enough, but I did not know he was on his feet until I looked up at last, and there he was standing in front of me, with his wild eyes staring down at the child.

He pointed at the little thing with his long forefinger.

"Julianna," said he.

"You are mad, sir," I cried.

"No," said he. "My wife! It must be done to save her happiness. Yes! To save her life."

"To save her?" I repeated after him.

"Yes, a lie," he whispered bitterly. "She has not seen the baby for weeks and weeks."

"She could never know," I cried, understanding what he meant. "That is true, sir. No one could ever tell. The two of them were not different anyway. But you--! You could never forget."

"I know," said he. "Yet it is my happiness against hers, and I have made up my mind. No living soul can ever learn of this. I am safe there. Chalmers will never come back. Nor could he ever know if he did. And so--"

"But the blood," I said, trembling with the thought. "What of that?"

"God help us!" he answered, beating his knuckles on his jaws. "How can I say? But, come what may, I have decided! That child is now Julianna! Give her to me!"

He took the infant in his arms again, pressing it close to him, as if it were a nettle which must be grasped with full courage to avoid the pricks of its thousand barbs.

"What are you?" he whispered to the new Julianna. "What will you be? What is your birthright?"

Well I remember his words, spoken in that half-broken voice; they asked questions which have not been answered yet, I tell you! And yet little attention I paid to them at the moment, for the mischief Welstoke had taught me crept around me again. I could not look at the Judge with his youth dropped off him, his voice and face ten years older and his eyes grown more tender by the grief and love and sacrifice of an hour, without turning away from him. Why? Because a voice from the grave was whispering to me as cool as wet lettuce, to prove that the good or bad of a soul does not end with death.

"Didn't I tell you that skeletons hang in all closets?" it said. "Now, after this night, the Judge, to use a good old phrase, is quite in your power. Bide your time, my dear. We women will come into our own again."

"Excuse me, sir," I said, aloud. "There was a locket on the child's neck. Wouldn't it be well to remove it? It is marked with a name that must be forgotten."

He looked at me gratefully as he fumbled at the trinket with his long, smoke-blackened fingers, while I trembled with my desire to have it safe in my own hands. It was the one thing left to prove the truth. I believe my arms were stretched out for it, when there came a knock on the door.

"You want some breakfast," said a voice. "You poor tired people!"

The Judge, jumping up, placed the little chain and locket on the window sill. I saw it slide down the incline; the screen was up far enough to let it through. It was gone! He gave an exclamation, but the next moment the door had opened and the Danforth family were crowding in.

"Well, Colfax," said the old lawyer, "you're a lucky man. Everybody safe and sound and a very ugly old colonial house burned flat to the ground, with plenty of insurance. Now that you have the new appointment and are going to leave town, it makes a very convenient sale for you."

"Hush!" said his daughter. "The hot coffee is more important. You had better bring the baby down with you. We have sent for milk and nursing-bottles. There, John, that is the baby. You've never seen it. Wasn't I right? Isn't it pretty?"

"My God!" cried the Judge.

"What!" said they.

"I must be tired," he answered. "It has been a strain. It was nothing."

We went out onto the porch for a moment when we were below, and stood out of sight behind the vines. The street was still crowded with curious people, and there was a great black hole with the elm trees, scorched brown, drooping over it--a hole filled with the ashes that were all that was left of the home. Men were playing a hose into it and every time they moved the stream, here or there, a great hiss and cloud of vapor came up. Some one had hung the Judge's straw hat on a lilac bush and there it advertised itself. But the Judge drew himself up and stiffened his body and set his teeth, as he looked at that scene, and I knew then he would not break down again, but would play the game he had begun to the end.

Indeed, I felt his fingers at my sleeve.

"I shall slip away to get the locket," he whispered. "Do you understand? Just a moment. Tell them I will be right back."

He went around the house and I into the hall.

"Judge Colfax will return in a minute," I explained.

"Of course!" said Miss Danforth. "We will wait for him."

The minutes passed. He did not come back.

"Where did you say he went?" asked the old barrister--or lawyer, as you call them.

I shook my head and turned the baby onto my other arm. In a second more I heard his voice on the porch.

"Margaret!" he called.

I went out to him.

His face showed his nervousness again. His fingers trembled as he took the baby from me.

"Go! Look!" he whispered. "I cannot find it!"

This was my chance! I went. The grass below the window had grown long and was matted down; people on the street were watching me and I did not dare to drop on my knees for fear some well-meaning and unwelcome assistance might come for the search. Nevertheless I pushed my toes, I thought, over every inch of the ground below the window. I doubled and redoubled the space. At last the Danforths' cook raised the screen.

"What are ye doing?" said she. "Come in. The baby's food is here already."

What could I say? How could I avoid going? There was no way. But the Judge had not found the locket. Nor had I.

But the Judge had other worries, I'm telling you. He feared the news of the fire would reach his wife in some wrong way and he telegraphed her. She answered by saying she was leaving for home. Brave woman that she was! The telegram said, "It is worth the fire to feel the leap of the heart when I know that you all were saved for me."

"Will she ever know?" he whispered, staring down at the laughing baby, with its little pink, curved mouth.

"Will she ever know? I did this for her. God, tell me if I was right!"

"Be easy, sir," I said to him. "Have no fear. There is no one in the world but you and me can tell the story of last night. After these weeks and weeks your wife has been away, there is nobody but me or you who can say this child is not--"

"Julianna," he choked.

"Yes, sir," said I.

I was right. What it cost the Judge's soul I do not know. But that the lie he acted in the name of love was not discovered by the thin woman and wife, whose only beauty was in the light of her eyes, I know very well. The years that she lived--it was after we all came to this city, when the Judge took his new office--were happy enough years for her. Rare enough is the brand of devotion he gave to her; rare enough was the beauty and sweetness of the girl that grew up calling her "Mother."

In all that time never a word did he say to me of what only he and I knew, and I have often thought of what faith he must have had in human goodness--what full, unchanging, constant, noble faith--to trust a servant the way he seemed to trust me by his silence. I have believed ever since that no man or animal can long be mean of soul under the terrible presence of kindness and confidence. For all the trickery that the inherited character of my mother and that Madame Welstoke had poured into my nature was driven bit by bit out of my heart by the trust the Judge put in me, and his looking upon me as a good and honest woman. Long before my love for Julianna had grown strong, I knew that I never could bring myself to use my knowledge of the Judge's secret to wring money from him, or in fact for any other purpose than to feel sorrow for what his fear of the future must have made him suffer.

I knew well enough how the blood of the daughter preyed upon his mind. There is no child that, sooner or later and more than once, does not come to a time of badness and stubbornness and mischief, and when those times came to Julianna, the Judge would watch her as if he expected to see her turn into a snake like magic in a fairy story. More than that, for days he would be odd and silent, and when he thought no one was looking at him, he would sit with his face in his hands, thinking and brooding and afraid.

I found out, too, that he had tried to trace the father, John Chalmers, back to the days when he wore his own name, and it may have been that then he would have strived to go back to Monty's father and grandfather, and so on, as far as he could go. I knew about it because one day I was looking through his desk drawers--prying has always been a failing with me!--and I found a letter from Mr. Roddy, the newspaper reporter, who I had almost forgotten. Mr. Roddy said that he never had been able to find anything of the murderer's history before the time he was employed in Bermuda, and I know my heart jumped with pleasure, for I could not see what good it would do for the Judge to know; and I felt, for some reason, that the name of Cranch was one that both he and I would not have smudged with the owner's misdeeds and folly. You may say that it was strange that pictures of love--the love which came and went like the shadow of a flying bird, flitting across a wall--should have still been locked up in an old woman's heart. But they were there to be called back, as they are now, with all their colors as clear and bright as the pictures of Julianna's future that the Judge used to see pass before the eyes of his fear.

At first I used to think that the master was principally in terror because of the chance that some strange trick of fate would show his wife the truth. The older and more beautiful and the more lovable and affectionate the little daughter grew, and the weaker and whiter the poor deceived woman, the worse the calamity would have been. Perhaps I thought this was the Judge's fear, because of its being my own. I was always feeling that the blow was about to fall, and I prayed that Mrs. Colfax would no longer be living when it came.

But at last she was gone. She died when Julianna was eleven, and had long braids of hair that would have been the envy of the mermaids, and eyes that had begun to grow deep like pools of cool water, and a figure that had begun to be something better than the stalkiness of a child. Mrs. Colfax died with a little flickering smile one day, and the Judge put his arms around her and then fell on his knees. She looked thin and worn, but very happy.

"Sleep," he whispered to her.

And then he opened the door and called Julianna.

"You must not be afraid, dear," he said to her. "Death is here, but Death is not terrible. See! She has smiled. We can tell that she knew that we would see her again in a little while, can't we?"

"Why, yes," said Julianna. "For she never thought first of herself, but of us."

Then the Judge put out his arms and held the girl close to him, so that I knew a fresh love for her had come into his heart. Perhaps on account of it he had more fear than ever. One day he brought home a book in a green cover; I read the words on the back--"Some Aspects of Heredity." Nor was that book the last of its kind he bought or sat reading till late at night, with his pipe held in the crook of his long fingers and his forehead drawn down into a scowl. I could tell he was wondering about the mystery of that which goes creeping down from mother or father to son and daughter, and on and on, like a starving mongrel dog that slinks along after a person, dropping in the grass when a person speaks cross to it, running away when a person turns and chases it, and then, when it has been forgotten, a person looks around and there it is again, skulking close behind. "And then," as Madame Welstoke used to say, folding her hands, "if you call it 'Heredity,' it knows its name and wags its tail!"

One would have said that the Judge always expected that some creature like that would crawl up behind the

girl. I used to imagine, when Julianna came into the room, that he looked over her shoulder or behind her, as if he expected to see it there with its grinning face. And, moreover, I've seen him look at the soft, fine skin of her round forearms, or the little curls of hair at the back of her neck, or the lids of her eyes, when they were moist in summer, or the half moons on the nails of her fingers, as if he might be able to see there some sign of her birth or the first bruises made by this thing called "Heredity," that would say, if it could talk, "Come. Don't you feel the thrill of my touch? You belong not to yourself, my dear, but to me."

I knew. And as the girl came into womanhood, and he saw, perhaps, that I was watching her, too, I think he longed for sympathy and wanted the relief of speech. Finally he spoke. It was late one night and he had his hand on the stair rail, when he heard me locking the window in the hall. He turned quickly.

"Margaret," he whispered.

"Yes, sir," I answered.

"Thank God, she is a woman and not a man," he said, out of a clear sky; "for a woman is better protected against herself."

For a moment he seemed to be thinking; then he looked at the floor.

"Does Julianna ever take a glass of sherry or claret when I am not at dinner?" he asked. "I thought it had gone quickly."

"Why, no!" I replied.

He nodded the way he did when he was satisfied--the way a toyshop animal's head nods--less and less until it stops.

"I'm sorry I asked," he said. "Good-night."

What he had said was enough to show me that his imagination had been sharpened and sharpened and sharpened. Perhaps you know how it is when some one does not come back until late at night, and how, when you are waiting, listening to the ticking of the clock, or the sounds of footsteps or cab horses in the street, coming nearer and nearer and then going farther and farther away, you can imagine all kinds of things like highway robbery and accidents and hospitals, and the telephone seems ready to jump at you with a piece of bad, bad news. So it was with him, except that he did not see pictures of what had happened, but pictures of what might come. I knew that he feared the character that might crop out of the good and beautiful girl, and I thought sometimes, too, that he still had fits of believing, though the past was buried under the years, that sometime the ugly ghost of the truth would come rapping on the window pane in the dead o' night.

Perhaps I can say, in spite of the fact that we never knew of a certainty, that it did. We had cause to know that, barring the Judge and me and Monty Cranch, wherever he might have been, a new and strange and evil thing showed itself as the fourth possessor of our secret.

Julianna, in that year, had begun going to a new school--fashionable, you might call it, and many is the time I have smiled, remembering how it came about. The woman with the old-fashioned cameo brooch, who kept it, did everything to invite the Judge to send his daughter there, except to ask him outright, and afterward I heard she had rejoiced to have the one she called "the best-born girl in all the city" at her school, which she boasted, in the presence of her servants, was not made like the others, with representatives of ten Eastern good families as social bait for a hundred daughters, of Western quick millionaires.

I mention this because it was the beginning of times when Julianna was being asked to other girls' houses and

for nice harmless larks at fine people's country-places, when vacations came. On one of these times when she was away, a voice came whispering to us out of the past!

It was the Christmas season, bitter cold, and before I went to bed I could hear the wind snapping the icicles off the edge of the library balcony and sending them, like bits of broken goblets onto bricks and crusted snow below. I could see the flash of them, too, as they went by the light from the frosted windows in the kitchen basement, but nothing else showed outside in the old walled garden, for it was as black as a pocket.

Not later than ten I crawled up the stairs and stood for a minute in the dining-room. I heard the scratch of the Judge's pen and knew he was hard at work, and I remember, when I looked through the curtains, how I thought of how old the Judge looked, with his hair already turning from gray to white, and of how the youth of all of us hangs for a moment on the edge and then slides away without any warning or place where a body can put a finger and say, "It went at that moment." Perhaps I would have stood there longer, but the Judge looked up and smiled, dry enough.

"You may think I am working," he said. "But I'm mostly engaged just now, Margaret, exerting will power to overcome a foolish fancy."

"What is that, sir?" I asked.

"That somebody is watching me," he said. "I've turned around a dozen times and left this seat twice already. It's an uncomfortable feeling, but I've made up my mind not to look again."

"Not to look?" I cried.

"No. There's nothing there."

"Where?" I said.

"Below--in the garden or on the balcony," he answered; "somewhere outside the window."

"Bless us, I'll look," I whispered, walking toward the back of the room.

It might have been my fancy or my own reflection, but whatever it was, I thought I saw a dark and muffled thing move outside. It forced a scream from me, and that one little cry was enough to bring the Judge up out of his chair, knowing well enough without words that I had seen something.

"That's enough!" he said, his long legs striding toward the French windows. "Stand back, Margaret. We'll look into this."

He tore the glass doors open, the bitter cold wind flickered the lamp, and by some sensible instinct I pulled the cord of the oil burner. I knew that as he stood on the balcony, looking, he could see nothing with a light behind him. Furthermore, I did not move, because I knew that he was listening, too. Both of us heard the scrape of something on the icy garden walk, the moment the lights went out. Immediately after it the Judge called to me.

"Look!" he said. "Isn't something moving there along the shrubs?"

"Yes," I whispered. "It's near the ground. It crawls."

"What do you want?" called the Judge to the moving thing. Then, although he had no revolver at hand, he said, "Answer, or I'll shoot."

The only reply to this was the sound of breathing and one little cough that sounded human. The Judge reached behind him with one long arm, feeling around the little table by the window for some object. At last his fingers closed on it and I knew he had the little bronze elephant that now stands on the mantel, where Mrs. Estabrook turns it so it will not show that it has lost its tail.

