GREEN ANNA KATHARINE

THE HOUSE OF THE WHISPERING PINES

Anna Green

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Green A.

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Anna Katharine Green
The House of the Whispering Pines

BOOK ONE
SMOKE

I
THE HESITATING STEP

To have reared a towering scheme
Of happiness, and to behold it razed,
Were nothing: all men hope, and see their hopes
Frustrate, and grieve awhile, and hope anew;
But—

A Blot in the 'Scutcheon.

The moon rode high; but ominous clouds were rushing towards it—clouds heavy with snow. I watched these clouds as I drove recklessly, desperately, over the winter roads. I had just missed the desire of my life, the one precious treasure which I coveted with my whole undisciplined heart, and not being what you call a man of self-restraint, I was chafed by my defeat far beyond the bounds I have usually set for myself.

The moon—with the wild skurry of clouds hastening to blot it out of sight—seemed to mirror the chaos threatening my better impulses; and, idly keeping it in view, I rode on, hardly conscious of my course till the rapid recurrence of several well-known landmarks warned me that I had taken the longest route home, and that in another moment I should be skirting the grounds of The Whispering Pines, our country clubhouse. *I* had taken? Let me rather say, my horse; for he and I had traversed this road many times together, and he had no means of knowing that the season was over and the club-house closed. I did not think of it myself at the moment, and was recklessly questioning whether I should not drive in and end my disappointment in a wild carouse, when, the great stack of chimneys coming suddenly into view against the broad disk of the still unclouded moon, I perceived a thin trail of smoke soaring up from their midst and realised, with a shock, that there should be no such sign of life in a house I myself had closed, locked, and barred that very day.

I was the president of the club and felt responsible. Pausing only long enough to make sure that I had yielded to no delusion, and that fire of some kind was burning on one of the club-house's deserted hearths, I turned in at the lower gateway. For reasons which I need not now state, there were no bells attached to my cutter and consequently my approach was noiseless. I was careful that it should be so, also careful to stop short of the front door and leave my horse and sleigh in the black depths of the pine-grove pressing up to the walls on either side. I was sure that all was not as it should be inside these walls, but, as God lives, I had no idea what was amiss or how deeply my own destiny was involved in the step I was about to take.

Our club-house stands, as it may be necessary to remind you, on a knoll thickly wooded with the ancient trees I have mentioned. These trees—all pines and of a growth unusual and of an aspect well-nigh hoary—extend only to the rear end of the house, where a wide stretch of gently undulating ground opens at once upon the eye, suggesting to all lovers of golf the admirable use to which it is put

from early spring to latest fall. Now, links, as well as parterres and driveways, are lying under an even blanket of winter snow, and even the building, with its picturesque gables and rows of be-diamonded windows, is well-nigh indistinguishable in the shadows cast by the heavy pines, which soar above it and twist their limbs over its roof and about its forsaken corners, with a moan and a whisper always desolate to the sensitive ear, but from this night on, simply appalling.

No other building stood within a half-mile in any direction. It was veritably a country club, gay and full of life in the season, but isolated and lonesome beyond description after winter had set in and buried flower and leaf under a wide waste of untrodden snow.

I felt this isolation as I stepped from the edge of the trees and prepared to cross the few feet of open space leading to the main door. The sudden darkness instantly enveloping me, as the clouds, whose advancing mass I had been watching, made their final rush upon the moon, added its physical shock to this inner sense of desolation, and, in some moods, I should have paused and thought twice before attempting the door, behind which lurked the unknown with its naturally accompanying suggestion of peril. But rage and disappointment, working hotly within me, had left no space for fear. Rather rejoicing in the doubtfulness of the adventure, I pushed my way over the snow until my feet struck the steps. Here, instinct caused me to stop and glance quickly up and down the building either way. Not a gleam of light met my eye from the smallest scintillating pane. Was the house as soundless as it was dark?

I listened but heard nothing. I listened again and still heard nothing.

Then I proceeded boldly up the steps and laid my hand on the door.

It was unlatched and yielded to my touch. Light or no light, sound or no sound there was some one within. The fire which had sent its attenuated streak of smoke up into the moonlit air, was burning yet on one of the many hearths within, and before it I should presently see—

Whom?

What?

The question scarcely interested me.

Nevertheless I proceeded to enter and close the door carefully behind me. As I did so, I cast an involuntary glance without. The sky was inky and a few wandering flakes of the now rapidly advancing storm came whirling in, biting my cheeks and stinging my forehead.

Once inside, I stopped short, possibly to listen again, possibly to assure myself as to what I had best do next. The silence was profound. Not a sound disturbed the great, empty building. My own footfall, as I stirred, seemed to wake extraordinary echoes. I had moved but a few steps, yet to my heightened senses, the noise seemed loud enough to wake the dead. Instinctively I stopped and stood stock-still. There was no answering cessation of movement. Darkness, silence everywhere. Yet not quite absolute darkness. As my eyes grew accustomed to the place, I found it possible to discern the outlines of the windows and locate the stairs and the arches where the side halls opened. I was even able to pick out the exact spot where the great antlers spread themselves above the hatrack, and presently the rack itself came into view, with its row of empty pegs, yesterday so full, to-day quite empty. That rack interested me,—I hardly knew why,—and regardless of the noise I made, I crossed over to it and ran my hand along the wall underneath. The result was startling. A man's coat and hat hung from one of the pegs.

I knew my business as president of this club. I also knew that no one should be in the house at this time—that no one could be in it on any honest errand. Some secret and sinister business must be at the bottom of this mysterious intrusion immediately after the place had been shut for the winter. Would this hat and coat identify the intruder? I would strike a light and see. But this involved difficulties. The gas had been turned off that very morning and I had no matches in my pocket. But I remembered where they could be found. I had seen them when I passed through the kitchen earlier in the day. They were very accessible from the end of the hall where I stood. I had but to feel my way through a passage or two and I should come to the kitchen door.

I began to move that way, and presently came creeping back, with a match-box half full of matches in my hand. But I did not strike one then. I had just made a move to do so, when the unmistakable sound of a door opening somewhere in the house made me draw back into as quiet and dark a place as I could find. This lay in the rear and at the right of the staircase, and as the sound had appeared to come from above, it was the most natural retreat that offered. And a good one I found it.

I had hardly taken up my stand when the darkness above gave way to a faint glimmer, and a step became audible coming from some one of the many small rooms in the second story, but so slowly and with such evident hesitation that my imagination had ample time to work and fill my mind with varying anticipations, each more disconcerting than the last. Now I seemed to be listening to the movements of an intoxicated man seeking an issue out of strange quarters, then to the wary approach of one who had his own reasons for dread and was as conscious of my presence as I was of his.

But the light, steadily increasing with each lagging but surely advancing step, soon gave the lie to this latter supposition, since no sane man, afraid of an ambush, would be likely to offer such odds to the one lying in wait for him, as his own face illumined by a flaming candle, and I was yielding to the bewilderment of the moment when the uncertain step paused and a sob came faintly to my ears, wrung from lips so stiff with human anguish that my fears took on new shape and the event a significance which in my present mood of personal suffering and preoccupation was anything but welcome. Indeed, I was coward enough to contemplate flight and might in another moment have yielded to the unworthy impulse if the sound of a second sigh had not struck shudderingly on my ear, followed by the renewal of the step and the almost immediate appearance on the stairs of a young girl holding a candle in one hand and shielding her left cheek with the other.

Life offers few such shocks to any man, whatever his story or whatever his temperament. I had been prepared by the sob I had heard to see a woman, but not this woman. Nothing could have prepared me for an encounter with this woman anywhere that night, after what had passed between us and the wreck she had made of my life. But here! in a place so remote and desolate I had hesitated to enter it myself! What was I to think? How was I to reconcile so inconceivable a fact with what I knew of her in the past, with what I hoped from her in the future.

To steady my thoughts and bring my whirling brain again under control, I fixed my eyes on her well-known form and features as upon a stranger's whom I would understand and judge. I have called her a woman and certainly I had loved her as such, but as, in this moment of strange detachment, I watched her descend, swaying foot following swaying foot falteringly down the stairs, I was able to see that only the emotions which denaturalised her expression were a woman's; that her features, her pose, and the peculiar childlike contour of the one cheek open to view were those of one whose yesterday was in the playroom.

But beautiful! You do not often see such beauty. Under all the disfigurement of an agitation so great as to daunt me and make me question if I were its sole cause, her face shone with an individual charm which marked her out as one of the few who are the making or marring of men, sometimes of nations. This is the heritage she was born to, this her lot, not to be shirked, not to be evaded even now at her early age of seventeen. So much any one could see even in a momentary scrutiny of her face and figure. But what was not so clear, not even to myself with the consciousness of what had passed between us during the last few hours, was why her heart should have so outrun her years, and the emotion I beheld betray such shuddering depths. Some grisly fear, some staring horror had met her in this strange retreat. Simple grief speaks with a different language from that which I read in her distorted features and tottering, slowly creeping form. What had happened above? She had escaped me to run upon what? My lips refused to ask, my limbs refused to move, and if I breathed at all, I did so with such fierceness of restraint that her eyes never turned my way, not even when she had reached the lowest step and paused for a moment there, oscillating in pain or uncertainty. Her face was turned more fully towards me now, and I had just begun to discern something in it besides its tragic beauty, when she made a quick move and blew out the candle she held. One moment that magical picture of

superhuman loveliness, then darkness, I might say silence, for I do not think either of us so much as stirred for several instants. Then there came a crash, followed by the sound of flying feet. She had flung the candlestick out of her hand and was hurriedly crossing the hail. I thought she was coming my way, and instinctively drew back against the wall. But she stopped far short of me, and I heard her groping about, then give a sudden spring towards the front door. It opened and the wind soughed in. I felt the chill of snow upon my face, and realised the tempest. Then all was quiet and dark again. She had slid quickly out and the door had swung to behind her. Another instant and I heard the click of the key as it turned in the lock, heard it and made no outcry, such the spell, such the bewilderment of my faculties! But once the act was accomplished and egress made difficult, nay, for the moment, impossible, I felt all lesser emotions give way to an anxiety which demanded immediate action, for the girl had gone out without wraps or covering for her head, and my experience of the evening had told me how cold it was. I must follow and find her and rescue her if possible from the snow. The distance was long to town, the cold would seize and perhaps prostrate her, after which, the wind and snow would do the rest.

Throwing myself against the door, I shook it violently. It was immovable. Then I flew to the windows. Their fastenings yielded readily enough, but not the windows themselves; one had a broken cord, another seemed glued to its frame, and I was still struggling with the latter when I heard a sound which lifted the hair on my head and turned my whole attention back to what lay behind and above me. There was still some one in the house. I had forgotten everything in this apparition of the woman I have described in a place so disassociated with any conception I could possibly have of her whereabouts on this especial evening. But this noise, short, sharp, but too distant to be altogether recognisable, roused doubts which once awakened changed the whole tenor of my thoughts and would not let me rest till I had probed the house from top to bottom. To find Carmel Cumberland alone in this desolation was a mystifying discovery to which I had found it hard enough to reconcile myself. But Carmel here in company with another at the very moment when I had expected the fruition of my own joy,—ah, that was to open hell's door in my breast; a possibility too intolerable to remain unsettled for an instant. Though she had passed out before my eyes in a drooping, almost agonised condition, not she, dear as she was, and great as were my fears in her regard, was to be sought out first, but the man! The man who was back of all this, possibly back of my disappointment; the man whose work I may have witnessed, but at whose identity I could not even guess.

Leaving the window, I groped my way along the wall until I reached the rack where the man's coat and hat hung. Whether it was my intention to carry them away and hide them, in my anxiety to secure this intruder and hold him to a bitter account for the misery he was causing me, or whether I only meant to satisfy myself that they were the habiliments of a stranger and not those of some sneaking member of the club, is of little importance in the light of the fact which presently burst upon me. The hat and coat were gone. Nothing hung from the rack. The wall was free from end to end. She had taken these articles of male apparel with her; she had not gone forth into the driving snow, unprotected, but—

I did not know what to think. No acquaintanceship with her girlish impulses, nothing that had occurred between us before or during this night, had prepared me for a freak of this nature. I felt backward along the wall; I felt forward; I even handled the pegs and counted them as I passed to and fro, touching every one; but I could not alter the fact. The groping she had done had been in this direction. She was searching for this hat and coat (a man's hat,—a derby, as I had been careful to assure myself at the first handling) and, in them, she had gone home as she had probably come, and there was no man in the case, or if there were—

The doubt drove me to the staircase. Making no further effort to unravel the puzzle which only beclouded my faculties, I began my wary ascent. I had not the slightest fear, I was too full of cold rage for that.

The arrangement of rooms on the second floor was well known to me. I understood every nook and corner and could find my way about the whole place without a light. I took but one precaution—that of slipping off my shoes at the foot of the stairs. I wished to surprise the intruder. I was willing to resort to any expedient to accomplish this. The matches I carried in my pocket would make this possible if once I heard him breathing. I held my own breath as I stole softly up, and waited for an instant at the top of the stairs to listen. There was an awesome silence everywhere, and I was hesitating whether to attack the front rooms first or to follow up a certain narrow hall leading to a rear staircase, when I remembered the thin line of smoke which, rising from one of the chimneys, had first attracted my attention to the house. In that was my clue. There was but one room on this floor where a fire could be lit. It lay a few feet beyond me down the narrow hall I have just mentioned. Why had I trusted everything to my ears when my nose would have been a better guide? As I took the few steps necessary, a slight smell of smoke became very perceptible, and no longer in doubt of my course, I pushed boldly on and entering the half-open door, struck a match and peered anxiously about.

Emptiness here just as everywhere else. A few chairs, a dresser,—it was a ladies' dressing-room,—some smouldering ashes on the hearth, a lounge piled up with cushions. But no person. The sound I had heard had not issued from this room, yet something withheld me from seeking further. Chilled to the bone, with teeth chattering in spite of myself, I paused just inside the door, and when the match went out in my hand remained shivering there in the darkness, a prey to sensations more nearly approaching those of fear than any I had ever before experienced in my whole life.

II
IT WAS SHE—SHE INDEED!

Look on death itself!—up, up, and see
The great doom's visage!

Macbeth.

Why, I did not know. There seemed to be no reason for this excess of feeling. I had no dread of attack; my apprehension was of another sort. Besides, any attack here must come from the rear —from the open doorway in which I stood—and my dread lay before me, in the room itself, which, as I have already said, appeared to be totally empty. What could occasion my doubts, and why did I not fly the place? There were passage-ways yet to search, why linger here like a gaby in the dark when perhaps the man I believed to be in hiding somewhere within these walls, was improving the opportunity to escape?

If I asked myself this question, I did not answer it, but I doubt if I asked it then. I had forgotten the intruder; the interest which had carried me thus far had become lost in a fresher one of which the beginning and ending lay hidden within the four walls I now stared upon, unseeing. Not to see and yet to feel—did that make the horror? If so, another lighted match must help me out. I struck one while the thought was hot within me, and again took a look at the room.

I noted but one thing new, but that made me reel back till I was half way into the hall. Then a certain dogged persistency I possess came to my rescue, and I re-entered the room at a leap and stood before the lounge and its pile of cushions. They were numerous,—all that the room contained, and more! Chairs had been stripped, window-seats denuded, and the whole collection disposed here in a set way which struck me as unnatural. Was this the janitor's idea? I hardly thought so, and was about to pluck one of these cushions off, when that most unreasonable horror seized me again and I found myself looking back over my shoulder at the fireplace from which rose a fading streak of smoke which some passing gust, perhaps, had blown out into the room.

I felt sick. Was it the smell? It was not that of burning wood, hardly of burning paper, I—but here my second match went out.

Thoroughly roused now (you will say, by what?) I felt my way out of the room and to the head of the staircase. I remembered the candle and candlestick I had heard thrown down on the lower floor by Carmel Cumberland. I would secure them and come back and settle these uncanny doubts. It might be the veriest fool business, but my mind was disturbed and must be set at ease. Nothing else seemed so important, yet I was not without anxiety for the lovely and delicate woman wandering the snow-covered roads in the teeth of a furious gale, any more than I was dead to the fact that I should never forgive myself if I allowed the man to escape whom I believed to be hiding somewhere in the rear of this house.

I had a hunt for the candlestick and a still longer one for the candle, but finally I recovered both, and, lighting the latter, felt myself, for the first time, more or less master of the situation.

Rapidly regaining the room in which my interest was now centred, I set the candlestick down on the dresser, and approached the lounge. Hardly knowing what I feared, or what I expected to find, I tore off one of the cushions and flung it behind me. More cushions were revealed—but that was not all.

Escaping from the edge of one of them I saw a shiny tress of woman's hair. I gave a gasp and pulled off more cushions, then I fell on my knees, struck down by the greatest horror which a man can feel. Death lay before me—violent, uncalled-for death—and the victim was a woman. But it was not

that. Though the head was not yet revealed, I thought I knew the woman and that she—Did seconds pass or many minutes before I lifted that last cushion? I shall never know. It was an eternity to me and I am not of a sentimental cast, but I have some sort of a conscience and during that interval it awoke. It has never quite slept since.

The cushion had not concealed the hands, but I did not look at them—I did not dare. I must first see the face. But I did not twitch this pillow off; I drew it aside slowly, as though held by the restraining clutch of some one behind me. And I was so held, but not by what was visible—rather by the terrors which gather in the soul at the summons of some dreadful doom. I could not meet the certainty without some preparation. I released another strand of hair; then the side of a cheek, half buried out of sight in the loosened locks and bulging pillows; then, with prayers to God for mercy, an icy brow; two staring eyes—which having seen I let the cushion drop, for mercy was not to be mine.

It was *she*, she, indeed! and judgment was glassed in the look I met—judgment and nothing more kindly, however I might appeal to Heaven for mercy or whatever the need of my fiercely startled and repentant soul.

Dead! Adelaide! the woman I had planned to wrong that very night, and who had thus wronged me! For a moment I could take in nothing but this one astounding fact, then the how and the why woke in maddening curiosity within me, and seizing the cushion, I dragged it aside and stared down into the pitiful and accusing features thus revealed, as though to tear from them the story of the crime which had released me as I would not have been released, no, not to have had my heart's desire in all the fulness with which I had contemplated it a few short hours before.

But beyond the ever accusing, protuberant stare, those features told nothing; and steeling myself to the situation, I made what observation I could of her condition and the surrounding circumstances. For this was my betrothed wife. Whatever my intentions, however far my love had strayed under the spell cast over me by her sister,—the young girl who had just passed out,—Adelaide and I had been engaged for many months; our wedding day was even set.

But that was all over now—ended as her life was ended: suddenly, incomprehensibly, and by no stroke of God. Even the jewel on her finger was gone, the token of our betrothal. This was to be expected. She would be apt to take it off before committing herself to a fate that proclaimed me a traitor to this symbol. I should see that ring again. I should find it in a letter filled with bitter words. I would not think of it or of them now. I would try to learn how she had committed this act, whether by poison or—

It must have been by poison; no other means would suggest themselves to one of her refined sense; but if so, why those marks on her neck, growing darker and darker as I stared at them!