"We are a pair of old fools," said the Judge, as if he was not sure. "It probably is a cat."

With these words he poised the bronze that was solid and must have weighed two pounds, and hurled it into the garden. There was a sound of striking flesh that a body can tell from all others. I heard it! And then, quicker than I tell it, the sharp clear air was filled with a cry which died away, as if it had flown up to the milky, starry sky and left us listening to strange, inhuman groans coming up from the garden.

"My God!" cried the Judge. "I did not mean to hit it! It wasn't a cat! It is something else."

"The kitchen!" I cried, and without stopping to close the doors against the nipping cold, I led the way down the back stairs.

"No time for caution," he said. "Unbolt this door. See, it is writhing there on the snow! It is a child!"

I believed at first that he was right. As we ran forward it seemed to be a naked, half-starved child of six or seven years, wallowing in the snow in some terrible agony. My heart jumped against my ribs as I saw it. I stopped in my tracks and let the Judge go on alone.

In a second his voice rose in a tone that braced me like a glass of brandy.

"See!" he cried. "Thank Heaven! It is only a poor, cringing dog--a shaggy hound. Here, you poor beast. Did I hurt you? Come, Laddie, come, boy!"

"Laddie" he had called him, and it was the same "Laddie" that lived with us so long.

"Margaret!" cried the Judge, as he pulled the dirty creature into the kitchen. "A light! The thing is half-starved. Bring some food upstairs to the library."

The hound was licking his hand and cowering as if accustomed to abuse, and from that night it was nearly six months before the old fellow got his flesh and healthy coat of hair and his spirit back again. That night, having eaten, it looked about the room, found the Judge, went to him, and, laying his head in his lap, looked up at him out of his two sorrowful eyes. I knew then, by the smile of the Judge's mouth and the way he put on his tortoise-shell glasses, that "Laddie" would never be sent away. Just then, though, the master, after he had looked at the dog a minute, sprang up suddenly and stood staring at me with his mouth twitching.

"What is it, sir?" I asked.

"The dog!" he said.

"Yes, sir," I said. "The dog--"

"The gate swings shut with a spring!" he said. "Some human being must have opened the gate."

It was true! We looked at each other, and then the Judge laughed.

"Oh, well," said he carelessly, "if they want the dog they must come and claim him with proceedings at law. Make a bed for him in the back hall."

On my part, however, I was not satisfied so easily and many more peaceful moments I would have had if I had never pried further as I did. After all, I only asked one question and that early the next morning. In the house next to ours a brick ell was built way out to the alleyway along half the yard. The kitchen windows looked out on the passage. There was a maid in that house,--a second girl, as they call them in this country,--and I knew she was a great person for staying up late, telling her own fortune with cards or reading a dream-book. She was hanging clothes in the early sun, with her red hair bobbing up and down above the sheets and napkins, when I stood on a chair and looked over the wall.

"Busy early?" I said. "But I saw your light late last night. Did you by any chance see anybody come in through our gate?"

"Only you," the stupid thing said. "At first I thought it was some other woman, because, begging your pardon, you looked thin. But it was after nine and I knew you'd not be having callers that late."

My tongue grew so dry it was hard to move it from the roof of my mouth, and before I could put in a word she threw a handful of clothespins into the basket and looked up again.

"When did you get a dog?" she asked. "I saw you had one with you."

"Dog!" I cried. "Oh, yes, the dog. That's the Judge's new dog."

I jumped down off the chair and looked up at the windows to be sure the Judge was not looking at me.

"A woman!" I whispered.

With a hundred thoughts I went across the garden, looking in the snow for a person's tracks. It had grown warmer, however. Water was dripping from the roof, and if there had been any snow, it had thawed away. I walked along with my head down, thinking and wondering whether I would tell the Judge. Mrs. Welstoke used to say, "Silence, my dear, is the result of thinking. You might not suppose so, perhaps, but why tell anything without a reason? People find out the good or bad news soon enough without your help. If it's good, their appetite is the sharper for it, and if it's bad, they have had just so much longer in peace." I thought of these words and wondered, too, what use it would be to worry the master. If evil was to come, it would come. And then, at that moment, my eye lit on something that shone in a hollow of the snow.

"A piece of jewelry!" I said to myself, stooping for it. My fingers never reached it in that attempt; instinct made them draw back as if the object had been of red-hot metal. But it was not of red-hot metal. It was of gold. It was a locket. It was the very locket and chain that had been taken from the neck of Monty Cranch's baby!

"So!" I cried, starting back as if it had been a tarantula; "so it is you! Found at last!"

CHAPTER V

AGAIN THE MOVING FIGURE

When it was in my fingers, I looked all about in a guilty way to see if any one had seen me pick it up, and then, with the metal icy cold in my hand, my head swam. I knew the meaning of my find. The thing had not come out of its hiding to spring upon us of its own accord. Human hands had preserved it, and human feet had brought it into the garden in the dead of a winter night, and human fright had been the cause of leaving it behind.

I had searched once for this trinket, with a plan to use it as a weapon of evil, and now it was mine. It was mine, and yet all my love for the Judge and Julianna, for whom I would have given my life, made me look upon it as if it were a snake. My first thought was its destruction. I wanted to throw it in the furnace. I longed to have an anvil and hammer, so that I could beat it into a pulp of gold. I wished a crack in the earth might open miles deep so I could drop it in.

I went into the kitchen where the cook was busy with her pastry, and up to my own room. It was there I began to think sensibly. I believed that whoever might want to come now and say, "I know. That is a murderer's child," no longer would have the proof. I believed that Julianna was safe again. So long as I had the locket and Monty Cranch was lost in the depths of time and perhaps dead, no real harm, I thought, could come to her. Often enough I had remembered the moment when Mr. Roddy had begged the Judge to condemn Monty to death by an accusation of a crime he never committed, and how I had said, perhaps, the words that prevented the master from agreeing to the devilish plot. I had often wondered if I had not been the cause of all the Judge's troubles by my speaking then. This thought, for the moment, prevented me from hurrying downstairs in time to catch the Judge before he went out. I could hear him hunting around the corners for his grapevine stick, humming a tune.

"What good, after all, to tell?" said I to myself. "Just as he kept a secret for the happiness of his wife, I will keep one for the sake of his peace of mind."

I heard the front door close and knew that he had gone.

"If I took the locket to him," I thought, "what would he believe? Only that I had had it in my possession all these years. After all, I am only a servant. He would be suspicious. He would believe I had invented the story of finding it in the yard. It would spoil all his trust in me and that would break my heart."

So my thoughts went around and a week passed, in which there was not a night that I did not sit in my bedroom window, looking out at the cold garden and the black alley, expecting to see some one lurking there. A hundred times I took the locket out of its hiding-place and wondered what to do, and at last it came to me that the first question the Judge would ask was why I had not told him at once. That was enough to clinch the matter; until to-night the secret has been my own and you can blame me or not, as you see fit.

It was painful enough for me--a lonely old maid--with nothing but memories of a wasted girlhood and no one to help me see the right of things. Many is the night I have wet my pillow with tears, being afraid that I had always played the wrong part and would finally be the cause of the ruin of those I had grown to love.

Of all those bad moments, none was more bitter than that when the Judge told me that the day would come when Julianna must know the truth. To this day I remember the study as it was then. Workmen had been redecorating the walls, and all the furniture was moved into the centre of the room, strips of paper were gathered into a tangled pile on the floor, and in the middle of the confusion, the Judge was sitting in his easy-chair, with his eyes looking a thousand miles away, and his lips moving just enough to keep his old pipe alight. He looked up as I drew the curtains.

"Don't light the lamp yet," he said. "You are a woman and I want to talk to you."

"It's about Julianna," said I.

"Yes," said he, "about her. She is eighteen. Her birthday is scarcely a week away. I suppose she will fall in love sometime?"

"Of course," I answered. "Women are not cast in her mould to be old maids."

"Isn't it funny?" he said. "I just began to think of it yesterday. I never realized. I thought we had at least ten years more before there would be any chance. They are women before one can turn around! It is surprising."

"It's terrible," I added.

"Yes," said he, "it's terrible! Because if any man won her, then I would have to tell--"

He stopped there and shut his two fists.

"Tell the truth!" I exclaimed.

"Yes," said he. "I'd have to tell him. Could I let him be cheated?"

"Cheated!" I cried. "No man is good enough for her, that's what I think!"

"I said cheated!" he answered roughly, as if he was trying to harden his own feelings. "He would be putting dependence upon her inherited characteristics, wouldn't he? And then, if anything ever cropped out in her, if he didn't know, how could he understand her or forgive her or help her?"

"Judge," said I, "you spoke of my being a woman. Well, sir, I am an ignorant woman, but I know well enough that there are some things that you and I had best leave alone--some things that God will take care of by Himself."

At that his face screwed up in pain.

"Honor is honor!" he said, jumping up. "Truth is truth! And heredity is heredity!"

He seized his hat and went into the hall and down the front steps and off along the pavement with his long strides, like a man followed by a fiend.

It was the last word he ever spoke on the subject until Mr. Estabrook came into our life. Then I saw from the first how things were going. When I caught the look on the girl's face as she watched the first man in whom she had taken that special interest, and when I saw him--begging your pardon--staring at her as if she were not real, I knew, with a sick feeling in my heart and throat, that the day would come when he would take her away from us.

It was like a panic to me. I could not stand it and I called the Judge. I wanted to speak with him. I nodded and beckoned to him and tried to show him what was going on, for though a mother has the eyes of a hawk, a father is often blind. And I thought that night he was going out without my having a chance to say a word. I went down to the kitchen and then to the dark laundry, out of sight of the cook. I threw my apron over my head and cried like an old fool from fright. It was in the midst of it that I heard the gate-latch.

"The woman again!" I said to myself. "The strange woman! She feels there's something wrong, too. She's

come back!"

I could hear my own heart thumping as I stared out into the dark, wiping my eyes to get the fog out of them. Minutes went by before I saw that it was the Judge. He had come back to hear what I had to say, and I think when I told him that he was as upset as I had been. Well I remember how his voice trembled as he told me how he had written the paper telling the whole secret, except for my knowing about it, to Julianna, in case he should die, and how, then and there, I made up my mind that if God would let me I would keep the girl from ever reading it. And to this day she does not know that I loved her that much. What made me fail to do this is something you are aware of already, just as you know all the story of the marriage and a time of happiness before this new and dreadful, dreadful thing, whatever it is, came to us.

Well enough for you, Mr. Estabrook, to notice the change in your wife. It is well enough for you to wonder what has come to her and why she has driven you out of your own house. But do not forget that I held her as a baby in my arms and saw her grow into a woman, as free from guilt or blame as any that ever lived. It may all be a mystery to you, sir. I tell you it is all a hundred times more a mystery to me who know no more of it than you, though in these terrible days I have been alone with her, locked into a deserted house, with every other servant sent away and the quiet of the grave over everything.

"Is it some of Monty Cranch's wild blood?" I have asked, and with that question no end of others.

I asked them when her arm had been hurt, and was getting well in those days when she seemed to be in a dream, with her silent thoughts and her frightened face. For hours she would sit in the window at night, looking out into the park, as you know, and daytimes, when you were away, many is the time I have found her on her bed, shaking with her misery and tears.

I asked those questions, too, when one night--a month ago--she came into my bedroom, walking like a ghost in her bare feet.

"Margaret," she whispered, trembling, "I can't wake Mr. Estabrook. I haven't the courage to. I want you to come to the front windows."

"Yes," said I. "What is the matter?"

"Oh, I don't know!" she cried. "Come. Come. He is there again!"

I had crept through the cold hall with her, and we kneeled down together under the ledge. Moonlight was on the street. The shadows of the trees moved back and forth slowly.

"Look! Now! Behind that post over the way!" she said, pinching my arm. "Do you see him?"

"See who?" I gasped. "What is it? I see nothing."

"He stretched his hands out!" she cried. "He isn't real! You see nothing?"

"Nothing," said I.

"I was afraid so!" she cried, and broke away from me and shut the door of her own room in my face. Nor have I ever since been able to get a word from her concerning that night.

It was about the same time I discovered that, though she almost never left the house, she was telephoning for messenger boys when she thought I was out of hearing. It set my curiosity on edge, I tell you. I began to watch. And then I discovered she was sending out little envelopes and getting little envelopes in return. All

my old training with Mrs. Welstoke came back to me; I made up my mind to be as sly as a weasel. Finally my chance came.

I had been out to do some shopping and walked home across the park. Just as I came within sight of the house, I saw a messenger boy come down our steps. I ran as fast as my old limbs would carry me, until I caught up with him.

"Little boy!" I said.

He looked around, half frightened and half impudent.

"There's been a mistake!" I told him. "Where did the lady tell you to take the message."

"Why, to the man with the gold teeth," said he.

"There's a mistake in it," said I. "Give me the envelope."

He looked at me suspiciously.

"Not on yer life," he said. "You'll get me in trouble. I won't open it for anybody."

"But there's money in it," I said.

"No, there ain't," he answered, feeling of the envelope. "I guess I can tell!"

"Hold it up to the light, then," said I, for the sun was shining very bright. "We'll see who is right."

He did this, and the writing was as plain as if written on the outside. It was her own hand, too, though it was not signed.

"She must have some more," it said.

"Where does the man with the gold teeth live?" I asked, trying to smile and look careless.

"I shan't say!" said the boy. "There is some funny business here. Let go of me!"

He twisted himself away and ran off, looking over his shoulder to see if I was following him.

I went back to the house then, and it was when I was in my room that I heard the telephone bell and Mrs. Estabrook's soft voice talking very low. I crept out and hung over the stair rail trying to listen. Any one could tell in a second that the poor girl was in fright.

"Who was it?" she asked. "Did they learn anything from the boy? How long ago?"

There was a pause.

"Can't you see how terrible it would be if any one knew about her?" she said. "Do you believe she is being watched? You do! Detectives! I can't talk any more--good-bye!"

That was what she said and for a week afterward she was walking through the house, up and down each room, like a creature in a cage, listening for every sound and nursing her head with her hands as if she were afraid it would burst. She would sit down in a chair and then jump up again, as if the place she had chosen to rest was

red-hot. Every moment she was with her husband she seemed to be holding herself in check, as if he might read some terrible thing in her eyes. Then, all of a sudden, she would get some message from outside and she would be peaceful again and sigh and fold her beautiful hands.

You can see well enough that I was ready for something queer. But when it came, it was so unaccountable that I could scarcely believe I wasn't living in a dream. It was late one afternoon when I came down from my room and found her talking through the crack of the front door to somebody outside in the vestibule. I could hear the whisper of voices and I thought the other person was a man. I can be sly when I want to, so I did not go forward at all, but crept back and along the upper hall to the window. After a minute or two I heard the door close and somebody going down the steps. I had raised the screen already so that I could lean out to see who it was.