My senses reeled as I scrutinised those marks. Small, delicate but deadly, they stared upon me from either side of her white neck till nature could endure no more and I tottered back against the further wall, beholding no longer room, nor lounge, nor recumbent body, but a young girl's exquisite face, set in lines which belied her seventeen years, and made futile any attempt on my part at self-deception when my reason inexorably demanded an explanation of this death. As suicide it was comprehensible, as murder, not, unless—

And it had been murder!

I sank to the floor as I fully realised this.

III
"OPEN!"

PRINCE.—Bring forth the parties of suspicion.
FRIAR.—I am the greatest, as the time and place Doth make against me, of this direful murder; And here I stand, both to impeach and purge. Myself condemned and myself excused.

Romeo and Juliet.

I have mentioned poison as my first thought. It was a natural one, the result undoubtedly of having noticed two small cordial glasses standing on a little table over against the fireplace. When I was conscious again of my own fears, I crossed to the table and peered into these glasses. They were both empty. However, they had not been so long. In each I found traces of anisette cordial, and though no bottle stood near I was very confident that it could readily be found somewhere in the room. What had preceded and followed the drinking of this cordial?

As I raised my head from bending over these glasses—not club glasses, by the way—I caught sight of my face in the mantel mirror. It gave me maddening thoughts. In this same mirror there had been reflected but a little while before, two other faces, for a sight of whose expression at that fatal moment I would gladly risk my soul.

How had *she* looked—how that other? Would not the story of those awful, those irrevocable moments be plain to my eye, if the quickly responsive glass could but retain the impressions it receives and give back at need what had once informed its surface with moving life!

I stared at the senseless glass, appealed to it with unreasoning frenzy, as to something which could give up its secret if it would, but only to meet my own features in every guise of fury and despair —features I no longer knew—features which insensibly increased my horror till I tore myself wildly from the spot, and cast about for further clues to enlightenment, before yielding to the conviction which was making a turmoil in mind, heart, and conscience. Alas! there was but little more to see. A pair of curling-irons lay on the hearth, but I had no sooner lifted them than I dropped them with a shudder of unspeakable loathing, only to start at the noise they made in striking the tiles. For it was the self-same noise I had heard when listening from below. These tongs, set up against the side of the fireplace had been jarred down by the forcible shutting of the large front door, and no man other than myself was in the house, or had been in the house; only the two women. But the time when this discovery would have brought comfort was passed. Better a hundred times that a man—I had almost said any man—should have been with them here, than that they should be closeted together in a spot so secluded, with rancour and cause for complaint in one heart, and a biting, deadly flame in the other, which once reaching up must from its very nature leave behind it a corrosive impress. I saw,-I felt,—but I did not desist from my investigations. A stick or two still smouldered on the hearthstone. In the ashes lay some scattered fragments of paper which crumbled at my touch. On the floor in front I espied only a stray hair-pin; everything else was in place throughout the room except the cushions and that horror on the lounge, waiting the second look I had so far refrained from giving it.

That look I could no longer withhold. I must know the depth of the gulf over which I hung. I must not wrong with a thought one who had smiled upon me like an angel of light—a young girl, too, with the dew of innocence on her beauty to every eye but mine and only not to mine within—shall I say ten awful minutes? It seemed ages,—all of my life and more. Yet that lovely breast had heaved not so many times since I looked upon her as a deified mortal, and now two small spots on another

woman's pulseless throat had drawn a veil of blood over that beauty, and given to a child the attributes of a Medusa. Yet hope was not quite stilled. I would look again and perhaps discover that my own eyes had been at fault, that there were no marks, or if marks, not just the ones my fancy had painted there.

Turning, I let my glance fall first on the feet. I had not noted them before, and I was startled to see that the arctics in which they were clad were filled all around with snow. She had walked then, as the other was walking now; she, who detested every effort and was of such delicate make that exertion of unusual kind could not readily be associated with her. Had she come alone or in Carmel's company, and if in Carmel's company, on what ostensible errand if not that of death? Her dress, which was of dark wool, showed that she had changed her garments for this trip. I had seen her at dinner, and this was not the gown she had worn then—the gown in which she had confronted me during those few intolerable minutes when I could not meet her eyes. Fatal cowardice! A moment of realisation then and we might all have been saved this horror of sin and death and shameful retribution.

And yet who knows? Not understanding what I saw, how could I measure the might-have-beens! I would proceed with my task—note if she wore the diamond brooch I had given her. No, she was without ornament; I had never seen her so plainly clad. Might I draw a hope from this? Even the pins which had fallen from her hair were such as she wore when least adorned. Nothing spoke of the dinner party or of her having been dragged here unaware; but all of previous intent and premeditation. Surely hope was getting uppermost. If I had dreamed the marks—

But no! There they were, unmistakable and damning, just where the breath struggles up. I put my own thumbs on these two dark spots to see if—when what was it? A lightning stroke or a call of fate which one must answer while sense remains? I felt my head pulled around by some unseen force from behind, and met staring into mine through the glass of the window a pair of burning eyes. Or was it fantasy? For in another moment they were gone, nor was I in the condition just then to dissociate the real from the unreal. But the possibility of a person having seen me in this position before the dead was enough to startle me to my feet, and though in another instant I became convinced that I had been the victim of hallucination, I nevertheless made haste to cross to the window and take a look through its dismal panes. A gale of blinding snow was sweeping past, making all things indistinguishable, but the absence of balcony outside was reassuring and I stepped hastily back, asking myself for the first time what I should do and where I should now go to ensure myself from being called as a witness to the awful occurrence which had just taken place in this house. Should I go home and by some sort of subterfuge now unthought of, try to deceive my servants as to the time of my return, or attempt to create an alibi elsewhere? Something I must do to save myself the anguish and Carmel the danger of my testimony in this matter. She must never know, the world must never know that I had seen her here.

I had lost at a blow everything that gives zest or meaning to life, but I might still be spared the bottommost depth of misery—be saved the utterance of the word which would sink that erring but delicate soul into the hell yawning beneath her. It was my one thought now—though I knew that the woman who had fallen victim to her childish hate had loved me deeply and was well worth my avenging.

I could not be the death of two women; the loss of one weighed heavily enough upon my conscience. I would fly the place—I would leave this ghastly find to tell its own story. The night was stormy, the hour late, the spot a remote one, and the road to it but little used. I could easily escape and when the morrow came—but it was the present I must think of now, this hour, this moment. How came I to stay so long! In feverish haste, I began to throw the pillows back over the quiet limbs, the accusing face. Shudderingly I hid those eyes (I understood their strange protuberance now) and recklessly bent on flight, was half way across the floor when my feet were stayed—I wonder that my reason was not unseated—by a sudden and tremendous attack on the great door below, mingled with loud cries to open which ran thundering through the house, calling up innumerable echoes from its dead and hidden corners.

It was the police. The wild night, the biting storm had been of no avail. An alarm had reached headquarters, and all hope of escape on my part was at an end. Yet because at such crises instinct rises superior to reason, I blew out the candle and softly made my way into the hall. I had remembered a window opening over a shed at the head of the kitchen staircase. I could reach it from this rear hall by just a turn or two, and once on that shed, a short leap would land me on the ground; after which I could easily trust to the storm to conceal my flight across the open golf-links. It was worth trying at least; anything was better than being found in the house with my murdered betrothed.

I had no reason to think that I was being sought, or that my presence in this building was even suspected. It might well be that the police were even ignorant of the tragedy awaiting them across the threshold of the door they seemed intent on battering down. The gleam of a candle burning in this closed-up house, or even the tale told by the rising smoke, may have drawn them from the road to investigate. Such coincidences had been. Such untoward happenings had misled people into useless self-betrayal. My case was too desperate for such weakness. Flight at this moment might save all; I would at least attempt it. The door was shaking on its hinges; these intruders seemed determined to enter.

With a spring I reached the window by which I hoped to escape, and quickly raised it. A torrent of snow swept in, covering my face and breast in a moment. It did something more: it cleared my brain, and I remembered my poor horse standing in this blinding gale under cover of the snow-packed pines. Every one knew my horse. I could commit no greater folly than to flee by the rear fields while such a witness to my presence remained in full view in front. With the sensation of a trapped animal, I reclosed the window and cast about for a safe corner where I could lie concealed until I learned what had brought these men here and how much I really had to fear from their presence.

I had but little time in which to choose. The door below had just given way and a party of at least three men were already stamping their feet free from snow in the hall. I did not like the tone of their voices, it was too low and steady to suit me. I had rather have heard drunken cries or a burst of wild hilarity than these stern and purposeful whispers. Men of resolution could have but one errand here. My doom was closing round me. I could only put off the fatal moment. But it was better to do this than to plunge headlong into the unknown fate awaiting me.

I knew of a possible place of concealment. It was in the ballroom not far from where I stood. I remembered the spot well. It was at the top of a little staircase leading to the musicians' gallery. A balustrade guarded this gallery, supported by a boarding wide enough to hide a man lying behind it at his full length. If the search I was endeavouring to evade was not minute enough to lead them to look behind this boarding, it would offer me the double advantage of concealment and an unobstructed view of what went on in the hall, through the main doorway opening directly opposite. I could reach this ballroom and its terminal gallery without going around to this door. A smaller one communicated directly with the corridor in which I was then lurking, and towards this I now made my way with all the precaution suggested by my desperate situation. No man ever moved more lightly. The shoes which I had taken off in the lower hall were yet in my hand. I had caught them up after replacing the cushions on Adelaide's body. Even to my own straining ears I made no perceptible sound. I reached the balcony and had stretched myself out at full length behind the boarding, before the men below had left the lower floor.

An interval of heart-torture and wearing suspense now followed. They were ransacking the rooms below by the aid of their own lanterns, as I could tell from their assured manner. That they had not made at once for the scene of crime brought me some small sense of comfort, but not much. They were too resolute in their movements and much too thorough and methodical in their search, for me to dream of their confining their investigations to the first floor. Unless I very much mistook their purpose, I should soon hear them ascending the stairs, after which, instinct, if not the faint smell of smoke still lingering in the air, would lead them to the room where my poor Adelaide lay.

And thus it proved. More quickly than I expected, the total darkness in which I lay, brightened under an advancing lantern, and I heard the steps of two men coming down the hall. It was a steady if not rapid approach, and I was quite prepared for their presence when they finally reached the doorway opposite and stopped to look in at what must have appeared to them a vast and empty space. They were officials, true enough—one hasty glance through the balustrade assured me of that. I even knew one of them by name—he was a sergeant of police and a highly trustworthy man. But how they had been drawn to this place at a moment so critical, I could not surmise. Do men of this stamp scent crime as a hound scents out prey? They had the look of hounds. Even in the momentary glimpse I got of them, I noted the tense and expectant look with which they endeavoured to pierce the dim spaces between us. The chase was on. It was something more than curiosity or a chance exercise of their duty which had brought them here. Their object was definite, and if the sight of the low gallery in which I lay, should suggest to them all its possibilities as a hiding-place, I should know in just one moment more what it is for the helpless quarry to feel the clutch of the captor.

But the moment passed without any attempt at approach on their part, and when I lifted my head again it was to catch a glimpse of their side faces as they turned to look elsewhere for what they were plainly in search of. An oath, muffled but stern, which was the first word above a whisper that I had heard issue from their lips, told me that they had reached *the* room and had come upon the horror which lay there. What would they say to it! Would they know who she was—her name, her quality, her story—and respect her dead as they certainly must have respected her living? I listened but caught only a low murmur as they conferred together. I imagined their movements; saw them in my mind's eye leaning over that death-tenanted couch, pointing with accusing finger at those two dark marks, and consulting each other with side-long looks, as they passed from one detail of her appearance to another. I even imagined them crossing the floor and lifting the two cordial glasses just as I had done, and then slowly setting them down again, with perhaps a lift of the brows or a suggestive shake of the head; and maddened by my own intolerable position, drawn by a power I felt it impossible to resist, I crept to my feet and took my staggering way down the half-dozen steps of the gallery and thence along by the left-hand wall towards the further doorway, and through it to where these men stood weighing the chances in which my life and honour were involved, and those of one other of whom I dared not think and would not have these men think for all that was left me of hope and happiness.

It was dark in the ballroom, and it was only a little less so in the corridor. All the light was in *that* room; but I still slid along the wall like a thief, with eyes set and ears agape for any chance word which might reach me. Suddenly I heard one. It was this, uttered with a decision which had the strange effect of lifting my head and making a man of me again:

"That settles it. He will find it hard to escape after this."

He! I had been dreading to hear a *she*. Yet why? Who on God's earth, save myself, could know that Carmel had been within these woeful walls to-night. *He!* I never stopped to question who was meant by this definite pronoun. I was not even conscious of caring very much. I was in a coil of threatening troubles, but I was in it alone, and, greatly relieved by the discovery, I drew myself up and stepped quickly forward into the room where the two officials stood.

Their faces, as they wheeled sharply about and took in my shoeless and more or less dishevelled figure, told me with an eloquence which made my heart sink, the unfortunate impression which my presence made upon them. It was but a fleeting look, for these men were both by nature and training easy masters of themselves; but its language was unmistakable and I knew that if I were to hold my own with them, I must get all the support I could from the truth, save where it would involve her —from the truth and my own consciousness of innocence, if I had any such consciousness. I was not sure that I had, for my falseness had precipitated this tragedy,—how I might never know, but a knowledge of the how was not necessary to my self-condemnation. Nevertheless my hands were clean of this murder, and allowing the surety of this fact to take a foremost place in my mind, I faced these men and with real feeling, but as little display of it as possible, I observed:

"You have come to my aid in a critical moment. This is my betrothed wife—the woman I was to marry—and I find her lying here dead, in this closed and lonely house. What does it mean? I know no more than you do."

IV
THE ODD CANDLESTICK

It is a damned and a bloody work;
The graceless action of a heavy hand,
If that it be the work of any hand.

King John.

The two men eyed me quietly, then Hexford pointed to my shoeless feet and sternly retorted:

"Permit us to doubt your last assertion. You seem to be in better position than ourselves to explain the circumstances which puzzle you."

They were right. It was for me to talk, not for them. I conceded the point in these words:

"Perhaps—but you cannot always trust appearances. I can explain my own presence here and the condition in which you find me, but I cannot explain this tragedy, near and dear as Miss Cumberland was to me. I did not know she was in the building, alive or dead. I came upon her here covered with the cushions just as you found her. I have felt the shock. I do not look like myself—I do not feel like myself; it was enough—" Here real emotion seized me and I almost broke down. I was in a position much more dreadful than any they could imagine or should be allowed to.

Their silence led me to examine their faces. Hexford's mouth had settled into a stiff, straight line and the other man's wore a cynical smile I did not like. At this presage of the difficulties awaiting me, I felt one strand of the rope sustaining me above this yawning gulf of shame and ignominy crack and give way. Oh, for a better record in the past!—a staff on which to lean in such an hour as this! But while nothing serious clouded my name, I had more to blush for than to pride myself upon in my career as prince of good fellows,—and these men knew it, both of them, and let it weigh in the scale already tipped far off its balance by coincidences which a better man than myself would have found it embarrassing to explain. I recognised all this, I say, in the momentary glance I cast at their stern and unresponsive figures; but the courage which had served me in lesser extremities did not fail me now, and, kneeling down before my dead betrothed, I kissed her cold white hand with sincere compunction, before attempting the garbled and probably totally incoherent story with which I endeavoured to explain the inexplainable situation.

They listened—I will do them that much justice; but it was with such an air of incredulity that my words fell with less and less continuity and finally lost themselves in a confused stammer as I reached the point where I pulled the cushions from the couch and made my ghastly discovery.

"You see—see for yourselves—what confronted me. My betrothed—a dainty, delicate woman—dead—alone—in this solitary, far-away spot—the victim of what? I asked myself then—I ask myself now. I cannot understand it—or those glasses yonder—or *those marks!"* They were black by this time—unmistakable—not to be ignored by them or by me.

"We understand those marks, and you ought to," came from the second man, the one I did not know.

My head fell forward; my lips refused to speak the words. I saw as in a flash, a picture of the one woman bending over the other; terror, reproach, anguish in the eyes whose fixed stare would never more leave my consciousness, an access of rage or some such sadden passion animating the other whose every curve spoke tenderness, whose every look up to this awful day had been as an angel's look to me. The vision was a maddening one. I shook myself free from it by starting to my feet." It's—it's—" I gasped.

"She has been strangled," quoth Hexford, doggedly.

"A dog's death," mumbled the other.

My hands came together involuntarily. At that instant, with the memory before me of the vision I have just described, I almost wished that it had been *my* hate, *my* anger which had brought those tell-tale marks out upon that livid skin. I should have suffered less. I should only have had to pay the penalty of my crime and not be forced to think of Carmel with terrible revulsion, as I was now thinking, minute by minute, fight with it as I would.

"You had better sit down," Hexford suddenly suggested, pushing a chair my way. "Clarke, look up the telephone and ask for three more men. I am going into this matter thoroughly. Perhaps you will tell us where the telephone is," he asked, turning my way.

It was some little time before I took in these words. When I did, I became conscious of his keen look, also of a change in my own expression. I had forgotten the telephone. It had not yet been taken out. If only I had remembered this before these men came—I might have saved—No, nothing could have saved her or me, except the snow, except the snow. That may already have saved her. All this time I was trying to tell where the telephone was.

That I succeeded at last I judged from the fact that the second man left the room. As he did so, Hexford lit the candle. Idly watching, for nothing now could make me look at the lounge again, I noticed the candlestick. It was of brass and rare in style and workmanship—a candlestick to be remembered; one of a pair perhaps. I felt my hair stir as I took in the details of its shape and ornamentation. If its mate were in her house—No, no, no! I would not have it so. I could not control my emotion if I let my imagination stray too far. The candlestick must be the property of the club. I had only forgotten. It was bought when? While thinking, planning, I was conscious of Hexford's eyes fixed steadily upon me.

"Did you go into the kitchen in your wanderings below?" he asked.

"No," I began, but seeing that I had made a mistake, I bungled and added weakly: "Yes; after matches."

"Only matches?"

"That's all."

"And did you get them?"

"Yes."

"In the dark? You must have had trouble in finding them?"

"Not at all. Only safety matches are allowed here, and they are put in a receptacle at the side of each door. I had but to open the kitchen door, feel along the jamb, find this receptacle, and pull the box out. I'm well used to all parts of the house."

"And you did this?"

"I have said so."

"May I ask which door you allude to?"

"The one communicating with the front hall."

"Where did you light your first match?"

"Upstairs."

"Not in the kitchen?"

"No, sir."

"You are sure?"

"Quite sure."

"That's a pity. I thought you might be able to tell me how so many wine and whiskey bottles came to be standing on the kitchen table."

I stared at him, dazed. Then I remembered the two small glasses on the little table across the room, and instinctively glanced at them. But no whiskey had been drunk out of them—the odor of anisette is unmistakable.

"You carry the key to the wine-cellar?" he asked.

I considered a moment. I did not know what to make of bottles on the kitchen table. These women and *bottles*! They abhorred wine; they had reason to, God knows; T remembered the dinner and all that had signalised it, and felt my confusion grow. But a question had been asked, and I must answer it. It would not do for me to hesitate about a matter of this kind. Only what was the question. Something about a key. I had no key; the cellar had been ransacked without my help; should I acknowledge this?

"The keys were given up by the janitor yesterday," I managed to stammer at last. "But I did not bring them here to-night. They are in my rooms at home."