For some reason I felt I should know the person. I had a horrid feeling that it was somebody I had seen before. The name of Monty Cranch was almost ready on my lips in spite of my old idea, which had never left me, that I had seen him--at least in this world--for the last time. Therefore it was almost a surprise to me to find that the man was as far different from her father as butter from barley. Whoever the man might be, he was tall and thin and had a white, disagreeable skin and a nervous way of looking to right and left, holding his chin in his hands. I never got a good look at his face. But once he turned up his head, perhaps to look at the house. He had gold teeth--a whole front row of them! This, perhaps, was the man the messenger boy had described--the man to whom Mrs. Estabrook was addressing secret communications. Certainly it was no one I had ever seen, and certainly, too, there was something in that fleeting glance at the lower part of his face which made me have no wish to see his ugly countenance again.

His visit, at any rate, set me to thinking more than ever, and that night as I walked about the dining-room, serving the courses in place of the maid who was away, I think I felt for the first time a doubt about my mistress. She had always seemed to me like a creature of heaven, and as I stood back of her chair, looking down upon those beautiful shoulders and white arms and head of soft and shining hair, it was hard to believe she was in some conspiracy of which she had kept her husband in ignorance with the slyness of a snake. I felt sorry for him. So at the moment of my first doubt of her, I found that pity--begging your pardon!--had at last made me ready to forget that I had never liked him or his cold ways, and ready to forgive the once he laid violent hands on me. My mistress had not chosen to tell me anything and had acted toward me as suspicious as if she had believed me capable of meaning evil to her. She had turned my questions aside and reminded me of my place. I suppose it was only human nature for me to lose sympathy with her and begin to have it with the man who sat across the table from her, all in the dark about the curious and perhaps terrible affairs that were hanging over his home and always kind and patient and, I may say,--begging your pardon!--innocent, too! It was during that meal that I made up my mind to tell him all I knew. It seemed to me the best and safest course; I would have taken it if he had stayed another day in the house.

His going was a mystery to me. I only knew that Mrs. Estabrook said that she had asked him to go and that he had gone. The front door had hardly closed behind him that morning before she unlocked her room and called to me to come to her. I shall never lose the picture of her face as I saw it then. She was sitting in that big wing-chair which is covered with the figured cretonne and her face was as white as a newly ironed napkin. It was so white that it did not seem real, but more like the face of some vision that comes and sits for a minute and fades away before a little draft of air. Her hands were on the chair arms just like the hands of those Egyptian kings, carved out of alabaster, that you see in museums. She might have been one of those queens of great empires in the old times. She might have heard the roar of battle and seen the retreat of her army from the windows of the palace and had plunged a thin little dagger into her breast so that she would not be captured alive. It cut me to the heart to see how beautiful she was--and how terrible!

"Margaret," she said to me, spacing off her words. "Margaret."

"Little girl!" I cried out, forgetting the passage of all the years. And I fell on my knees beside her.

"Sh! Sh!" she said. "I need your help. It is a desperate matter. You must be calm."

"And what shall I do?" I asked.

"This--as I tell you," she answered, her eyes fixed on mine. "Send every one else out of the house--only before they go, I want everything taken out of this room of mine--all the furniture, all the rugs, all the pictures. I want the blinds drawn everywhere, the doors bolted. For three weeks I want no person to come across the threshold. I want you to stay that long indoors--in this house. Mr. Estabrook will not come back during that time, and to all others I want you to say that he is away and that I am away, too,--or ill,--or anything that will seem best to you. I never want you to come near my locked door unless I call for you."

"But, Mrs. Estabrook!" I cried, my lips all of a tremble.

"Wait," she said. There was a look in her eyes that seemed to go into me like a knife. "Come to my door every morning. Bring a glass of milk. Knock. If I do not answer, have the door broken down! That is all; do you hear?"

"Mercy on us!" I cried. "Tell me what this means. Are you mad?"

She put her soft hand on my cheek for a second.

"No," said she, with a voice growing as hard as the rattling of wire nails. "Do as I say. Do it for the sake of the lives of all of us!"

I believed then that she was sane. There was something in her eyes, as I have said, that would have tamed a tiger. I got up. I did everything she had asked. The furnishings were all moved out of her room until it looked as bare as a place to rent in December. There was nothing on the floor but a mattress and a chair, which were left by her directions. I sent the servants away with instructions to come back after three weeks' time. At last, when all was done and I was alone, walking through the house like a sour-faced ghost, I climbed the stairs to her door. It was locked! I have not caught sight of her face since!

I cannot tell any one what I have been through in these days of waiting. I only know it has been like a terrible dream--like those dreams that make the perspiration come out on the forehead with the struggle to wake or cry out or toss the smothering thing from off a body's lungs and heart. And till now, in spite of all, I have been faithful enough to my trust.

I have turned away all the visitors that came. I have gone each morning to my mistress's door for orders that were spoken through the panels. I have walked up and down the silent rooms below, day after day, or sat in the library trying to read and listening to the tread of some one in that awful room above, with every hour dragging as if the hands of the clock on the mantel were slipping back almost as fast as they moved forward. Then the steps would stop and the clock would go on with its everlasting ticking. And if I listened hard, I could hear the big clock in the hall take up the tune like a duet. Then the one in the front room above would join in, then the one in the kitchen, until there was such a clamor of ticking that it would drive a body to distraction with a sound like a hundred typewriters all going at once.

I have heard voices, too. Voices seemed to be whispering in the hall as if some one were welcoming people at a funeral, voices seemed to be chatting in the basement, and again there would be a murmur like a rabble of voices all talking together in a room far away. Often it was more than a fancy, I can tell you. I heard real voices in the room of my mistress.

I began to have the idea that it was not my mistress's voice alone. There seemed to be another in argument with her. There seemed to be a strange voice speaking in an undertone--a voice I thought I never had heard

before. I crept up along the hall and listened. Everything was still. But in spite of all, I began to feel that there was more than one person on the other side of those thick white panels. I knew it was folly to suppose such a thing, but I began to have the idea that another--a woman or a talkative child--was with her behind the locked door.

Once this impossible idea took hold of me, I did all I could to get a peep within the room. I had been bringing the meals, that were not enough to keep a kitten alive, to the crack she would open to take them in. Believe me, that the very first time I tried to poke my head around where I could see, that practice stopped, and my mistress, in a dull and heavy voice, told me to leave everything on the floor and go away. It seemed that she had grown suspicious. It seemed that she had something to conceal. I brooded over the strangeness of it all until I began to wonder how this other person, whatever or whoever it might be, had ever entered the house. I even began to wonder whether creatures could be drawn from the air and put into the form of flesh and blood.

Finally came my chance to look. Three days ago, at about eleven o'clock in the morning, I heard the lock of her door slide over and a moment later she called to me. It was long after I had done her errand and had gone away that I began to be haunted by the thought that there had been no sound of the lock turning again. I heard the voices. I thought of the possibility that I might now softly open the door.

"A look! A look!" I heard my own tongue saying, as I tiptoed up the stairs and as I twisted the door knob by little turns, each one no more than the width of a hair.

I had been right about the lock. I discovered it at last when the door yielded. I looked in through a narrow crack. On the far side of the bare, dim room was my mistress on her knees, her clasped hands resting on the floor in front of her. She had not heard me and she seemed to be writhing as if in pain. Her skin was as pale as death. The whole picture gave a body the feeling that she had been thrown forward by some strong hand. I felt sure at that moment that I had not been mistaken--that some other person was there. I almost believed I saw its shadow falling across the floor. But after I had looked from one end to the other of the chamber, I knew at last that no one else was there.

If I had dared to speak I would have done so, but I felt that a word would be like dynamite, and would tear the silent house into a pile of smoking bricks and plaster. I felt sure it would act like an earthquake, toppling the house over into the street. I felt that a word would be like the roaring voice of some strange god that would send everything off in thin vapor. I felt I must shut the door, and I went away remembering the words of my Julianna, "If I do not answer some morning when you knock, have the door broken in!" and my heart jumped again with new fear. It was the fear of some other person who seemed to be in the house, unseen and hidden from my eyes. For in spite of my peep into the room, I felt that it was still there.

And now you have heard all! I have told everything--all that I know--things that many a time I have sworn to myself to take through my lonesome life unspoken to the grave.

BOOK V

THE MAN WITH THE WHITE TEETH

CHAPTER I

BLADES OF GRASS

When Margaret Murchie, sitting in the interior of the limousine, with the arc light playing through the thousand raindrops on the window pane spotting a face lined with the strength of a stolid old maid, had finished her narrative, there was no sound but that of the storm mourning down the avenue. Estabrook sat with his forehead in his hands. I had had enough experience in my practice with those who are struggling to overcome a great shock, not to speak until some word from him had disclosed the effect that Margaret's story had produced. His face was hidden, but his fingers moved on his temples as if he were grinding some substance there into powder. When at last he raised his head, his expression astounded me. It had, I thought, softened rather than hardened. A little patient smile almost concealed the fear that looked out of his eyes.

"The daughter of a murderer?" he asked, touching my knee.

What could I say?

"She must be in some distress, Doctor?" he whispered.

I nodded.

It was then that the true Estabrook went tearing up through the crust of custom, manners, traditions, egotism, smugness, and self-love. From the depths of his personality, the man for whom I have since that moment had a deep regard, then called his soul and it came. He leaned forward and looked through the misty glass in the door, across the wind-swept street, at the dripping front of his home, at the dim light that burned there.

"God, sir!" he said, turning on me with his teeth set like those of a fighting animal. "What's all this to me? I love her! She's mine! She's the most beautiful--the best woman in all the world!"

Margaret Murchie shivered.

After a moment Estabrook's hands were both clutching my sleeve.

"You'll stand by now?" he said, looking up into my face. "I can't ask any one else. You can see that. You'll help? What shall we do?"

"Depend on me," I answered him. "We must be careful. Wait! Just let me review these facts. The first move must be for us to send Margaret back into the house. Do you suppose your wife knows she is out of it?"

"I don't believe so," said he. "I watched the window all the time we were taking Margaret into this limousine. The curtains never moved."

"Good!" I cried. "Now, Miss Murchie, listen to what I say. How often does your mistress call you during the day?"

"Every three or four hours, I think, sir."

"Very well. Take this umbrella and go back. Use Mr. Estabrook's key. Enter as quietly as possible. Say nothing to any one. If your mistress should allow more than five hours to go by without calling you, go to her door and knock. If there is no answer, telephone my office. You mustn't allow a second of delay. It will mean danger."

Estabrook listened to these instructions with staring eyes.

"You know something!" he cried. "Tell me!"

I shook my head, opened the door, and the old servant, getting out, went waddling off across the street, her dress flapping in the wet wind.

"Come, Mr. Chauffeur!" I said to him. "You are to spend the night with me. To-morrow--"

"To-morrow?"

"Exactly," said I brusquely.

"And what then?"

"To-morrow I shall search for truth lying hidden among blades of grass!" said I. "In the mean time all the sleep I can pile into you may count more than you know!"

I had spoken with a note of authority because each moment I feared that he would become stubborn. I feared that, taking offense at my theories, he would reject my services and plunge into some folly at the moment when a most delicate balance between good and evil, life and death, safety and danger, might be overthrown on the side of terrible calamity. I was thankful when he once more showed himself tractable by climbing on the driver's seat and turning our course homeward. It was the small hours of morning that found me under the lamp in my study, giving the distracted young man a narcotic. When his head was nodding, he struggled once to open his eyes.

"I don't understand--anything--blades of grass--or anything," he asserted sleepily, as I closed his door.

Exhaustion had brought its childlike petulance, but I knew that drowsiness would do its work, and that he was now safely stowed away for at least ten hours. He would not interfere with my plans before noon.

For a few moments that night I sat on the edge of my own bed.

"What if I am right?" I whispered to myself. "What a drama! What a peep into the unexplored corners of our souls!"

I went to the window. An early milk cart clattered along the thoroughfare with a figure nodding on its seat. When the mud-spattered white horse had reached a circle of light shed from the lamp on the street corner, the figure arose and, looking up at the stars in the rifts of the sky, pulled off and folded a rubber coat. The storm had blown away.

"He does a simple little act," I said to myself as I watched the figure seat itself again. "His thoughts may be as simple. But the consequences of either! Who can say? Life itself is all on one side of a blue wall!"

* * * * *

Physicians, however, make good detectives. I mention this not to point out my own case particularly, but merely to call your attention to the fact that a good surgeon or practitioner has a training in those qualities of mind which produce a great solver of mysteries. A good physician must develop the powers of observation. In any physical disorder, knowing the cause, he must forecast the effect, or with the evidences of some effect before him, he must deduce the cause. Above all he must keep his mind from jumping at false conclusions, even though these conclusions are in line with all his former experiences. Physicians learn these principles by

their mistakes in following clues. A good diagnostician has in him the material for an immortal police inspector. I speak modestly, and yet I must say that the next morning proved that I was not mistaken in these theories.

Before nine o'clock I had arrived at the Marburys'. The banker himself opened the door.

"Doctor!" he cried, his face drawn out of its mask of eternal shrewdness and suspicion by a beaming smile, "what can I say? How can we ever show our gratitude?"

"Not so fast!" I reproved him. "There is danger in too much optimism. The disease is treacherous."

"But Miss Peters, the nurse--she sees it, too! There can be no doubt. Our little Virginia is saved! You have done it!"

I shook my head.

"Not I."

"Not you? Who, then?"

"Marbury," said I, "I am just beginning to learn that there are other contagions than those of the body. Can we be sure, my good sir, that fear is not a disease? Do we know that love is not an infection? Can the criminal's gloves, saturated with his personality, be safe for the hands of an honest man? Don't we weaken by rubbing elbows with the weak? Are there not contagious germs of thought?"

He raised his eyebrows. Finance he knew well. Otherwise he was a stupid man.

"I do not believe I follow you," he said nervously. "I was speaking of Virginia. She is so much better!"

I bowed to him politely, and, instead of entering the open door, descended the steps.

"You're not coming in?" he exclaimed.

"Not yet," said I. "To tell you the truth, I am looking in that grass plot next door for something dropped there. I see that no one has disturbed the grass. It has not even been cut. Hello! What's this?"

I had reached down, picked up a metal cylinder and showed it to him.

"It looks like a rifle cartridge--one of those murderous steel-nosed bullet affairs," said he.

"Something even more dangerous!" said I, thrusting it into my pocket. "Much more dangerous! Possibly you will believe that I am ungracious--rather odd as it were--not to mention its name."

He shook his head. The mask of the polite student of percents had returned; he became formally polite.

"Not at all," he answered, adjusting his black tie. "I had rather hoped you would stay to see my daughter."

"Another crisis prevents," I said, bowing at the door of my car. But the banker had turned his back.

"Where now, sir?" asked my chauffeur.

"The old Museum of Natural History."