I finished with a gasp. I had suddenly remembered that these keys were not in my rooms. I had had them with me at Miss Cumberland's and being given to fooling with something when embarrassed, I had fooled with them and dropped them while talking with Adelaide and watching Carmel. I had meant to pick them up but I forgot and—

"You need say nothing more about it," remarked Hexford. "I have no right to question you at all." And stepping across the room, he took up the glasses one after the other and smelled of them. "Some sweet stuff," he remarked. "Cordial, I should say anisette. There wasn't anything like that on the kitchen table. Let us see what there is in here," he added, stepping into the adjoining small room into which I had simply peered in my own investigation of the place.

As he did so, a keen blast blew in; a window in the adjoining room was open. He cast me a hurried glance and with the door in his hand, made the following remark:

"Your lady love—the victim here—could not have come through the snow with no more clothing on her than we see now. She must have worn a hat and coat or furs or something of that nature. Let us look for them."

I rose, stumbling. I saw that he did not mean to leave me alone for a moment. Indeed, I did not wish to be so left. Better any companionship than that of my own thoughts and of her white upturned face. As I followed him into this closet he pushed the door wide, pulling out an electric torch as he did so. By its light we saw almost at first glance the coat and hat he professed to seek, lying in a corner of the floor, beside an overturned chair.

"Good!" left my companion's lips. "That's all straight. You recognise these garments?"

I nodded, speechless. A thousand memories rushed upon me at the sight of the long plush coat which I had so often buttoned about her, with a troubled heart. How her eyes would seek mine as we stood thus close together, searching, searching for the old love or the fancied love of which the ashes only remained. Torment, all torment to remember now, as Hexford must have seen, if the keenness of his intelligence equalled that of his eye at this moment.

The window which stood open was a small one,-a mere slit in the wall; but it let in a stream of zero air and I saw Hexford shiver as he stepped towards it and looked out. But I felt hot rather than cold, and when I instinctively put my hand to my forehead, it came away wet.

V
A SCRAP OF PAPER

Look to the lady:—
And when we have our naked frailties hid,
That suffer in exposure, let us meet,
And question this most bloody piece of work,
To know it further. Fears and scruples shake us;
In the great hand of God I stand; and, thence,
Against the undivulg'd pretence I fight
Of treasonous malice.

Macbeth.

Shortly after this, a fresh relay of police arrived and I could hear the whole house being ransacked. I had found my shoes, and was sitting in my own private room before a fire which had been lighted for me on the hearth. I was in a state of stupor now, and if my body shook, as it did from time to time, it was not from cold, nor do I think from any special horror of mind or soul (I felt too dull for that), but in response to the shuddering pines which pressed up close to the house at this point and soughed and tapped at the walls and muttered among themselves with an insistence which I could not ignore, notwithstanding my many reasons for self-absorption.

The storm, which had been exceedingly fierce while it lasted, had quieted down to a steady fall of snow. Had its mission been to serve as a blanket to this crime by wiping out from the old snow all tell-tale footsteps and such other records as simplify cases of this kind for the detectives, it could not have happened more *apropos* to the event. From the complaints which had already reached my ears from the two policemen, I was quite aware that even as early as their first arrival, they had found a clean page where possibly a few minutes before the whole secret of this tragedy may have been written in unmistakable characters; and while this tilled me with relief in one way, it added to my care in another, for the storm which could accomplish so much in so short a time was a bitter one for a young girl to meet, and Carmel must have met it at its worst, in her lonesome struggle homeward.

Where was she? Living or dead, where was she now and where was Adelaide—the two women who for the last six weeks had filled my life with so many unhallowed and conflicting emotions? The conjecture passed incessantly through my brain, but it passed idly also and was not answered even in thought. Indeed, I seemed incapable of sustaining any line of thought for more than an instant, and when after an indefinite length of time the door behind me opened, the look I turned upon the gentleman who entered must have been a strange and far from encouraging one.

He brought a lantern with him. So far the room had had no other illumination than such as came from the fire, and when he had set this lantern down on the mantel and turned to face me, I perceived, with a sort of sluggish hope, that he was Dr. Perry, once a practising physician and my father's intimate friend, now a county official of no ordinary intelligence and, what was better, of no ordinary feeling.

His attachment to my father had not descended to me and, for the moment, he treated me like a stranger.

"I am the coroner of this district," said he. "I have left my bed to have a few words with you and learn if your detention here is warranted. You are the president of this club, and the lady whose violent death in this place I have been called upon to investigate, is Miss Cumberland, your affianced wife?"

My assent, though hardly audible, was not to be misunderstood. Drawing up a chair, he sat down and something in his manner which was not wholly without sympathy, heartened me still more, dispelling some of the cloudiness which had hitherto befogged my faculties.

"They have told me what you had to say in explanation of your presence here where a crime of some nature has taken place. But I should like to hear the story from your own lips. I feel that I owe you this consideration. At all events, I am disposed to show it. This is no common case of violence and the parties to it are not of the common order. Miss Cumberland's virtue and social standing no one can question, while you are the son of a man who has deservedly been regarded as an honour to the town. You have been intending to marry Miss Cumberland?"

"Yes." I looked the man directly in the eye. "Our wedding-day was set."

"Did you love her? Pardon me; if I am to be of any benefit to you at this crisis I must strike at the root of things. If you do not wish to answer, say so, Mr. Ranelagh."

"I do wish." This was a lie, but what was I to do, knowing how dangerous it would be for Carmel to have it publicly known where my affections were really centred and what a secret tragedy of heart-struggle and jealous passion underlay this open one of foul and murderous death. "I am in no position to conceal anything from you. I did love Miss Cumberland. We have been engaged for a year. She was a woman of fortune but I am not without means of my own and could have chosen a penniless girl and still been called prosperous."

"I see, and she returned your love?"

"Sincerely." Was the room light enough to reveal my guilty flush? She had loved me only too well, too jealously, too absorbingly for her happiness or mine.

"And the sister?"

It was gently but gravely put, and instantly I knew that our secret was out, however safe we had considered it. This man was cognisant of it, and if he, why not others! Why not the whole town! A danger which up to this moment I had heard whispered only by the pines, was opening in a gulf beneath our feet. Its imminence steadied me. I had kept my glance on Coroner Perry, and I do not think it changed. My tone, I am quite assured, was almost as quiet and grave as his as I made my reply in these words:

"Her sister is her sister. I hardly think that either of us would be apt to forget that. Have you heard otherwise, sir?"

He was prepared for equivocation, possibly for denial, but not for attack. His manner changed and showed distrust and I saw that I had lost rather than made by this venturous move.

"Is this your writing?" he suddenly asked, showing me a morsel of paper which he had drawn from his vest pocket.

I looked, and felt that I now understood what the pines had been trying to tell me for the last few hours. That compromising scrap of writing had not been destroyed. It existed for her and my undoing! Then doubt came. Fate could not juggle thus with human souls and purposes. I had simply imagined myself to have recognised the words lengthening and losing themselves in a blur before my eyes. Carmel was no fool even if she had wild and demoniacal moments. This could not be my note to her,—that fatal note which would make all denial of our mutual passion unavailing.

"Is it your writing?" my watchful inquisitor repeated.

I looked again. The scrap was smaller than my note had been when it left my hands. If it were the same, then some of the words were gone. Were they the first ones or the last? It would make a difference in the reading, or rather, in the conclusions to be drawn from what remained. If only the mist would clear from before my eyes, or he would hold the slip of paper nearer! The room was very dark. The—the—

"Is it your writing?" Coroner Perry asked for the third time.

There was no denying it. My writing was peculiar and quite unmistakable.

I should gain nothing by saying no.

"It looks like it," I admitted reluctantly. "But I cannot be sure in this light. May I ask what this bit of paper is and where you found it?"

"Its contents I think you know. As for the last question I think you can answer that also if you will."

Saying which, he quietly replaced the scrap of paper in his pocket-book.

I followed the action with my eyes. I caught a fresh glimpse of a darkened edge, and realised the cause of the faint odour which I had hitherto experienced without being conscious of it. The scrap had been plucked out of the chimney. She had tried to burn it. I remembered the fire and the smouldering bits of paper which crumbled at my touch. And this one, this, the most important—the only important one of them all, had flown, half-scorched, up the chimney and clung there within easy reach.

The whole incident was plain to me, and I could even fix upon the moment when Hexford or Clarke discovered this invaluable bit of evidence. It was just before I burst in upon them from the ballroom, and it was the undoubted occasion of the remark I then overheard:

"*This settles it. He cannot escape us now*."

During the momentary silence which now ensued, I tried to remember the exact words which had composed this note. They were few–sparks from my very heart—I ought to be able to recollect them.

"To-night—10:30 train—we will be married at P–. Come, come, my darling, my life. She will forgive when all is done. Hesitation will only undo us. To-night at 10 30. Do not fail me. I shall never marry any one but you."

Was that all? I had an indistinct remembrance of having added some wild and incoherent words of passionate affection affixed to her name. *Her name*! But it may be that in the hurry and flurry of the moment, these terms of endearment simply passed through my mind and found no expression on paper. I could not be sure, any more than I could be positive from the half glimpse I got of these lines, which portion had been burned off,—the top in which the word *train* occurred, or the final words, emphasising a time of meeting and my determination to marry no one but the person addressed. The first gone, the latter might take on any sinister meaning. The latter gone, the first might prove a safeguard, corroborating my statement that an errand had taken me into town.

I was oppressed by the uncertainty of my position. Even if I carried off this detail successfully, others of equal importance might be awaiting explanation. My poor, maddened, guilt-haunted girl had made the irreparable mistake of letting this note of mine fly unconsumed up the chimney, and she might have made others equally incriminating. It would be hard to find an alibi for her if suspicion once turned her way. She had not met me at the train. The unknown but doubtless easily-to-be-found man who had handed me her note could swear to that fact.