"All cobblestones in those streets, sir," he said as we leaped forward again.

This was true. We fairly jounced our way to the old brownstone structure, which sat with such pathetic dignity on the square of discouraged grass, frowning at the surrounding tenements. The sign advertising the waxworks and "Collection of Criminology" still hung at the door of the lower floor.

"Tell me," said I to the freckled girl who sold admissions, "is the Man with the Rolling Eye still here?"

She put down her embroidery and removed a long end of red silk thread which she had been carrying on the tip of her tongue.

"I should certainly say not!" she answered. "He's all wore out. They couldn't repair him any more."

"The machine or the man?"

"Both," said she. "But they weren't much of an attraction. Of course there wasn't supposed to be any man--only the machine--the automaticon they called it. But it didn't make enough money the last year or two to pay the repairs. The old man that run it was a swell chessplayer. The old man got sick and the machine got broken. Both were about at the end of the rope. So he went away three weeks ago and the machine is stored in the cellar now."

"Where did you say the old man lived?" I asked.

"I didn't say. But I'll write it down for you. It's a scene-painting loft over by the river."

She scribbled on a slip of paper, "J. Lecompte, 5 East India Place."

"Thank you," I said.

"Um-m. You can't fool me," said she. "You're in the show business!"

This was a thrust of her curiosity, but I merely bowed and left her.

"Go home as quickly as you can," I whispered to the chauffeur. "Give Mr. Estabrook, my guest, this slip of paper. Tell him to lose no time. Tell him to bring the revolver he will find in the top drawer of my desk! Don't wait for me. I'll walk."

The man gazed at me stupidly a moment before he started the machine.

"He believes I am crazy," I said to myself as I saw him turn the corner. "Whether or not he is right, the interview will be at least interesting."

You will agree with me that these words forecasted accurately.

CHAPTER II

IN THE PAINTED GARDEN

East India Place is not a well-known thoroughfare. In fact, it is a court, hidden between truck stables and concealed also by the boxes and bales of commission merchants. Even on a sunshiny day the dank bottom of this court is dark and smells as if it were under rather than on the earth. A warehouse occupies one side, the other presents several doorways, which might once have been the entrances to sailors' lodgings, but which now are plastered with the rude signs of junk dealers. The numbers on these houses were all even--2-4-8-10--which left me the conclusion that Number 5 must be the warehouse and that the scene-painting loft must be on the top floor of the grimy building. Indeed, I could see that a skylight had been superimposed on the roof and my eye caught the sign at the entrance, "The Mohave Scenic Studios." I began the ascent of boxed wooden stairways, musty with the odors of ships' cargoes. At the top a sign confronted me, "No Admittance Except on Business. This means You"; but beneath it in red, white, and blue paint, was the message, "Used for Storage. New Studio at 43 Barkiston Avenue."

I knocked. There was no answer. I tried the stump of a knob; the door yielded. I found myself in a large room with rolls and rolls of canvas in piles and huge scenic back drops pendant from the high ceiling. A skylight above, with rotting curtains drawn across the square panes, threw a strange green glare over everything. A peculiar aromatic odor, such as is sometimes wafted over the footlights into the audience, gave the deserted place a theatrical flavor which was heightened by the presence of gilded papier-maché statuettes and a huge representation of the god Buddha leaning against the bare brick wall. A spider had spun a web above one of this god's bare shoulders; it glinted in a chance ray of direct sunlight which had entered through a tear in the curtain overhead. Above me a staging held a kitchen chair, some fire pails, and several pots whose sides were smirched with the colors they contained. The only sign of human life was the faint warm odor of pipe smoke. Knowing, then, that some one beside myself was in the loft, I proceeded gingerly between two vast canvases which hung side by side, preparing myself on my soft-footed way down this aisle to see the man I sought as I emerged from the other end. I imagined I heard a nervous, suppressed cough, indicating that the other already knew of my invasion of his strange abode.

This was not the fact. For a moment, looking from the opening, I had ample opportunity, without being seen, to observe all that spread itself before me. A painted drop hung against the wall, upon which, in delicate colors of Italian blue and rich green, was stretched a vast, imposing, and beautiful view of the Gardens of Versailles, with a wealth of flowers in full bloom extending along the velvet greensward into the depth of the landscape, where, white and regal, walls and pillars rose toward the clear sky of spring. A modern grotesque had invaded this regal scene and forbidden ground, and had placed his cot, disordered with newspapers and ragged red blankets, so boldly in the foreground that at first sight the impropriety of his presence was shocking. I could see that the man sat upon his cot cross-legged; his back, pitifully thin under a spare white shirt, was turned toward me. With one sinewy, aged hand he fondled the wisps of faded hair upon his head; with the other he moved small objects over a flat board. He was a lonely monarch upon a throne of squalor; he was playing a solitary game of chess!

"The Sheik of Baalbec!" I whispered to myself.

The creature stopped, looked up at the skylight and its green curtains and drew a miserable sigh from the depths of his lungs. It was such a sigh that I could not restrain a shudder.

"Julianna," said I.

He drew his head down between his shoulders like a frightened turtle and held himself stiffly as one who has been doused with a pail of ice water. For several moments he did not move; when at last he turned around, his expression was patient rather than vicious, sad rather than terror-stricken.

"What do you want?" he said, and held his mouth open so that he, too, seemed like an automaton, the springs of which had failed.

The pause gave me the opportunity to observe that he was not the man with the gold fillings. Indeed, the only part of him which seemed well preserved--which, as it were, he had saved from the wreck--was a row of white, even teeth!

"What do you want?" he repeated. "I have never seen you before. I know no reason for your speaking a word to me."

"Your daughter--" I began.

"I have no daughter," he cried, his eyes blazing with sudden passion. "Who are you? I tell you that you are talking nonsense. I have no daughter!"

"Fine words," I said threateningly; "fine words. But this is no time for them. She is in vital danger--"

"Danger!" he screamed, clawing at the red blankets. "My God! Has it come? What form? Quick, I say! What form?"

"It is because you can shed light upon it that I have come," said I. "We know little. She has sent her husband away--"

"Damn him!" he choked.

"She has locked herself in her room. She has been so for three weeks. The maid--"

"Margaret Murchie," he whispered. "She believes that I am dead?"

I nodded.

"I know nothing," he said. "The girl is not of me or mine."

"Come, come," said I. "It is time for disclosure."

He arose, searched under the corner of the mattress a moment, and then, with a quick, panther-like movement, sprang upon the bed again, holding a revolver in his two claws.

"I have no idea of what you mean," he cried. "I will not be questioned. If I shoot, it is self-defense. You understand that. Nor will any one be the wiser. She is not my daughter. I know nothing of her."

"You know everything," I cried, as anger made me reckless. "It will not pay you to flourish that weapon. Listen!"

"Some one else coming!" he whispered.

"Yes," I shouted. "You have seen him before. It is young Estabrook."

The wizened creature immediately hid the revolver under the folds of the blanket and began to play nervously with the chessmen. Both of us waited, listening to the approach of the footsteps which came so cautiously behind the pendant canvas.

To see at last that I was right, that the newcomer was Estabrook, was a relief.

"Well," said the young man, appearing suddenly around the corner. "I came. I thought I heard your voice, Doctor. You were talking?"

I pointed.

The worn, colorless face of the other man gazed up at us pathetically; his body had relaxed into the hollows of his disordered cot. Against the scene of regal gardens which was luminous as if the painted sky itself bathed all in the soft light of a spring evening, the man and his face were ridiculous and incongruous. His presence in that half-real setting seemed a satire upon the beauties achieved by man and God.

"Who?" asked Estabrook involuntarily.

"The Sheik of Baalbec," I said.

The man looked up at me again.

"Mortimer Cranch," said I.

He fell forward on his face. It was several moments before any of us moved. Cranch spoke first. He had arisen, and now stood with his sad eyes fixed upon Estabrook, and I noticed for the first time that his mouth and lips showed suffering and, perhaps, strength.

"It is this, above all things, I hoped would never come," said he. "You have resurrected me from the dead. I was buried. You have dug me up. Whatever good you may get from this strange meeting, make the most of it. If it will help to guard against the danger spoken of by this man you address as Doctor, I will be satisfied."

"You dog!" cried Estabrook, hot with emotions of violence. "It is you who were responsible for the death of Judge Colfax."

The other held out his knotted hands toward me.

"The whole story!" he cried. "Not a part. You must know the whole story."

"Briefly," I commanded.

He nodded, and began to pace the foreground of the Gardens of Versailles, back and forth like a tethered beast in a park. His voice was dispassionate. The narrative proceeded in a monotone. But if fiends could conceive a tale more dark, they would whisper it among themselves.

For this, told in the somewhat quaint narrative of a former generation, was his story.

BOOK VI

A PUPPET OF THE PASSIONS

CHAPTER I

THE VANISHED DREAM

There is only one person now in this world who could have told you my name. I have been sure that she has long believed me to be dead. That person is Margaret Murchie, and it is only too plain that she has told you all that she knows of me. Parts of my life she does not know. My testimony as to these is now given against my prayers, for I have prayed that I never would have to uncover my heart to any living man.

My first two recollections are of my birthplace and of my mother. A lifetime has passed, yet I remember both as plainly as if they were before me now. I was heir to a fine old colonial estate which, because of diminishing fortunes and increasing troubles extending over two generations, had been allowed to run down. My great-great-grandfather, whose portrait hung in the old parlor between two mirrors that extended solemnly from floor to ceiling, had been a sea-captain and shipowner, and, it is said, a privateer as well. Whatever strange doings he had seen, one thing is certain; he returned after one mysterious voyage with great wealth, a sword-wound through his middle, ruined health, and a desire for respectability, social position, and a reputation for piety. It had been he who had built the immense house which, in my childhood, was shaded by huge gnarled trees, under which crops of beautiful but poisonous toadstools were almost eternally sprouting.

If the great house was like a tomb, my mother was like a flower in it. I recall the sweetness of her timid personality, the half-frightened eyes which looked at me sometimes from the peculiar solitude of her mind, and the faint perfume of her dress when, as a child, I would rest my head in her lap and beg her to tell me of my father's brave and good life.

If I grew up somewhat headstrong and self-confident, it was in part due to a faith in my inheritance. The delicate and refined lips of my mother, upon which prayers were followed by lies and lies by prayers, taught me an almost indescribable belief in my own strength. The fruit forbidden by moral law to the ordinary man seemed to belong of right to me. No sensation, no indulgence, no excess seemed to threaten me. I knew my mother's philosophy of pleasure was different from mine, and, reaching an early maturity, I concealed from her the experiments I made in tasting daintily and rather proudly of life's pleasures. Before my boyhood had gone, my natural cleverness and my selection of friends had introduced me to many follies, each of which I regarded as a taste of life which in no way meant a weakness. Weakness I was sure was not the legacy of character which I possessed, and I failed to notice that I no longer sipped of the various poisons which the world may offer, but feverishly drank long drafts.

The awakening came in extraordinary form. I had not had my eighteenth birthday when, upon a beautiful moonlit night in spring, a man and a woman, more sober and much older than I, drove me out to my gate, begged me to say less of the nobility of the horse which they had whipped into a froth of perspiration, and left me to make my way alone along the long path of huge flagstones to the house.

A light burned in the hall. I stood there looking for a long time in the mirror of the old mahogany hatrack, with a growing conviction that my reflected image looked extraordinarily like some one I had seen before. I finally recognized myself as being an exact counterpart of my great-great-grandfather's portrait. This did not shock me, though the idea was a new one. I remember I laughed and brushed some white powder from my sleeve. The powder did not come off readily; it was with some thought of finding a brush that I gave my serious attention to the handles of one of the little drawers. My awkward movement resulted in pulling it completely out. Chance brought to light at that moment an object long hidden behind the drawer itself. The thing fell to the floor; I stooped dizzily to pick it up. It was an old glove!

It was an old glove, musty with age and yet still filled with the individuality of the man who had worn it and still creased in the distinctive lines of his hand. As I held it, I imagined that it was still warm from the contact of living flesh, that it still carried faint whiffs of its owner's personality as if he had a moment before drawn it

from his fingers. What maudlin folly seized me, I cannot say. I remember that I exclaimed to myself affectionately, as one might who, like Narcissus, worshiped his own image in a pool. I pressed the glove to my face, delighting in its imagined likeness to myself. I gave it, in my intoxicated fancy, the attributes of a living being. To me it seemed alive with vital warmth. It had long lain a corpse. My touch had thrilled it as its contact now thrilled me.

With it, pressing it against my cheek, I turned toward the portière of the library, and as chance would have it, making a misstep when my head was swimming, I went plunging forward into the folds of this curtain. Because of this I found myself sitting flat upon the hardwood floor, gibbering like an idiot at the dim light which showed the bookcases which extended around the room from floor to ceiling.

At last, out of the haze of my befuddled mind, I saw my mother. She did not speak; she did not cry. She had come down the stairs, and now her face shone out of the clouds of other objects, quiet, set, as immovable and as white as a death mask. She came near me and, taking the glove from my hand, examined it in the manner of a prospective purchaser.

The next morning, in the midst of a horror of brilliant sunlight, she told me the truth about my father. He had not been brave. He had not been good.

"The glove was his," she said in her dead, cold voice. "Are you not afraid?"

"Of what?" I asked.

"Of yourself," she whispered.

"Yes," said I. "Mortally!"

I had believed in my strength. Now a few hours had taught me the terrors of self-fear. The ghastly story of inheritance of wild passions from grandfather to grandfather, from father to son, pressed on my brain like a leaden disk thrust into my skull. I had first learned the joy of experiment with my strength; I was now to learn the pains of the ghosts which always seemed to be mocking the assertions of my will. A line of them, fathers and sons, pointed fingers at me and laughed. "You are doomed," said they in matter-of-fact voices. I spent my days between determination to indulge myself, for the very purpose of testing my power in self-control, and the sickening relaxation of moral force that occurs from the mere deprivation of all hope of victory in the battle. The excuses of intemperance were never so clever as those I devised for my own satisfaction; the bald truth, that I had taught my body enjoyments which would never be shaken off before old age or infirmity had placed them out of my reach, was never better known than to me.

Fortunately my mother died before the outbreak of my barbarous nature had broken down the pride which caused me to conceal my true self from the daylight world. I sold the home and cursed its dank old trees and toadstools and silent, gloomy chambers the day I signed the deed. I went to city after city, leaving each as it threatened me with ennui or with retribution. Money went scattering hither and thither, spent madly, given, stolen, borrowed, with no regret but that the piper might some day, when the pay was no longer forthcoming, refuse to play.

Perhaps all would have been different had I not been pursued by a fiendish fortune at games of chance. As if Fate meant that my ruin should be complete, she saw to it that I was provided with funds for the journey. I have seen my last penny hang on the turn of a card, and come screaming back to me with a small fortune in its wake. Everywhere, misconstruing the results, men whispered of my luck. It was only once that the truth was told: at Monte Carlo a pair of red-painted, consumptive lips pouted at me with terrible coquetry over the table. "Pah!" said they. "The Devil takes us all on application. It is only very few he *chooses*! Monsieur has won again!"

She was right, but there is an end to all things and the end of all my ruinous luck came at Venice. It came with Margaret Murchie; it came, I believe, at the very instant that I saw her sitting in a café there--saw her sitting alone, golden from head to foot, golden of hair, golden of skin, golden rays shining from her eyes, showers of gold in the motions of her body--a living creature of gold, shining as a great mass of it, warm and bright and untarnished as a coin fresh from the pressure of the dies. I took her with me to Tuscany--stole her from an old vixen of a fortune-teller. Ah, I see she did not tell you all!--Never mind. There was no disgrace for her--she might well have told everything! She needed no blush for the story. It was the only pretty thing in my life.

The trees of that country grow at the edges of green meadows, tall and stately as the trees of Lorrain's brush. Sheep, with soft-sounding bells, feed along the rich rolls of the land. Birds sing in the thicket at daybreak. The hills are alive with springs of matchless clearness. Butterflies hover over hedges and dart into half-concealed gardens.

For a month we played there like children. Her ignorance was charming. Her mind was like a fresh canvas; I could paint whatever I chose upon it, and loving her, I painted none but beautiful pictures, pictures of the divine things that were still left in the violated mortal sanctuary of the soul of Mortimer Cranch.

What did I accomplish by spreading all the fruits of my education and my familiarity with refinement before her? What did I accomplish by my mastery of mind? I accomplished my undoing! You need not ask how. I will tell you. I made this healthy, glowing Irish lass believe in the beauty of character which I insisted she possessed. I made her believe that she was a noble creature and that she was capable of fine womanly unselfishness. It was like the influence of the hypnotist. My own fanciful conception of her, at first described merely to awake in her the pleasures of admiration, became, when repeated, convincing to myself. I began to feel sure that she had the rare qualities which I had ascribed to her. I found myself desperately in love with her--not only intoxicated by the beauty of her body and the sound of her laugh, but by real or imagined beauty of character as well. This acted upon her powerfully. She, too, began to believe. Her capacity for goodness expanded. A sadness came over her.

"Why are you so thoughtful?" I said to her one midday as we sat together on a ledge overlooking the peaceful valley.

"Don't ask," she said bitterly, looking at the ground.

Curiosity then drove me mad. For two days I persecuted her with cruel questions. I believed that some regret for a secret in her past was troubling her. At last she told me. I believe she told me truly. She said that she knew that a girl without education and refinement could have no hope of being taken through life by me. She spoke simply of the unhappiness it would bring me if I were tied to her.

"Tell me that you love me!" I cried.

She shook her head.

"I am not your equal," she said. "You have been the one who has made me good, if I am good at all. Didn't you say that I would be capable of any sacrifice for love?"

"Why, yes," I said.

"Hush," she whispered and laid her hand on mine.

The next day she had disappeared. No one knew when or how or where she had gone. She had vanished. She left no word. Her room was empty. And there on the tiled floor, in the sunlight, was the rosette from a woman's slipper. It spoke of haste, of farewell; it was enough to convince me that Margaret was not a creature

of my imagination. But the little tawdry decoration, and the faint aroma of her individual fragrance which still clung to it, was all that was left of her and my selfish dreams.

I traveled all the capitals in search of her or of Mrs. Welstoke, to no purpose. My resources dwindled. The wheel and the cards mocked my attempts to repair my state. Fortune had dangled salvation in front of me, had snatched it away, and now laughed at my attempts to put myself in funds. I was shut off from a search for my happiness. When I had played to gain money for my damnation, as if with the assistance of the Evil One, I had won; now that I sought regeneration, a malicious fiend conducted the game and ruined me.

I remember of thinking how I had begun life with full assurance of my power over all the world and, above all, over myself. I was sitting on a chair on the pavement in front of a miserable little café at Brest, looking down at my worn-out shoes.

"Well," said I, aloud, "some absinthe--a day of forgetfulness--and then--I will begin life anew."

It was the same old tricky promise--the present lying to the future and making everything seem right.

I clapped my hands. A slovenly girl served me, standing with her fat red hands pressed on her hips as I gazed down into the glass.

"Drink," said she. She was a cockney, after all.

"Must I?" I asked.

She nodded solemnly. And so I drank.

CHAPTER II

MARY VANCE

Eight days later I was taken on board a sailing-vessel, and when we were out at sea and my nerves had steadied, I was forced by a villainous captain to the work of a common sailor. From that experience as a laborer I never recovered. My mind learned the comfort of association with other minds which conceived only the most elementary thoughts. The savage vulgarity of stevedores, strike-breakers, ships' waiters, circus crews, and soldiers had a charm to me of which I had never before dreamed. I entered the brotherhood of those at life's bottom and found that again I was looked upon as a man superior to my associates and perhaps more fortunate. Even though I exhibited a brutality equal to any, I was regarded as a person of undoubted cleverness. If the great or showy classes of mankind would no longer flatter my vanity, the vicious and uncivilized classes would still perform that office. Fate threw me among them, so that nothing should be left undone to cajole me toward the last point of degradation.

I kept no track of those years, nor understood why Mary Vance ever married me, nor why she was willing to be so patient, so loyal, so tender, and so kind. I had come from above and was going down. She had come from the dregs; she was going up. We met on the way. I married her, not because I loved her, but because she loved me and I could not understand it. She was a lonely, tired little gutter-snipe, who had gone on the stage, had had no success whatever, and whose pale red hair was always stringing down around her neck and eyes; but even then I could not see why she picked me out for her devotion. She was like a dog in her faithfulness. I can see her now as she was one night, snarling and showing her teeth, keeping the police from taking me to a patrol box. I can see her cooking steak over a gas jet. She thought my name was John Chalmers. I learned to love her at last. I learned to love her, and because of it I learned to hate myself. She deserved so much and had so little from me beside my temper, my wildness, and abuse.

When we were at our wits' end for pennies to buy food, the little girl came. The only thing we had not pawned was a gold locket that had never been off her neck because it was wished on by her mother and had always kept her from harm, as she said. She took it off and put it on the baby's neck and tears came to my eyes--the first in thirty-five years.

"We will call her Mary," I said, choking with happiness.

Four hours later I was on a wharf, crawling around on my hands and knees in the madness of alcohol, with a New York policeman and a gang of longshoremen roaring with laughter at my predicament. It was on that occasion that, as my brain cleared, I saw what I had done. I had sworn a thousand times never to do it. And now it had come about. I had become responsible for another living human thing with the blood of my veins coursing in its own! I had committed the crime of all crimes!

To describe the horror of this thought is impossible. It never left me. I began to devise a means to undo this dreadful work of mine. I prayed for days--savagely and breaking out into curses--that the little laughing, mocking thing should die.

"She has your eyes," said Mary, looking up at me with a smile on her gaunt, starved face.

I rushed from the dirty lodgings like a man with a fiend in pursuit; the words followed me. I roared out in my pain.

"I will do it!" I said over and over again. "I will kill the child. I will kill it."

I believed I was right. I believed the best of me and not the worst of me had spoken. I believed I must atone for my crime by another. I believed I should begin to prepare the way.

"Suppose she should die," I said to my wife.

"Then grief would kill me, too," she said.

I could not stand the look on her face.

"This is the only happiness I ever had," she said, pressing the little body close to her.

I believed then that I could never do what I had planned. I knew I could never take Mary's happiness away. I felt myself caught like a rat in a trap. The blood of my fathers was going on in a new house of flesh and bone! I had done the great crime! And there was no help for it!

We move, however, like puppets of the show. Just see!

Within a month the doctor at the clinic had said that my wife was incurable with consumption.

"The worst trouble with it all," said he, "is that she will suffer without hope and for no purpose."

"Death would be good luck?" said I.

"The kindest thing of all," he answered, killing a fly on the window ledge, as if to demonstrate it.

I was trembling all over with wild nerves, a wild brain-madness. I shut my eyes craftily as I went down the steps.

"She may go first," I whispered to myself. "I will kill her in the name of God. And then the other and the Devil is cheated!"

Was I a madman? I cannot say! I had sense enough to prepare myself by days of drinking, during which I deliberately and cruelly beat whatever tenderness remained in me into insensibility. I suffered no doubts, however, for I was sure that I had planned a crime which, unlike all my others, was founded on unselfishness. I believed I had dedicated myself at last to a supreme test of goodness and love.

The question of what would become of me after I had done this terrible thing never entered my mind. My desire was to place Mary where she need suffer no more, where she would be free from hardships and labors, from lingering disease and slow death, and from my ungoverned brutalities. Above all, however, I wanted to accomplish the second murder--made possible to me by the first. A monomania possessed me. I wanted to put an end forever to my strain of blood before it was too late--before it had escaped me through the body of my little daughter.

My zeal, I suppose, was like that of a religious fanatic; but it did not blind me to the horror of my undertaking. I cried out aloud at the picture of the sad, reproachful eyes of my poor wife, fixed upon me as they might be when the film of death passed over them. I knew that I must do the thing in a way which would prevent her sensing my purpose, even in the last flicker of time in which her understanding remained.

I can't go on!... Wait!...

Well, it was over. I fled. Dripping, I rushed from the river bank. I had planned to go back after the baby. I forgot it entirely. The meadows became alive with shapes and faces. I swear to you that I believed a terrible green glow hung over the hole in the black water behind me. I thought this water had opened to receive her. I had not seen it close again. There was a hole there! She lay in the bottom of it, screaming terrible screams. The grass of the slope was filled with creatures who had seen all. The moon rose up the sky with astounding

rapidity. Its rays dropped like showers of arrows. Every sparkling drop of dew became an eye that watched me as I fled. I sought dark shadows; the moon snatched them away from me. I ran over the soft carpet of new vegetation; it seemed to echo with the sounds of a man in wooden shoes, fleeing over a tiled floor. I fell over in a faint. I regained consciousness with indescribable agonies.

Then and then only did I remember the flask in my pocket. I drank. The stimulant, contrary to my expectation, flew into my brain like fire. I was crazy for more of this relief. I had believed it would sharpen my wits for further action; I found it made me disregard the existence of a world. And instead of suffering fear or regret, I was mad with joy. I drained the flask, hummed a tune, grew foolish in my mutterings to my own ears, and at last, glad of the warmth of the spring night, welcomed sleep as a luxury never before enjoyed by mortal man in all of history.

It is unnecessary to tell you of my awakening. Though no one was about, the air seemed to ring with the news of a floating body. I had slept, but that wonderful sleep had robbed me of all possibility of defending myself. Believing this, I tried to escape the town. The sun was worse than the moon. It poked fun at me. From the moment I awoke to look into the face of this mocking sun, I knew that my capture could not be prevented. The very fact that I myself believed so thoroughly that I could not escape, determined the outcome. To feel the hand of the law on my shoulder was a blessed relief. It seemed to save me so much useless thought and unavailing effort. It was as welcome as death must be to a pain-racked incurable. This touch of the hand of the law is a blessed thing; it is as comforting as the touch of a mother's hand. So lovely did it seem that it put me into a mind when, for a little kindly encouragement, I would have said, "You have opened your doors to welcome me in. God bless you for your insight. I am the man!"

I do not know why I shook my head at my accusers with stupid complacency. My denial of guilt seemed to me a trivial lie. I had become a man of wood. I went through my trial like a carved image. I seemed to myself to be a puppet, a jointed figure, a manikin. In a dull, insensate way I had learned to hate the Judge as a superior being who showed loathing for me on his face. The jury foreman and all the rest there in the court-room day after day were as little to me as a lot of mountebanks on a stage. Yet it was the foreman, with his red, bursting face and thin, yellow hair and fat hand stuck in his trousers' pocket, who awakened me from this strange and comfortable coma of the trial. "Because of reasonable doubt," he said, with his unconscious humor, "we find the prisoner"--here he paused and shifted his feet like a schoolboy who has forgotten his piece--"we find him not guilty."

Not guilty! I was free! It crashed in upon my senses. Suddenly there came back to me the existence of my little daughter--the existence of my blood--the fact that I had pledged myself to another crime in the name of humanity--that its execution awaited me. Damn them! They had gone wrong. They had thrown me back on the world. They had denied me the comfort of the law--that thing which had touched me on the throat with its firm hands and had promised me oblivion. They had left me staring at the terrible mind-picture of a little child asleep in its crib with the thing that was me lurking in its heart, in its lungs, in the cells of its brain.

"I did it," I whispered to my lawyer.

"You spoke too late," he said, gathering up his papers. "You have been tried. And for that crime you can never be tried again! Come with me. I have a carriage outside. Where are you going?"

"For alcohol!" I said, gritting my teeth.

"That is a matter of indifference to me," he replied, sniffing with a miserable form of contempt. "Our relationship is over anyhow!"

His eyes were upon me with the same expression as the others. They looked at me everywhere. Youthful eyes ran along beside the carriage; a hundred pairs watched me after I had alighted and the vehicle had gone. The

darkness came on as a kind thing which threw a merciful blanket over me. I thanked the night. I was grateful for the world's vicious classes, so used to violence that they did not stare at me. I thanked the good old rough crowd, the fist-pounding, the hard-talking, hoarse-voiced loafers whose leers showed envy of my notoriety. And all the time I thought of my child, of the blood of my fathers which, against all my vows, had escaped again, and with the stimulant whirling in my head, I determined to go back to the other end of town, to the house where I knew this menace to the world lay smiling in its crib.

Yet when I had carried out all but the last chapter of my plans, when I, like a thief, had slipped off into the night with my little daughter in my arms, I found that I held her tight against my aching heart. At last I knew fear--no longer the fear that I would not carry out my aim, but fear that I would.

Again, out of the grass and down from the apple trees, drops of dew glinted through the darkness like a thousand human eyes. Then suddenly they all vanished, and as I walked along in the shadows I believed that some one trod behind. I heard soft footsteps in the grass. I thought I felt human breath upon my neck. Some one came behind me and yet I did not dare to look, for I knew if I turned I would see the pale, thin face of Mary, with her wistful eyes.

She was there--

I say, visible or not, she was there. I knew then, as if I had heard her command, that I must go up the slope to the Judge's house and knock upon the door. As I walked, she walked with me, watching me as I held the sleeping baby in my arms, fearing perhaps that in my drunken course I would fall.

And then--after I had been knocked senseless by the reporter's fist and at last regained consciousness--then, after all the years, at that terrible moment, a self-confessed murderer, a half-witted, half-sodden, disheveled, driven, half-wild creature, what prank did Fate play? Who stood there, gazing at me with full recognition in her eyes and begging for my life? You know the story already. It was Margaret, the woman of a thousand dreams,--the woman I had lost.