Then the note itself! I had destroyed it, it is true, but its phrases were so present to my mind—had been so branded into it by the terrors of the tragedy which they appeared to foreshadow, that I had a dreadful feeling that this man's eye could read them there. I remember that under the compelling power of this fancy, my hand rose to my brow outspread and concealing, as if to interpose a barrier between him and them. Is my folly past belief? Possibly. But then I have not told you the words of this fatal communication. They were these—innocent, if she were innocent, but how suggestive in the light of her probable guilt:

"I cannot. Wait till to-morrow. Then you will see the depth of my love for you—what I owe you—what I owe Adelaide."

I should see!

I was seeing.

Suddenly I dropped my hand; a new thought had come to me. Had Carmel been discovered on the road leading from this place?

You perceive that by this time I had become the prey of every threatening possibility; even of that which made the present a nightmare from which I should yet wake to old conditions and old struggles, bad enough, God knows, but not like this—not like this.

Meantime I was conscious that not a look or movement of mine had escaped the considerate but watchful eye of the man before me.

"You do not relish my questions," he dryly observed. "Perhaps you would rather tell your story without interruption. If so, I beg you to be as explicit as possible. The circumstances are serious enough for perfect candour on your part."

He was wrong. They were too serious for that. Perfect candour would involve Carmel. Seeming candour was all I could indulge in. I took a quick resolve. I would appear to throw discretion to the winds; to confide to him what men usually hold sacred; to risk my reputation as a gentleman, rather than incur a suspicion which might involve others more than it did myself. Perhaps I should yet win through and save her from an ignominy she possibly deserved but which she must never receive at my hands.

"I will give you an account of my evening," said I. "It will not aid you much, but will prove my good faith. You asked me a short time ago if I loved the lady whom I was engaged to marry and whose dead body I most unexpectedly came upon in this house some time before midnight. I answered yes, and you showed that you doubted me. You were justified in your doubts. I did love her once, or thought so, but my feelings changed. A great temptation came into my life. Carmel returned from school and—you know her beauty, her fascination. A week in her presence, and marriage with Adelaide became impossible. But how evade it? I only knew the coward's way; to lure this inexperienced young girl, fresh from school, into a runaway match. A change which now became perceptible in Miss Cumberland's manner, only egged me on. It was not sufficiently marked in character to call for open explanation, yet it was unmistakable to one on the watch as I was, and betokened a day of speedy reckoning for which I was little prepared. I know what the manly course would have been, but I preferred to skulk. I acknowledge it now; it is the only retribution I have to offer for a past I am ashamed of. Without losing one particle of my intention, I governed more carefully my looks and actions, and thought I had succeeded in blinding Adelaide to my real feelings and purpose. Whether I did or not, I cannot say. I have no means of knowing now. She has not been her natural self for these last few days, but she had other causes for worry, and I have been willing enough to think that these were the occasion of her restless ways and short, sharp speech and the blankness with which she met all my attempts to soothe and encourage her. This evening"—I choked at the word. The day had been one string of extraordinary experiences, accumulating in intensity to the one ghastly discovery which had overtopped and overwhelmed all the rest. "This evening," I falteringly continued, "I had set as the limit to my endurance of the intolerable situation. During a minute of solitude preceding the dinner at Miss Cumberland's house on the Hill, I wrote a few lines to her sister, urging her to trust me with her fate and meet me at the station in time for the ten-thirty train. I meant to carry her at once to P–, where I had a friend in the ministry who would at once unite us in marriage. I was very peremptory, for my nerves were giving way under the secret strain to which they had been subjected for so long, and she herself was looking worn with her own silent and uncommunicated conflict.

"To write this note was easy, but to deliver it involved difficulties. Miss Cumberland's eyes seemed to be more upon me than usual. Mine were obliged to respond and Carmel seeing this, kept hers on her plate or on the one other person seated at the table, her brother Arthur. But the opportunity came as we all rose and passed together into the drawing-room. Carmel fell into place at my side and I slipped the note into her hand. She had not expected it and I fear that the action was observed, for when I took my leave of Miss Cumberland shortly after, I was struck by her expression. I had never seen such a look on her face before, nor can I conceive of one presenting a more extraordinary contrast to the few and commonplace words with which she bade me good evening. I could not forget that look. I continued to see those pinched features and burning eyes all the way home where I went

to get my grip-sack, and I saw them all the way to the station, though my thoughts were with her sister and the joys I had planned for myself. Man's egotism, Dr. Perry. I neither knew Adelaide nor did I know the girl whose love I had so over-estimated. She failed me, Dr. Perry. I was met at the station not by herself, but by a letter—a few hurried lines given me by an unknown man—in which she stated that I had asked too much of her, that she could not so wrong her sister who had brought her up and done everything for her since her mother died. I have not that letter now, or I would show it to you. In my raging disappointment I tore it up on the place where I received it, and threw the pieces away. I had staked my whole future on one desperate throw and I had lost. If I had had a pistol—" I stopped, warned by an uneasy movement on the part of the man I addressed, that I had better not dilate too much upon my feelings. Indeed, I had forgotten to whom I was talking. I realised nothing, thought of nothing but the misery I was describing. His action recalled me to the infinitely deeper misery of my present situation, and conscious of the conclusions which might be drawn from such impulsive utterances, I pulled myself together and proceeded to finish my story with greater directness.

"I did not leave the station till the ten-thirty train had gone. I had hopes, still, of seeing her, or possibly I dreaded the long ride back to my apartments. It was from sheer preoccupation of mind that I drove this way instead of straight out by Marshall Avenue. I had no intention of stopping here; the club-house was formally closed yesterday, as you may know, and I did not even have the keys with me. But, as I reached the bend in the road where you get your first sight of the buildings, I saw a thin streak of smoke rising from one of its chimneys, and anxious as to its meaning, I drove in—"

"Wait, Mr. Ranelagh, I am sorry to interrupt you, but by which gate did you enter?"

"By the lower one."

"Was it snowing at this time?"

"Not yet. It was just before the clouds rushed upon the moon. I could see everything quite plainly."

My companion nodded and I went breathlessly on. Any question of his staggered me. I was so ignorant of the facts at his command, of the facts at any one's command outside my own experience and observation, that the simplest admission I made might lead directly to some clew of whose very existence I was unaware. I was not even able to conjecture by what chance or at whose suggestion the police had raided the place and discovered the tragedy which had given point to that raid. No one had told me, and I had met with no encouragement to ask. I felt myself sliding amid pitfalls. My own act might precipitate the very doom I sought to avert. Yet I must preserve my self-possession and answer all questions as truthfully as possible lest I stumble into a web from which no skill of my own or of another could extricate me.

"Fastening my horse to one of the pine trees in the thickest clump I saw—he is there now, I suppose—I crept up to the house, and tried the door. It was on the latch and I stole in. There was no light on the lower floor, and after listening for any signs of life, I began to feel my way about the house, searching for the intruder. As I did not wish to attract attention to myself, I took off my shoes. I went through the lower rooms, and then I came upstairs. It was some time before I reached the—the room where a fire had been lit; but when I did I knew—not," I hastily corrected, as I caught his quick concentrated glance, "what had happened or whom I should find there, but that this was the spot where the intruder had been, possibly was now, and I determined to grapple with him. What—what have I said?" I asked in anguish, as I caught a look on the coroner's face of irrepressible repulsion and disgust, slight and soon gone but unmistakable so long as it lasted.

"Nothing," he replied, "go on."

But his tone, considerate as it had been from the first, did not deceive me. I knew that I had been detected in some slip or prevarication. As I had omitted all mention of the most serious part of my adventure—had said nothing of my vision of Carmel or the terrible conclusions which her presence there had awakened—my conscience was in a state of perturbation which added greatly to my confusion. For a moment I did not know where I stood, and I am afraid I betrayed a sense of

my position. He had to recall me to myself by an unimportant question or two before I could go on. When I did proceed, it was with less connection of ideas and a haste in speaking which was not due altogether to the harrowing nature of the tale itself.

"I had matches in my pocket and I struck one," I began. "Afterwards I lit the candle. The emptiness of the room did not alarm me. I experienced the sense of tragedy. Seeing the pillows heaped high and too regularly for chance along a lounge ordinarily holding only two, I tore them off. I saw a foot, a hand, a tress of bright hair. Even then I did not think of *her*. Why should I? Not till I uncovered the face did I know the terrors of my discovery, and then, the confusion of it all unmanned me and I fell on my knees—"

"Go on! Go on!"

The impetuosity, the suspense in the words astounded me. I stared at the coroner and lost the thread of my story—What had I to say more? How account for what must be ever unaccountable to him, to the world, to my own self, if in obedience to the demands of the situation I subdued my own memory and blotted out all I had seen but that which it was safe to confess to?

"There is no more to say," I murmured. "The horror of that moment made a chaos in my mind. I looked at the dead body of her who lay there as I have looked at everything since; as I looked at the police when they came—as I look at you now. But I know nothing. It is all a phantasmagoria to me —with no more meaning than a nightmare. She is dead—I know that—but beyond that, all is doubt —confusion—what the world and all its passing show is to a blind man. I can neither understand nor explain."

VI
COMMENTS AND REFLECTIONS

There is no agony and no solace left;
Earth can console, Heaven can torment, no more

Prometheus Unbound

The coroner's intent look which had more or less sustained me through this ordeal, remained fixed upon my face as though he were still anxious to see me exonerate myself. How much did he know? That was the question. *How much did he know*?

Having no means of telling, I was forced to keep silent. I had revealed all I dared to. As I came to this conclusion, his eyes fell and I knew that the favorable minute had passed.

The question he now asked proved it.

"You say that you were not blind to surrounding objects, even if they conveyed but little meaning to you. You must have seen, then, that the room where Miss Cumberland lay contained two small cordial glasses, both still moist with some liqueur."