CHAPTER III

THE GHOST

You know, too, of that night. But this you do not know--that a mile out of the village I sat on a boulder in a hillside pasture and watched the flames of a terrible fire, without any knowledge of what house was burning, and that it was not until a man came along the road long after daybreak, with a shovel over his shoulder, that I had the energy to stir.

He saw me as I got up; he waved his hand.

"Bad fire," he shouted, not recognizing me.

"Whose house?" I asked.

"Judge Colfax."

My heart came gurgling up into my throat.

"Anybody lost in it?" I asked, trembling.

"No," said he. "Everybody got out. The servant got out and the Judge saved his baby and there wasn't anybody else in it. Those three. That was all."

His words stunned me at first. I said them over and over after he had gone, because I could not seem to believe their meaning. Those three! That was all! What I could not do by my will, another Will had done. The Great Hand had swept away my fears! Above my grief I felt the presence of one marvelous fact. The inheritance I had allowed to escape me had been ended again! Once more my body was the only body in all the world containing the terrible ingredients of my strain of blood. I raised my face toward the blue of heaven and gave vent to a long cry of triumphant, hysterical, passionate exultation.

I became possessed of the desire to make sure, to ask again, to hear once more the phrase, "Those three. That was all," and then turn my back on the town forever. With this idea I walked swiftly into the village, choosing a back street until I had reached a point opposite the smoking ruins of the Judge's house. The crowd was still buzzing back and forth along the fence and gathered about the old-fashioned fire engine that was still spitting sparks and pumping water. I slipped into the back yard of the house just across the street, half afraid to show myself, half mad to ask some one the question I had asked the man with the shovel.

Then, suddenly, as I stood hesitating, I heard Margaret Murchie's voice in the window above me--I recognized it instantly.

"There is some one at the door, Judge. The secret is safe with me," she whispered.

At the same moment something fell at my feet. It was the tiny locket my child had worn on its little neck from the day the mother had fastened it there. What secret had Margaret meant? The locket was the answer! I had been a plaything of some unknown, malicious fiend again. The rescued baby was not the Judge's baby. That was the secret! The child I heard crying there was mine!

I felt like a creature in a haunted place, pursued by devils, mocked by strange voices in the air, deceived by the senses, tricked by unrealities, persecuted by memories, the victim of fear, falsities, and impotent rage. I rushed away from the spot, walked many miles, and at last, coming to the railroad again, I took a train and for weeks, without money, rode westward on freight trains. I dropped out of sight. I lost my name. I even lost

much of my flesh. I was as thoroughly dead as a living man could be. The world had buried me.

Almost immediately the body and its organs, which had borne up with such infernal endurance for the express purpose of making the ruin of my soul complete, gave way. Suddenly my stomach, as if possessing a malicious intelligence of its own, refused the stimulant with which I had helped to accomplish my slide to the bottom of life and with which I had expected to be able to dull the mental and physical pains of my final accounting. My mind now found itself picturing with feverish desire all the old pleasures. At the same moment my flesh and bones forbade me to enjoy them. My body had caught my mind like a rat in a trap!

Day followed day, week, week, and year, year. It was a weary monotony of manual labor, poverty, restless travel, on foot, and hopeless attempts to recover my birthright--the privileges of excess--which had gone from me forever. Cities and their bright lights laughed at me.

I suffered the tortures of insomnia, the pains of violent rheumatism, the dreadful imprisonment of a partial paralysis. I was in and out of hospitals. I spent months on my back, entertained only by my lurid memories. My mind became starved for new material on which to work. It was at that period that I first learned to obscure the awful presence of my own personality by flinging my thoughts into the problems of chess.

I recalled often enough the fact that somewhere I had a daughter. No night passed that I did not go to sleep wondering where she might be. I realized that she was growing up somewhere. I realized, too, that a child of fancy was growing up in my mind. I could see her in her crib, a laughing baby uttering meaningless sounds, clasping a flower in her fat little fist. I could see her in short skirts, trying to walk upstairs, clinging to the banister. I could hear her first words. I saw her learning to read. Little by little her hair grew. It reached a length which made a braid necessary. At times I saw her laugh,--this child of the imagination,--and once, left alone at dusk, she had wept over some cross word that had been spoken to her. I could see her tears glisten on her cheeks in the fading light.

"Little girl!" I cried aloud. "Come to me! It's I! Little girl!"

The sound of my own voice startled me. I found myself sitting in the Denver railroad station with my hands clasped around my thin knees.

No man's own blood ever haunted him more than mine. I had not seen the child, yet I loved her. She had no knowledge of my existence, yet she seemed to call to me. I suffered a dreadful thought--the fear that I should die before I saw her and feasted my eyes upon my own. I struggled to keep myself from going to seek her. I felt as one who, being dead, impotently desires to return to the world and touch the hands of the living. Year after year the desire grew strong to rise from my grave and call out that she was mine.

At last I yielded to my temptation--fool that I was! I came eastward. I made cautious inquiry. I arrived in this city where I had heard the Judge had gone. The mere fact of proximity to her made me tremble as I alighted from the train. I had expected difficulties in finding her. But when I telephoned to the name I had found in the book and heard a voice say that the Judge had just gone out with his daughter, I felt that I was in a dream. A strange faintness came over me. The glass door of the booth reflected my image--the face of a frightened old man. It was remarkable that I did not fall forward sprawling, unconscious.

Before seeking a lodging I sat for hours in a park. Young girls passed, fresh, beautiful, laughing, going home from school.

"Can that be she?" I asked a dozen times, looking after one of those chosen from among the others. "What can she be like? What would she say to me?"

Suddenly I realized again that I did not exist, that she could not know that I had ever existed, that whatever

pain it might cost me, she must never know. If I saw her, it must be as a ghost peeping through a crevice in the wall. These were my thoughts as I sat on the park bench hour after hour until a little outcast pup--a thin, bony creature, kicked and beaten, came slinking out of the gathering dusk and licked my hand. It was the first love I had felt in years. My whole being screamed for it. I caught up the pariah and warmed its shivering body in my arms. This was the dog that, two years later, I lost along with the locket in the Judge's old garden where I had gone indiscreetly, praying that I might get a peep in the window and see my own girl--so wonderful, so beautiful, so good--reading by the lamp.

You need not think I had not seen her before. If I spent my working hours manipulating the automaton at the old museum, all my leisure I spent in seeking a glimpse of my own daughter. The very sight of her was nourishment to my starving heart. Many is the time I have hobbled along far behind her as she walked on the city pavements. Months on end I strolled by the house at night to throw an unseen caress up at a lighted window. I have seen a doctor's carriage at that door with my heart in my mouth. I have seen admiration, given by a glance from a girl friend, with a father's pride so great and real that it took strength of mind to restrain myself from stopping the nearest passer-by and saying, "Look! She is mine!"

Again the malicious fortune into which I was born was making game of me; it had made my daughter more than a mere girl, whom I was forbidden to claim. It had made her the loveliest creature in the world! I cried out against it all. I knew that if I would, I could claim her. She was mine. I had the right of a father. She was still a child. I loved her. I wanted to have the world know that whatever else I had done and whatever doubts I had once felt about the blood that was in my veins and hers, now I was sure that I could claim a great achievement and hold aloft the gift to mankind of this blooming flower.

I remembered then, however, what I had been. I saw in the bit of mirror in my squalid lodgings a countenance stained with the indelible ink of vice and moulded beyond repair by excesses and the sufferings of shame. Could I present this horror to my daughter? Could I destroy her by claiming her? Could I blight her life by thrusting my love for her beyond the secret recesses of my own heart?

"No!" I whispered. And I prayed for strength.

Above all, I knew that except for regaining, by reading books, the refinement of my youth, I was not changed. I knew I was not, and never should be free from the old vicious fiends within myself. I could not, had I come to her with health, prosperity, and a good name, have offered her safety from my brutal nature. I had even abused the dog which had been my only companion and the one living thing that had love for me in its heart. I can see its eyes upon me now, with their reproach, and, I imagine, with their distrust. I had cowed its spirit with my passions of rage, my kicks and my curses, for each of which I had felt a torment of regret and with each of which came a hundred vain vows to myself never to let my nature get the best of me again. I had grown old, but I could not trust myself more than before. I even feared that some day I might reveal voluntarily my existence to my daughter, so that a final and terrible, unspeakable culminating evil deed should mark the end of my career. I feared this even more than another narrow escape from accidental disclosure, such as I had had in my first attempt to enter the old garden on that winter night I remember so well.

At these times I have kept away for weeks and weeks, mad for want of the sight of her. I had been forbidden liquor by wrecked organs, but now the sound of her voice at a distance, the sight of her perfect skin was like a draft of wine to me. Crazy with the lack of it, I always at last gave up my struggle, and with my heart filled with the tormented affections of a father, I went back to my watching and waiting, to my interest in her school, her clothes, her young friends, her health, her afternoon walks. I watched Margaret Murchie, too, with strange memories that caught me by the throat. And ever and ever I watched the Judge. Unseen, unknown, careful never to show myself often in the neighborhood for fear of attracting attention, as sly as a fox, suffering like a thing in an inferno, and no more than a lonesome ghost, I tried to determine if the Judge were acting my part as he should--he who had taken what was mine by the gift of God.

Chance, as you now know, threw him into a place where he was no longer a stranger to me. He became a visitor to the "Man with the Rolling Eye," though I believe he used to call my automaton "The Sheik of Baalbec." It was my delight to beat him in a battle of skill and at the same time, from my peephole, scan his face to read his character.

At last one day he brought this young man, Estabrook.

What awakened all my sense of danger then, I cannot explain. I only know that as this young man walked toward the machine, I realized a truth that had never so presented itself before. My daughter was no longer a girl! She was now a woman! Some man would come for her. And I believe I would have been filled with hatred and fear, no matter what man he had been.

That night I tossed upon my bed, feverish with new thoughts. I realized that soon there would be a turn in the road of my own child's destiny. I realized with agony which I cannot describe that I could use no guiding hand. I hungered for the responsibility of a father. I cried out aloud that now, in this choosing of men, I should have a word. I writhed as I had often writhed, because, loving her too much, I was forbidden to perform the offices of my affection. The tears that had come before now came again, and I wept for hours, as I had wept on other occasions.

I began a new and indiscreet observation. I found that this young man was a real menace. I followed him as he walked with her, liking him no better when I saw a look in my daughter's eyes that never had been there before. I would have interfered with his lovemaking, had I been able.

"God," I whispered, "I am only a ghost!"

Then chance gave me, I thought, an opportunity to strike at his courage. He is here. He can tell you of the message the automaton scrawled for him on a bit of paper. But he cannot tell the anxious hours, the frantic hours, a tormented outcast spent before that message was written, lurking in front of the Judge's house, watching with eyes red with sleeplessness for every little sign of what was going on. Nor can he tell you of the terror that came into a lonely creature's soul the night the Judge came down his front steps and met a shadow of the past, face to face. It is only I who may describe the horror of that meeting. The recognition of my identity by a dog who whined and cowered, and then by a man, whose breath gurgled in his throat and whose skin turned white, are things that no man knows but me.

I can see the Judge's face now. It looked upon me with the same accusing expression that I knew so well, and I slunk away believing that the worst had at last come. He had seen behind the mask of my years, my physical decline and my suffering. In one glance, before he turned dizzily back toward the house, he had taken my secret away from me. He knew me!

The madness of desperation came over me then. It was that which caused me to write the message through the hand of my automaton; it was that which led me to conceive the folly that, being known by the Judge to be living, I might, in the name of my love for my daughter, tell him out of my own mouth that I would never molest them.

I had stood all that man could bear. For the second time in my desperation, I entered the garden. I climbed the balcony. The Judge was there. Estabrook was there. They both saw me. I fled with their staring eyes pursuing me.

What more can I tell?

You have heard.

I am a miserable man.

BOOK VII

THE PANELED DOOR

CHAPTER I

THE SCRATCHING SOUND

Estabrook listened to the story of Mortimer Cranch, sometimes staring into the wizened face of the speaker, sometimes gazing into the depths of the painted Gardens of Versailles. When at last, in a hollow voice which reverberated through the scene loft, Cranch had ended, the younger man jumped forward with his eyes blazing, his hands clenched, his nostrils distended.

"What is wrong with my wife now?" he roared. "You know. Tell me or I'll tear you to pieces!"

There was a moment in which the place was as still as a tomb. I myself drew no breath, but watched the half-bald head of the criminal shake sadly.

Then suddenly he looked up. With one claw-like finger, he pointed at Estabrook. Hate and distrust were in his eyes.

"You know!" he piped in a thin but terrible voice. There was no doubting the sincerity of his accusation.

"I know?" cried Estabrook, falling back. "I know?"

"It began when you left the house!" cried Cranch. "I've always watched on and off since you married her. I'm her father. I've loved her as no one knows. It was my right to watch. I've been nearly mad with worry. What have you done to her? You have dug me out of the grave, I tell you. Now we're face to face. What have you done with my girl?"

The lonely, ruined man had thrown his arms forward. He wore dignity. For a passing second he became a figure to inspire awe; for a moment he seemed the incarnation of a great self-sacrifice. And in that pause he saw that Estabrook's expression had suddenly filled with sympathy, as if in a flash a warmer circulation of blood stirred in his veins; as if, suddenly, his sight had been cleared so that he could picture all the suffering which Cranch had been forced to keep locked up within himself, through dragging years. He reached for the extended, bare, and bony wrist of the older man and grasped its cords in his strong fingers.

"Come," said he softly, "there is no time for us who have loved her so much, each in his own way, to misunderstand."

Cranch did not answer. He did not move a muscle. But his eyes filled with the thin tears of aged persons.

"And now, Doctor," said Estabrook, wheeling toward me, "we must find out if Margaret has sent us word."

He plucked my sleeve; he started toward the stairs. He turned his back on the Gardens of Versailles and the vagrant who kneeled beside the cot in the foreground, with his face buried in the red blankets.

It was the hoarse call of this ghost of a man that stopped us.

"Estabrook!" he said.

"Yes."

"We may never meet again."

The younger man went back and without speaking, clasped the other's hand.

"You will tell one person--just one--about me?" asked Cranch.

"Julianna!" Estabrook exclaimed with horror.

The other shook his head patiently from side to side.

"I meant Margaret Murchie," he whispered.

Then, feeling the wistful gaze of his worn and watery eyes upon our backs, we left the Mohave Scenic Studio forever. A run across town in my car brought us again to my door. My scrawny busybody of a maid opened it before I had opportunity to even draw forth my key.

"Four or five telephone calls," she said with her impudent importance, "but only one is pressing."

"One?" cried I, "who from?"

"Somebody I don't know, Doctor. Margaret Somebody. She left a message. She wouldn't say no more than just one word."

"What was that word?" cried Estabrook at my shoulder.

"Danger."

I suppose that both of us felt the shock and then the tingle of excitement in the meaning of that phrase, interpreted in the light of our understanding.

"Doctor!" the young man shouted.

"Yes, Estabrook," said I; "keep your nerve. I think I have the key to this problem in my possession. I have not yet explained. I did not want to do so unless it was necessary. But if I am right you must not weaken. You must be ready to throw your whole strength into loyalty and affection for your wife and courage to protect her at any cost!"

"I'm ready!" he cried. "I feel that I must win her all over again. She is as fresh and new and beautiful to me as the day I first saw her. And I love her now as never before!"

"Jump into the car, then!" I commanded, and turning to my chauffeur, whispered, "To the Marburys'. Where we were this morning. And what--we--want--is--speed!"

He nodded, but I have no doubt that Estabrook and I both cursed him for his caution as he slowed down at the crossings, and finally, when, to conform to the traffic regulation, he circled in front of the banker's house.

This time neither of us looked up at either residence, but ran forward toward the Estabrooks' door. I pressed the bell centred in the Chinese bronze.

Suddenly, however, the unfortunate husband grasped the arm of my coat.

"My promise!" he exclaimed.

"You mean to keep it at any cost?"

"Yes," said he. "I trusted her judgment and her loyalty, and gave her my word."

"Pah!" I exploded angrily. His literal sense of honor, his narrow conscience which led him into inexpediency, seemed to me a part of a feminine rather than of a masculine nature, and more ridiculous than high-minded.

"Well, wait here, then," I snapped back at him as Margaret Murchie opened the door. "If necessary I will call you."

The old servant said nothing until we were in the hall, but her face was white with fear. I read on it the word she had transmitted to us by telephone. And whether or not it was my imagination, I felt the presence of a crisis and a forewarning that the inexplicable events which I had observed were now to come to some explosive end.

Margaret's first words, said to me with her two large hands raised as if to ward off a menace, were not reassuring.

"The scratching noise!" she cried. "The soft scratching noise!"

I turned her toward me by grasping her shoulder.

"No hysteria," I said firmly. "Every second may count. Tell me quickly what has happened."

"Yes, sir," she said, bracing herself. "I've done as you told me--very faithful. I went this morning to get my orders from her. I don't say the voice that answered me weren't hers."

"Well, would you say it was?" I asked savagely.

"I think I would, sir," she replied. "It was strange and changed and soft. I could hardly hear it. She said she didn't require anything. So I came away."

"And then--?"

"And then I did as you told me. I went to her door often enough and listened. You told me not to call to her unless there wasn't any sound. But there was a sound--a dreadful sound after a body had listened to it a bit."

"A sound?"

"Yes, a scratching sound. Sometimes it would stop and then it would go on again. And all the time it seemed to me more than ever that she wasn't alone in that room."

"Wasn't alone! What made you think so?" I exclaimed.

"I couldn't just say," answered Margaret. "I've never been able to say. It's just a feeling--a strange and terrible feeling, sir, that somebody else is there. But the scratching sound I heard with my two ears. And you never heard so worrying a sound before!"

"It has stopped?" I said.

"Yes, it has stopped. It stopped just before I telephoned. I thought I heard something touch the door and I went up and listened. I couldn't hear anything. I knocked. I got no answer. I remembered your orders. I wasn't sure whether I could hear breathing or not inside, but I didn't dare to wait. I called your office, sir. And I thank God you're here!"

"And you didn't break open the door? You didn't even try the knob?"

She looked at me dumbly. Her mouth twitched with her terror.

"I didn't dare. I've had courage for everything in this world, sir," she said. "But I didn't dare to open that door! I'm glad somebody else has come into this dreadful house!"

"Which is the room?" I asked.

"Come with me," she replied, beginning her climb of the broad stairs.

Her feet made no noise on the soft carpeting; nor did mine. The whole house, indeed, seemed stuffy with motionless air, as if not even sound vibrations had disturbed the deathlike fixity of that interior. As we turned at the top toward the paneled white door, which I knew as by instinct was the one we sought, for the first time I became conscious of the faint ticking of a clock somewhere on the floor above us.

"I've forgot to wind the rest," whispered the old servant, as if she had divined my thought. "They were driving me mad."

I nodded to show her that now I, too, was beginning to feel the effect of the strange state of affairs which I had first sensed from the other side of the blue wall.

"Leave me here," I said to her softly. "Go down to Mr. Estabrook. He is in the vestibule. He has a message for you from long ago."

I may have spoken significantly; she may have been at that moment peculiarly sharp to read the meanings behind plain sentences. Whatever the case, her face lit up with joy--the characteristic, joyful expression that never comes to the faces of men and few times to the face of a woman. For a moment youth seemed to return to her. The last traces of the limber strength of body, gone with her girlhood, came back. She wore no longer, at that second, the mien of a nun of household service. She was transfigured.

"It's Monty Cranch!" she cried under her breath. "He isn't dead! I knew he wasn't. I knew it always."

"Go now," I said. "Mr. Estabrook has something of a story to tell you."

She left me then, standing alone before that white expanse of door. I was literally and figuratively on the threshold of poor MacMechem's mystery, knowing well that the solution of it would explain the strange influence that had registered its effects upon my patient, little Virginia Marbury.

I listened with my ear pressed softly against the door. No other sign of life came to me than that of soft breathing. Indeed, even then I had to admit to myself that I might have imagined the sound. I stood back, as one does in such circumstances, half afraid to act--half afraid that to touch the knob or assault the closed and silent room would be to bring the sky crashing down to earth, turn loose a pestilence, set a demon free, or expose some sight grisly enough to turn the observer to stone. I found myself sensing the presence of a person or persons behind the opaque panels; my eyes were trying, as eyes will, to look through the painted wooden barrier.

My glance wandered to the top of the door, back again to the middle, downward toward the bottom. The house was so still, now that Margaret had stepped out of it into the vestibule, that the ears imagined that they heard the beating of great velvety black wings. The gloom of the drawn blinds produced strange shadows, in which the eyes endeavored to find lurking, unseen things that watched the conduct and the destinies of men. But my eyes and ears returned again each time to their vain attention to the entrance of that room, as if the stillness and the gloom bade me listen and look, while I stood there hesitant.

At last the reason for my hesitancy, the reason for my reluctance, the reason for my staring, suddenly appeared as if some fate had directed my observation. A corner of an envelope was protruding from beneath the door!

I felt as I pulled the envelope through that the next moment might bring a piteous outcry from within, as if I had drawn upon the vital nerves of an organism. Yet none came; I found myself erect once more with the envelope in my hand, reading the writing on its face. It was scrawled in a trembling hand.

"Margaret," it said, "send for my husband. Give him this envelope without opening it yourself. Give it to him before he comes to this door."

"Poor woman!" I said with a sudden awakening of sympathy. "Poor, poor woman!"

With my whispered words repeating themselves in my mind, I retraced my way along the hall, down the stairs.

I opened the front door quietly. My first glance showed me the countenance of the old servant; it was lighted by the words which the young man was saying to her.

"Estabrook," said I.

He jumped like a wounded man.

"She is not dead?" he groaned.

"No," said I; "not dead. Come in. She has sent for you."

"Sent for me!" he cried, trying to dash by me.

"Wait," I commanded. "Before you go, come into this reception room. This message is for you."

He took the envelope, almost crunching it in his nervous fingers.

"Remember what I told you," I cautioned him.

"Told me?"

"Yes. To be strong," said I. "To be loyal."

He nodded, then ran his finger under the flap. There were several sheets of thin paper folded within.

"Her writing!" he exclaimed. "But so strange--so steady--so much like her writing when I first knew her. Why, Doctor, it is her old self--it's Julianna."

"Sit down," I suggested.

He spread the papers on his knee.

As he read on, I saw the color leave his skin, I saw his hands draw the sheets so taut that there was danger of their parting under the strain. I heard the catch in each breath he took. As he read, I looked away, observing the refined elegance of the room in which we were sitting and even noting the bronze elephant on the mantel which I remembered was the very one which Judge Colfax had thrown at the dog "Laddie." It was not until he

had reached forward and touched my sleeve that I knew he had finished.

I looked up then. He had buried his head in the curve of his arm. His body seemed to stiffen and relax alternately as if unable to contain some great grief or some great joy which accumulated and burst forth, only to accumulate again.

I heard him whisper, "Julianna."

I saw his hand extending the paper toward me with the evident meaning that I should read it.

I took it from him.

I have that very paper now. It reads as follows.

BOOK VIII

FROM THE WOMAN'S HAND

CHAPTER I

THE VOICE OF THE BLOOD

I am a miserable woman.

Before I ask you to return to me, I am determined that you shall know the truth. I beg you to read this and consider well what I am and what I have done before you undertake life with me or again bring your love into my keeping. This I ask for your sake and for my own; for yours, because I grant that you have been deceived and owe me nothing; for my own, because I believe that I have borne all that I can, and to have you come back to me without knowing all, and without still loving me as you used to love me, would break my heart.

I must not write you with emotion; I must stifle my desire to cry out for your sympathy. I shall write without even the tenderness of a woman.

I am the daughter of a murderer.

In my veins is an inheritance of unspeakable, viciousness.

Before the death of him who I had believed all my life was my own father, I was wholly in ignorance of my own nature. I believed that I took from two noble parents the full assurance that I would be exempt from weakness, that I, with brain cells formed like theirs, would possess forever their tenderness, their geniality, and their strength of will.

You know well how strong a faith I had in the power of inherited character. To it I attributed all that was good in me. I realize now how cruel is this doctrine of heredity; I have spent my strength and given my soul in a battle to prove that I was wrong, that it is not a true doctrine and that God and the human will can laugh in its face.

Without knowing my experience, however, you cannot know to what extent I have been successful. I must tell the story of the tempests which have swayed my mind, of the contests between good and evil, of the narrow gate where my will has made its last defense against the onslaught of terror and destruction.

To my task!

You remember the paper that I burned at dawn which my foster father had dropped from his fingers, stiffening in death. It was his last message to me, written in infinite pain and in an agony of doubt, intended to warn me of the truth that I was not by inheritance strong, but weak, not good, but bad. It told me that I was not the daughter of my mother, whose gentle goodness seemed to fill the old home like a lingering aroma, nor of him who was so strong and so respected of all men, but the daughter of a pitiable woman of the tenements who had passed her days in singing and dancing for pennies thrown at her, and of a man who, having descended from a long line of exquisite savagery, self-indulgence, and weakness, had been driven by his inheritance through all excesses and finally to the murder of his wife and the wish to strangle me in my crib.

Can you conceive the effect of this truth upon my mind?

At first I was merely frozen with terror. I did not fully grasp the significance of these lines of writing in which he who loved me so well had endeavored to soften for me his warning against the latent horrors that had been locked up within me. At first I did not realize that the same night which marked his death had marked also the death of my old self.

Indeed, my first thought was of you. The message had said plainly that I might consider myself the sole possessor of my secret. I was certain that you did not know. I felt the desire to prevent you from ever knowing; I felt the wildness of a tigress at the thought that any one might take my secret from me. Between your hearing the truth about me and my giving you up forever, I had no hesitancy of choice. You must never know, I told myself. Though you were all that was left in my life, I might send you away, but to tell you the truth about myself would be, I believed, to end your love for me which was all that was left to the comfort of my heart. And at that idea I screamed aloud in agony.

I still possessed my conscience; I promised myself over and over again in those hours that I would not deceive you. I did not think for a moment then of asking you to take me with the understanding that you knew there was some terrible thing about me which you were forbidden to know. If in those moments, then, when you came to my room at dawn, I made that bargain with you, so that I might feel your arms about me, and know that I was not to lose you, it was the act of a woman who had just lost her girlhood and whose life had been torn to shreds.

I made a terrible mistake. I know it now. The fact that you have refrained so honorably from asking me the forbidden question and also the fact of your keeping your promise to stay away during these last days, though you were in ignorance of my motives in asking it, has shown me that I might well have disclosed all to you. Without meaning to do so, I have tested not only your honor but something more. I have proved to myself that, behind your undemonstrative exterior which I have sometimes felt was cold, you have that love and tenderness of spirit which is capable of faith and loyalty and the warmth of which endures the better because covered. I should have told you because the secret has mocked me and because nothing can last between man and woman without truth.

I should have told you, moreover, because you might have prevented the terrible result of my knowledge of what I am in bone, blood, fibre, and brain.

That knowledge began its corrupting influence at once; it accumulated force as time went on. The irresistible pull of that knowledge has brought me to the point where I know not whether it is heredity, or the knowledge of it, which presses upon me--which has driven me like a slave. At times I feel certain that the last message of Judge Colfax, rather than the danger of which it intended to warn me, has been my menace.

At first I recalled the fact of my birth and inheritance with resentment and courage.

"I am myself," I have exclaimed. "I alone am responsible for my life, my thoughts, my actions. They shall be according to my will to make them."

Then the haunting doubt would oppose itself to my claim. It spoke to me like a person.

"No," it said. "You are not yourself. You are the victim of fixed laws. The zebra is striped rather than spotted because its forebears wore stripes. So with you. You are half murderess and half gutter-snipe. You are woven according to the pattern. You are moulded according to the mould. You are a prisoner of heredity. Deceive yourself if you will for a time, but sooner or later you, like those from whom you came and of whom you are a part, will be the plaything of self-indulgence and weakness and passion. Fate has made your image that you see in the mirror, refined and comely so that you may see the better the work of heredity when it asserts itself."

This voice was ever at my ear. It became a personal voice. I thought at first that it was the voice of some other being. At last I came by slow changes to the belief that it was not a voice outside of me. It was my Self that spoke. It was the heritage of evil within me. The thing that whispered to me with its condemning voice, frightening away my courage and sapping my strength of will, was my own blood!

I began to watch for the outcropping of evil in my conduct--for the moment when the force of heredity within me would make itself known to you and to the world. No morning dawned that I did not ask myself if night would fall without some opening of the gates of my character behind which so much that was evil, I believed, was clamoring to escape. I lived in two lives. In one I was your wife and the girl you had known, who now existed like an automaton, going senselessly through the acts of day to day existence. In the other I was a condemned victim, waiting in apprehension for the call of terrible and evil authority.

It was an accident which, at last, made real my fancies.

You remember that I was thrown from a horse. You remember that for days a torn nerve in my elbow gave me excruciating pain. You remember that, having regained my senses after the setting of the bone, I would not allow the doctor to give me any narcotic. You remember my protests against that form of relief.

I was afraid. I trembled not only with pain. I trembled with terror.

I believed I was on the threshold of danger. I felt the impending of ruin. Though I had never experienced the sensation of an opiate I even found my body already crying for its comfort. I found myself struggling hour after hour with a desire to try myself. I alternated between a belief that I was strong enough for the test and the instinct that told me the blood in my veins was waiting like a wild animal to pounce upon a first form of self-indulgence.

At last I yielded.

"There is no harm in the proper use of this," said the doctor, seeing my expression,--"by a woman of your type."

I laughed in his face.