"I noticed that, yes."

"Some one must have drunk with her?"

"I cannot contradict you."

"Was Miss Cumberland fond of that sort of thing?"

"She detested liquor of all kinds. She never drank I never saw a woman so averse to wine." I spoke before I thought. I might better have been less emphatic, but the mystery of those glasses had affected me from the first. Neither she nor Carmel ever allowed themselves so much as a social glass, yet those glasses had been drained. "Perhaps the cold—"

"There was a third glass. We found it in the adjoining closet. It had not been used. That third glass has a meaning if only we could find it out."

A possibility which had risen in my mind faded at these words.

"Three glasses," I dully repeated.

"And a small flask of cordial. The latter seems pure enough."

"I cannot understand it." The phrase had become stereotyped. No other suggested itself to me.

"The problem would be simple enough if it were not for those-marks on her neck. You saw those, too, I take it?"

"Yes. Who made them? What man—"

The lie, or rather the suggestion of a lie, flushed my face. I was conscious of this, but it did not trouble me. I was panting for relief. I could not rest till I knew the nature of the doubt in this man's mind. If these words, or any words I could use, would serve to surprise his secret, then welcome the lie or suggestion of a lie. "It was a brute's act," I went on, bungling with my sentences in anxiety to see if my conclusions fitted in with his own. "*Who was the brute*? Do you know, Dr. Perry?"

"There were three glasses in those rooms. Only two were drank from," he answered, steadily. "Tomorrow I may be in a position to answer your question. I am not to-night."

Why did I take heart? Not a change, not the flicker of one had passed over his countenance at my utterance of the word *man*. Either his official habit had stood him in wonderful stead, or the police had failed so far to see any connection between this murder and the young girl whose footprints, for all I knew, still lingered on the stairs.

Would the morrow arm them with completer knowledge? As I turned from his retreating figure and flung myself down before the hearth, this was the question I continually propounded to myself,

in vain repetition. Would the morrow reveal the fact that Adelaide's young sister had been with her in the hour of death, or would the fates propitiously aid her in preserving this secret as they had already aided her in selecting for the one man who shared it, him who of all others was bound by honour and personal consideration for her not to divulge what he knew.

Thus the hours between two and seven passed when I fell into a fitful sleep, from which I was rudely wakened by a loud rattle at my door, followed by the entrance of the officer who had walked up and down the corridor all night.

"The waggon is here," said he. "Breakfast will be given you at the station."

To which Hexford, looking over his shoulder, added: "I'm sorry to say that we have here the warrant for your arrest. Can I do anything for you?"

"Warrant!" I burst out, "what do you want of a warrant? It is as a witness you seek to detain me, I presume?"

"No," was his brusque reply. "The charge upon which you are arrested is one of murder. You will have to appear before a magistrate. I'm sorry to be the one to tell you this, but the evidence against you is very strong, and the police must do their duty."

"But I am innocent, absolutely innocent," I protested, the perspiration starting from every pore as the full meaning of the charge burst upon me. "What I have told you was correct. I, myself, found her dead—"

Hexford gave me a look.

"Don't talk," he kindly suggested. "Leave that to the lawyers." Then, as the other man turned aside for a moment, he whispered in my ear, "It's no go; one of our men saw you with your fingers on her throat. He had clambered into a pine tree and the shade of the window was up. You had better come quietly. Not a soul believes you innocent."

This, then, was what had doomed me from the start; this, and that partly burned letter. I understood now why the kind-hearted coroner, who loved my father, had urged me to tell my tale, hoping that I would explain this act and give him some opportunity to indulge in a doubt. And I had failed to respond to the hint he had given me. The act itself must appear so sinister and the impulse which drove me to it so incomprehensible, without the heart-rending explanation I dare not subjoin, that I never questioned the wisdom of silence in its regard.

Yet this silence had undone me. I had been seen fingering my dead betrothed's throat, and nothing I could now say or do would ever convince people that she was dead before my hands touched her, strangled by another's clutch. One person only in the whole world would know and feel how false this accusation was. And yesterday that one's trust in my guiltlessness would have thrown a ray of light upon the deepest infamy which could befall me. But to-day there had settled over that once innocent spirit, a cloud of too impenetrable a nature for any light to struggle to and fro between us.

I could not contemplate that cloud. I could not dwell upon her misery, or upon the revulsion of feeling which follows such impetuous acts. And it had been an impetuous act—the result of one of her rages. I had been told of these rages. I had even seen her in one. When they passed she was her lovable self once more and very penitent and very downcast. If all I feared were true, she was suffering acutely now. But I gave no thought to this. I could dream of but one thing—how to save her from the penalty of crime, a penalty I might be forced to suffer myself and would prefer to suffer rather than see it fall upon one so young and so angelically beautiful.

Turning to the officer next me, I put the question which had been burning in my mind for hours:

"Tell me, how you came to know there was trouble here? What brought you to this house? There can be nothing wrong in telling me that."

"Well, if you don't know—" he began.

"I do not," I broke in.

"I guess you'd better wait till the chief has had a word with you."

I suppressed all tokens of my disappointment, and by a not unnatural reaction, perhaps, began to take in, and busy myself with, the very considerations I had hitherto shunned. Where was Carmel, and how was she enduring these awful hours? Had repentance come, and with it a desire to own her guilt? Did she think of me and the effect this unlooked-for death would have upon my feelings? That I should suffer arrest for her crime could not have entered her mind. I had seen her, but she had not seen me, in the dark hall which I must now traverse as a prisoner and a suspect. No intimation of my dubious position or its inevitable consequences had reached her yet. When it did, what would she do? I did not know her well enough to tell. The attraction she had felt for me had not been strong enough to lead her to accommodate herself to my wishes and marry me off-hand, but it had been strong enough to nerve her arm in whatever altercation she may have had with her jealous-minded sister. It was the temper and not the strength of the love which would tell in a strait like this. Would it prove of a generous kind? Should I have to combat her desire to take upon herself the full blame of her deed, with all its shames and penalties? Or should I have the still deeper misery of finding her callous to my position and welcoming any chance which diverted suspicion from herself? Either supposition might be possible, according to my judgment in this evil hour. All communication between us, in spite of our ardent and ungovernable passion, had been so casual and so slight. Looks, a whispered word or so, one furtive clasp in which our hands seemed to grow together, were all I had to go upon as tests of her feeling towards me. Her character I had judged from her face, which was lovely. But faces deceive, and the loveliness of youth is not like the loveliness of age—an absolute mirror of the soul within. Was not Medusa captivating, for all her snaky locks? Hide those locks and one might have thought her a Daphne.

What would relieve my doubts? As Hexford drew near me again on our way to the head of the staircase, I summoned up courage to ask:

"Have you heard anything from the Hill? Has the news of this tragedy been communicated to Miss Cumberland's family, and if so, how are they bearing this affliction?"

His lip curled, and for a minute he hesitated; then something in my aspect or the straightforward look I gave him, softened him and he answered frankly, if coldly:

"Word has gone there, of course, but only the servants are affected by it so far. Miss Cumberland, the younger, is very ill, and the boy—I don't know his name—has not shown up since last evening. He's very dissipated, they say, and may be in any one of the joints in the lower part of the town."

I stopped in dismay, clutching wildly at the railing of the stairs we were descending. I had hardly heard the latter words, all my mind was on what he had said first.

"Miss Carmel Cumberland ill?" I stammered, "too ill to be told?"

I was sufficiently master of myself to put it this way.

"Yes," he rejoined, kindly, as he urged me down the very stairs I had seen her descend in such a state of mind a few hours before. "A servant who had been out late, heard the fall of some heavy body as she was passing Miss Cumberland's rooms, and rushing in found Miss Carmel, as she called her, lying on the floor near the open fire. Her face had struck the bars of the grate in falling, and she was badly burned. But that was not all; she was delirious with fever, brought on, they think, by anxiety about her sister, whose name she was constantly repeating. They had a doctor for her and the whole house was up before ever the word came of what had happened here."

I thanked him with a look. I had no opportunity for more. Half a dozen officers were standing about the front door, and in another moment I was bustled into the conveyance provided and was being driven away from the death-haunted spot.

I had heard the last whisper of those pines for many, many days. But not in my dreams; it ever came back at night, sinister, awesome, haunted with dead hopes and breathing of an ever doubtful future.

VII
CLIFTON ACCEPTS MY CASE

This hand of mine
Is yet a maiden and an innocent hand,
Not painted with the crimson spots of blood.
Within this bosom never enter'd yet
The dreadful motion of a murd'rous thought.

King John.

My first thought (when I could think at all) was this:

"She has some feeling, then! Her terror and remorse have maddened her. I can dwell upon her image with pity." The next, "Will they find her wet clothes and discover that she was out last night?" The latter possibility troubled me. My mind was the seat of strange contradictions.

As the day advanced and I began to realise that I, Elwood Ranelagh, easy-going man of the world, but with traditions of respectable living on both sides of my house and a list of friends of which any man might be proud, was in a place of detention on the awful charge of murder, I found that my keenest torment arose from the fact that I was shut off from the instant knowledge of what was going on in the house where all my thoughts, my fears, and shall I say it, latent hopes were centred. To know Carmel ill and not to know how ill! To feel the threatening arm of the law hovering constantly over her head and neither to know the instant of its fall nor be given the least opportunity to divert it. To realise that some small inadvertance on her part, some trivial but incriminating object left about, some heedless murmur or burst of unconscious frenzy might precipitate her doom, and I remain powerless, bearing my share of suspicion and ignominy, it is true, but not the chief share if matters befell as I have suggested, which they were liable to do at any hour, nay, at any minute.