I hardly recognized the sound of this laugh; it was not my own. It was the laugh of a new personality. It was care-free and desperate at one time.

"There is no need of your suffering so terribly after each adjustment I make of these cords," said the doctor a few days later, sympathetically.

"But I suffer so at night," said I.

"I will leave you something," said he. "Do not use it oftener than necessary."

Why should I tell you the imperceptible steps by which, partly because I believed myself destined to become a victim, I fell an abject slave to this drug? I need only say that while my arm was still suffering from its injury I gave myself false promises from time to time. "When the pain is gone," I said a thousand times, "there will be no need of this comforter."

When I was obliged to admit that I suffered no more, it was a shock to find myself secretly procuring the opiate in order to continue its use undiscovered.

"This will be the last time," I often said.

Then something laughed within me.

It was my blood laughing. It was my blood mocking me.

I began to experience a cycle of terrible emotions which consumed my days. They began with shame, with injured pride, and terrible grief. They then passed first to vain resolves, then to fear of myself, followed by the feeling that what must be is inevitable and that struggle to escape from the weakness given me by birth was hopeless. This belief led me over and over again to surrender, but with surrender came the fear of exposure of my new secret.

As long as I dared I used a prescription which the doctor had given me. I made guilty trips to the drug store where I had been from the first. I began to feel that strangers who had followed me into the store by chance were there by design to spy upon me. My own furtive glances were enough to excite suspicion. My more frequent purchases were enough to confirm them. At last one day I read in the eyes of the clerk who waited on me the question which must have been in his mind. I seized my package and rushed out onto the street, knowing that I would never dare return.

I went then from one place to another in shrinking fear of detection. In each one my experience was repeated until I believe I began to wear the air of a hunted creature.

So suspicious were my actions that at last a drug clerk shook my little worn-out slip of paper against the glass perfume case and scowled at me.

"The last half of the doctor's name is torn off," he said insolently. "Where did you get this?"

I could not speak.

"I'm sorry," he snarled. "We don't sell that under these circumstances. Where do you live, madam?"

I hurried out into the street.

There I noticed that a tall young man, who had been staring at me, with a row of gold teeth accenting a diabolical smile, had followed me from the store. After I had walked half a block to find my carriage, he spoke to me.

"I can sell you something just as good," he whispered by my side. "I do a little quiet business in it. It's not for yourself, is it?"

"No," I said, trembling from head to foot. "It is for an unfortunate woman, whose name must not be disclosed."

"Call her She," he suggested with a leer. "Here is an address. Send a messenger boy whenever you like. Every one thinks I am a perfume manufacturer."

This was the opening of greater comfort to me; my terror of detection was lessened. As time passed I found that my moral sense was being dulled, little by little. I was fulfilling my destiny. I was living according to my arrangement of brain cells. In spite of his warning--or perhaps solely because of it--the fears of my foster father were realized. I was I!

Four weeks ago came a new thing. It burst like dynamite. It gripped my heart. It felt along the chords of my womanhood. I could not escape its presence. It cried to me in the darkness. It walked beside me in the sunlight.

CHAPTER II**THIS NEW THING**

It has been hard for me to tell coldly of my first weakness; it will be harder still for me to write of what has followed, without letting escape on this page the emotions which are in my heart. This new thing awakened me with a start from my slumber of indifference and my philosophy of defeat.

With a sudden return of my old self I began to have my first doubts about the powers of heredity. I began to wonder if fear of myself, inspired by knowledge of whence I came, rather than any true inherited traits, had not been my undoing. I found that I had not changed so much, after all. The goodness in me had not gone. I saw in my mirror the Julianna you had known and loved. I felt new faith.

I felt new faith in the goodness of the plan under which men and women live and strive. I had always believed in a Divine Spirit if for no other reason than that I and all living things through all time had sensed somewhere beyond their full understanding the existence of a dynamic of creation and order. I believed, if you wish me to phrase it so, in God. It seemed to me in my new awakening that no human creature could be made by such a Spirit the plaything of so cruel a thing as all-powerful heredity.

"He must give us all a chance," I cried with tears on my cheeks. "It must be true that I can save myself by fight. It cannot be that I will be deprived of the opportunity of putting an end to this evil descent. My father sought to strangle me because he believed he would appear in my blood. Now it is I, who, finding him there, must strangle him!" And I, in my agony, fell upon my knees and prayed.

You were asleep when, in my bare feet, forgetful of the cold, I stood hour after hour at the window of my room, listening to your breathing. In those hours, little by little I realized that it was not escape from a single weakness or indulgence which I must seek, but that I must reestablish mastery over myself. I knew that no help from without would accomplish this mastery. I made up my mind to fight single-handed, and to stake myself and if necessary, my life, in a battle to place again my will upon its throne.

Accordingly I took, as I supposed, my last dose of opiate and under its influence, which gave me strength, I pleaded with you to leave me alone in this house for three weeks. You yielded. I then ordered all furnishings out of my chamber, and all the servants except Margaret out of the house, to the end that no sight or sound should draw my attention or my thoughts from my purpose.

I had a plentiful supply of my drug. You will doubtless want to know what I did with it. I took it with me into my retreat.

My first day I suffered the deprivation but little; it was on the second that I moved my mattress where I could concentrate all my attention on a single wall of the four. On the third day I began to lose track of time. I had feared much, but not the degree of suffering which the pains of denial now piled upon me in an accumulating load.

Often I fell forward prostrate on the floor, squirming in my agony of body and mind, while within me a battle went raging on between the spirit and the flesh. My eyes would search for the packet of drugs lying on the floor within my reach and rest upon the sight of it, staring as mad persons must stare. It was my will that held my hand.

Can you imagine the eternal vacillation of such a contest? Then you will know that desire fighting against reason now drove my will back step by step until it was tottering on the brink of chaos, and again, in a triumph of resistance, my determination swept everything before it until I longed to rise, to throw my arms upward, fingers extended, and cry aloud my victory.

On the other hand, a thousand moments came when, ready to yield to my temptation, I have dropped on my knees on the boards and, with my eyes fixed upon that wall, have prayed like mad, hour after hour, my lips parched and blood running from my bare knees.

Voices whispered to me that I was a fanatic, pinning my faith to superstition and the practices of savagery. I whispered back to them that they should see me victorious at last.

"How long will you fight?" said they mockingly.

"Till desire is gone and the will has nothing to fight for," I answered them.

"You are insane," they said, speaking like so many devils.

"We shall know better at the end," I replied softly.

These dialogues, the torture of which no one can know, went on eternally. They were arguments, I knew, between my ingenious mind and the will which was trying to reclaim its mastery of my thought.

Night and day became all one to me. I lost count of the hours, then of the days. I became filled with the fear that three weeks would go by, that you would return too soon, that interruption would come before my fight had been determined one way or the other. This terror was enough to weaken me. I felt it many times and on each occasion drew so near the bare wall that I could throw my weight against it and lose all external thoughts by staring at the blank surface, with all but one purpose banished from my mind.

I have eaten merely to live, slept only to repair my strength. Each morsel of food has added to my bodily anguish, each falling asleep has meant a horrible awakening to new, exquisite torture of the body. My hands have become black by resting on the bare boards, my nails torn by scratching over the covering of my mattress. My hair is matted. My throat, dry with prayers, is almost voiceless, my lips are cracked like old leather.

I do not tell you these things to gain your sympathy, but so that, if you should want to come back to me, you will not be shocked to find me horrible.

I must go on.

Five days ago my craving began to yield. The blessedness of the relief is beyond description. Little by little the resistance to my will weakened. Little by little my will gained mastery. It seemed a youthful giant, learning its power. It seemed to fill the room, to seek to reach beyond and find new labors for its strength. I felt the moment approach when I, no longer a slave of myself, could indeed rise from thanks to God and feel my triumph sure.

I dared three days ago to touch my drugs, to take them in my hand, to mock them.

Yesterday I got up. I began to write this message.

I could hear martial music as I wrote and the tramp of a million feet. It was the army of men and women who have fought against evil and won,--they who have been masters of themselves. As they passed, they cheered me, each one; they waved their hats and hands!

And afterward there came a little child and smiled and stretched his arms out to me. He was glad.

For he is to be my own.

BOOK IX

BEHIND THE WALL

CHAPTER I

AN ANSWER TO MACMECHEM

Such was the message Julianna had sent her husband. I read it and, without speaking, I arose and touched Estabrook on his shoulder.

"Doctor," said he pathetically.

"Come," said I.

We went up to her door. It was not locked; it opened. She was there.

She was there with a smile of greeting--a beautiful woman, pale with her suffering, pale as the flower of a night-blooming cactus, but warm with the vitality given to women who love. The pink light of dusk was on her calm face.

She was leaning back against the wall. Her great eyes fixed themselves upon Estabrook without seeing me at all. She did not speak. She seemed in doubt.

Estabrook hesitated a moment with his hand reaching behind him for my sleeve. He pulled at it twice, without turning.

"Is she safe?" he whispered hoarsely.

"Yes, in every way. The Lord wouldn't allow the contrary to happen," said I. "If she should need me later, call me. I shall be downstairs."

I stepped back then as softly as a cat. I shut the door after me with the greatest pains. In the reception room below I looked about for the letter I had laid on my chair. It was gone!

I called Margaret softly. I searched cautiously through the halls, whispering her name. She was nowhere. At last I brushed against a hanging which, being withdrawn, disclosed the message itself on the floor. Its sheets were crumpled together, so that it was evident that some one else had read it. I suppose that the old servant had done so. If her curiosity was pardonable, so was my theft. I folded the paper and thrust it in my pocket as I sat down to wait.

The minutes went by and many of them had gone before I heard some one in the back part of the house, descending the stairs. The breath of this person was labored like the breath of one who carries a heavy handbag. A little later I heard a door creak and a latch click below. Then all was still.

The house was terribly still. The stillness beat as before, like a thing with feathery wings. The distant clock tick came and went between these flurries of silence. I looked at my watch. An hour had gone. It was growing dark. My patient chauffeur had lit his lights. Passers-by came and went, in and out of their white glare. I had smoked two cigars.

[Illustration: SHE DID NOT SPEAK. SHE SEEMED IN DOUBT]

Finally a pair of feet ran up the front steps. The bell rang. There was no movement in the house. It rang again. The feet on the steps stamped impatiently. Again the bell buzzed. The sound came from some unexplored region of the house, but the little thing made a shocking hubbub in that desert of silence.

After this last vehement assault by the newcomer I heard a door open above. A man, burning one match after another to light his way, came down the stairs. When he had reached the bottom, I saw that it was Estabrook. His face was illuminated by the little flame, but a hundredfold more by an expression of happiness, the equal of which I have never seen.

"Great Scott, Doctor," he cried in sincere surprise. "I forgot you were here!"

"Come! Come!" said I. "Some one is wearing his thumb off on that bell."

As he swung the door back, obeying me like a man in a dream, a voice outside mumbled indistinctly.

"Yes," said Estabrook, "I am he."

Then closing the door he came into the room, fumbling along the wall for the electric switch. The flood of light disclosed him trying to tear open an envelope.

As he read the contents, his face grew black as if with rage, then it brightened again. He uttered an exclamation of pleasure.

"Thank God!" he cried. "Here! Read this. It's from Margaret Murchie."

I took the paper.

"You will never see me again," it said. "I have gone to Monty Cranch. You won't ever see either of us again. He is going with me. We plan to finish life, what is left of it, together. We will never turn up again. You better not worry.

"I have caused enough trouble already," it went on in its rough scrawl. "I have been wicked enough and had to pay dear for my lies. Julianna is not the daughter of Monty Cranch. That is the truth. She is the daughter of the Judge, so help me. Mrs. Welstoke is to blame for that first lie. I stole the locket from the Cranch baby's neck and after the fire I saw a chance to get the Judge in my power. I snapped the locket on and I fooled him otherwise. God knows I suffered enough for it afterward when I got to love him and Julianna. I never attempted any blackmail. But I did not dare to tell the truth. It was the only home I had and I was afraid. I have done the best I could. You will never see me again. Monty knows now she is not his. I have money saved. We won't come back."

"Well," said Estabrook, when I had tossed it on the table, "I am dumb. I am the happiest man alive. The Estabrooks, when you come right down to it quickly, would have been sorry if--"

"Pardon me, sir," I said. "I will call later. You do not need me now and I will step into the Marburys'."

"But, Doctor!" cried the young man.

I shook my head.

"My dear fellow," said I solemnly, "I cannot bear to hear you talk about the respectable Estabrooks!"

Our hands met, however, and, I believe, with a warmth that meant more than many words.

As I went up the Marburys' steps a minute later, I looked up. A light was burning in Mrs. Estabrook's room. I saw the shadows of a man and a woman pass the curtain together.

This pretty picture was in my mind as I entered little Virginia's room, where Miss Peters met me with a smile--the first human smile I had ever seen on her metallic face.

For many minutes I sat on the edge of the bed, looking down at the child that I had grown to love, as a foolish old doctor sometimes will. Then I bent and kissed her cool, white forehead.

"She is out of danger," said I softly.

"Oh, yes," said Miss Peters. "She will get well. You have saved her."

She moved her angular shoulders as she adjusted her belt, she strode noiselessly across the room and moved the shade on the lamp. The light now shone so that the blue wall, with its ethereal depths, had turned rosy as with the light of dawn.

"Suppose, Miss Peters--" said I, after staring at it a moment, "suppose that you were called upon for one guess about this wall and its effect upon this child."

She wheeled about and stared at me.

"I've thought of that," she said.

"What's behind that wall?" she mused as if to herself. "As between something and somebody, it is not a thing, but a person. A person has been there--perhaps some one overcoming evil or winning some victory over disease."

"Well," said I, seeing that she was hesitating, "go on."

"I can't exactly go on," she said. "I don't want you to take me for a fool. Only, don't you suppose that you and I, ourselves, must throw out some influence that is not seen with the eyes or heard with the ears? Don't we affect every one near us with our good and evil? Don't we affect the people who live above and below in apartments, or to the right and left in houses? Doesn't strength or weakness come through wood and iron and stone? Didn't it come through this wall, Doctor?"

"My dear Miss Peters," said I, shrugging my shoulders, "how can I say? I can only tell you that you have just finished the longest, the most human, and, on the whole, in the best sense, the most scientific observation I have ever known you to make."

CHAPTER II

"WHY CARE?"

There is the tale, all told. Many may want to ask me my theories. I have none. My story, except as to form, is like the data I keep in every case which comes before my notice--it is a somewhat incomplete and matter-of-fact section out of human life. Like poor MacMechem I try to keep my mind open. I simply offer a narrative of the sequence of events.

One thing only troubles me. Did Margaret Murchie lie when she said Mrs. Estabrook was the daughter of Cranch? or when she said that she was the daughter of Judge Colfax? And to this question many will say, "Why care?" Others will decide--each for himself.

THE END

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