My examination before the magistrate held one element of comfort. Nothing in its whole tenor went to show that, as yet, she was in the least suspected of any participation in my so-called crime. But the knowledge which came later, of how the police first learned of trouble at the club-house did not add to this sense of relief, whatever satisfaction it gave my curiosity. A cry of distress had come to them over the telephone; a wild cry, in a woman's choked and tremulous voice: "Help at The Whispering Pines! Help!" That was all, or all they revealed to me. In their endeavour to find out whether or not I was present when this call was made, I learned the nature of their own suspicions. They believed that Adelaide in some moment of prevision had managed to reach the telephone and send out this message. But what did I believe? What could I believe? All the incidents of the deadly struggle which must have preceded the fatal culminating act, were mysteries which my mind refused to penetrate. After hours of torturing uncertainty, and an evening which was the miserable precursor of a still more miserable night, I decided to drop conjecture and await the enlightenment which must come with the morrow.

It was, therefore, in a condition of mingled dread and expectation that I opened the paper which was brought me the next morning. Of the shock which it gave me to see my own name blotting the page with suggestions of hideous crime, I will not speak, but pass at once to the few gleams of added knowledge I was able to gather from those abominable columns. Arthur, the good-for-nothing brother, had returned from his wild carouse and had taken affairs in charge with something like spirit and a decent show of repentance for his own shortcomings and the mad taste for liquor which had led him away from home that night. Carmel was still ill, and likely to be so for many days to come. Her case was diagnosed as one of brain fever and of a most dangerous type. Doctors and nurses were

busy at her bedside and little hope was held out of her being able to tell soon, if ever, what she knew of her sister's departure from the house on that fatal evening. That her testimony on this point would be invaluable was self-evident, for proofs were plenty of her having haunted her sister's rooms all the evening in a condition of more or less delirium. She was alone in the house and this may have added to her anxieties, all of the servants having gone to the policemen's ball. It was on their return in the early morning hours that she had been discovered, lying ill and injured before her sister's fireplace.

One fact was mentioned which set me thinking. The keys of the club-house had been found lying on a table in the side hall of the Cumberland mansion—the keys which I have already mentioned as missing from my pocket. An alarming discovery which might have acted as a clew to the suspicious I feared, if their presence there had not been explained by the waitress who had cleared the table after dinner. Coming upon these keys lying on the floor beside one of the chairs, she had carried them out into the hall and laid them where they would be more readily seen. She had not recognised the keys, but had taken it for granted that they belonged to Mr. Ranelagh who had dined at the house that night.

They were my keys, and I have already related how I came to drop them on the floor. Had they but stayed there! Adelaide, or was it Carmel, might not have seen them and been led by some strange, if not tragic, purpose, incomprehensible to us now and possibly never to find full explanation, to enter the secret and forsaken spot where I later found them, the one dead, the other fleeing in frenzy, but not in such a thoughtless frenzy as to forget these keys or to fail to lock the club-house door behind her. That she, on her return home, should have had sufficient presence of mind to toss these keys down in the same place from which she or her sister had taken them, argued well for her clear-headedness up to that moment. The fever must have come on later—a fever which with my knowledge of what had occurred at The Whispering Pines, seemed the only natural outcome of the situation.

The next paragraph detailed a fact startling enough to rouse my deepest interest. Zadok Brown, the Cumberlands' coachman, declared that Arthur's cutter and what he called the grey mare had been out that night. They were both in place when he returned to the stable towards early morning, but the signs were unmistakable that both had been out in the snow since he left the stable at about nine. He had locked the stable-door at that time, but the key always hung in the kitchen where any one could get it. This was on account of Arthur, who, if he wanted to go out late, sometimes harnessed a horse himself. Zadok judged that he had done so this night, though how the horse happened to be back and in her stall and no Mr. Arthur in the house, it would take wiser heads than his to explain. But he was sure the mare had been out.

There was some comment made on this, because Arthur had denied using his cutter that night. He declared instead that he had gone out on foot and designated the coachman's tale as all bosh. "I was not the only one who had a drop too much down-town," was the dogged assertion with which he met all questions on this subject. "I wouldn't give a snap of my finger for Zadok's opinion on any subject, after five hours of dancing and the necessary drinks. There were no signs of the mare having been out when I got home." As this was about noon the next day, his opinion on this point could not be said to count for much.

As for myself, I felt inclined to believe that the mare had been out, that one or both of the women had harnessed him and that it was by these means they had reached The Whispering Pines. The night was too cold, a storm too imminent, for them to have contemplated so long a walk on a road so remote as that leading to the club-house. Arthur was athletic but Adelaide was far from strong and never addicted to walking under the most favourable conditions. Of all the mysteries surrounding her dead presence in the club-house, the one which from the first had struck me as the most inexplicable was the manner of her reaching there. Now I could understand both that fact and how Carmel had succeeded in returning in safety to her home. She had ridden both ways—a theory which likewise explained how she came to wear a man's derby and possibly a man's overcoat. With her skirts covered by a bear-skin she would present a very fair figure of a man to any one who chanced to pass her. This was desirable in her case. A man and woman driving at a late hour through the city streets would

attract little, if any, attention, while two women might. Having no wish to attract attention, they had resorted to subterfuge—or Carmel had; it was not like Adelaide to do so. She was always perfectly open, both in manner and speech.

These were my deductions drawn from my own knowledge. Would others who had not my knowledge be in any wise influenced to draw the same? Would the fact that the mare had been out during those mysterious hours when everybody had appeared to be absent from the house, saving the one young girl whom they afterwards found stark, staring mad with delirium, serve to awaken suspicion of her close and personal connection with this crime? There was nothing in this reporter's article to show that such an idea had dawned upon his mind, but the police are not readily hoodwinked and I dreaded the result of their inquiries, if they chose to follow this undoubted clew.

Yet, if they let this point slip, where should I be? Human nature is human all the way through, and I could not help having moments when I asked myself if this young girl were worth the sacrifice I contemplated making for her? She was lovely to look at, amiable and of womanly promise save at those rare and poignant moments when passion would seize her in a gust which drove everything before it. But were any of these considerations sufficient to justify me in letting my whole manhood slip for the sake of one who, whatever the provocation, had used the strength of her hands against the sister who had been as a mother to her for so many years. That she had had provocation I did not doubt. Adelaide, for all her virtues, was not an easy person to deal with. Upright and perfectly sincere herself, she had no sympathy with or commiseration for any lack of principle or any display of selfishness in others. A little cold, a little reserved, a little lacking in spontaneity, though always correct and always generous in her gifts and often in her acts, her whole nature would rise at any evidence of meanness or ingratitude, and though she said little, you would feel her disapprobation through and through. She would even change physically. Naturally pallid and of small inconspicuous features, her eyes on these occasions would so flame and her whole figure so dilate that she looked like another woman. I have seen her brother, six feet in height and weighty for his years, cringe under her few quiet words at these times till she absolutely seemed the taller of the two. It was only in these moments she was handsome, and had I loved her, I should probably have admired this passionate purity, this intolerance of all that was small or selfish or unworthy a good woman's esteem. But not loving her, I had merely cherished a wholesome fear of her displeasure, and could quite comprehend what a full display of anger on her part might call up in her sensitive, already deeply suffering sister. The scathing arraignment, the unbearable taunt—Well, well, it was all dream-work, but I had time to dream and opportunity for little else, and pictures, which till now I had sedulously kept in the background of my imagination, would come to the front as I harped on this topic and weighed in my disturbed mind the following question: Should I continue the course which I had instinctively taken out of a natural sense of chivalry, or face my calumniators with the truth and leave my cause and hers to the justice of men, rather than to the slow but righteous workings of Providence?

I struggled with the dilemma for hours, the more so, that I did not stand alone in the world. I had relatives and I had friends, some of whom had come to see me and gone away deeply grieved at my reticence. I was swayed, too, by another consideration. I had deeply loved my mother. She was dead, but I had her honour to think of. Should it be said she had a murderer for her son? In the height of my inner conflict, I had almost cried aloud the fierce denial which would arise at this thought. But ere the word could leave my lips, such a vision rose before me of a bewildering young face with wonderful eyes and a smile too innocent for guile and too loving for hypocrisy, that I forgot my late antagonistic feelings, forgot the claims of my dear, dead mother, and even those of my own future. Such passion and such devotion merited consideration from the man who had called them forth. I would not slight the claims of my dead mother but I would give this young girl a chance for her life. Let others ferret out the fact that she had visited the club-house with her sister; I would not proclaim it. It was enough for me to proclaim my innocence, and that I would do to the last.

I was in this frame of mind when Charles Clifton called and was allowed to see me. I had sent for him in one of my discouraged moods. He was my friend, but he was also my legal adviser, and it was as such I had summoned him, and it was as such he had now come. Cordial as our relations had been—though he was hardly one of my ilk—I noted no instinctive outstretching of his hand, and so did not reach out mine. Appearances had been too strong against me for any such spontaneous outburst from even my best friends. I realised that to expect otherwise from him or from any other man would be to play the fool; and this was no time for folly. The day for that was passed.

I was the first to speak.

"You see me where you have never thought to see a friend of yours. But we won't go into that. The police have good reasons for what they have done and I presume feel justified in my commitment. Notwithstanding, I am an innocent man so far as the attack made upon Miss Cumberland goes. I had no hand in her murder, if murder it is found out to be. My story which you have read in the papers and which I felt forced to give out, possibly to my own shame and that of another whom I would fain have saved, is an absolutely true one. I did not arrive at The Whispering Pines until after Miss Cumberland was dead. To this I am ready to swear and it is upon this fact you must rely, in any defence you may hereafter be called upon to make in my regard."

He listened as a lawyer would be apt to listen to such statements from the man who had summoned him to his aid. But I saw that I had made no impression on his convictions. He regarded me as a guilty man, and what was more to the point no doubt, as one for whom no plea could be made or any rational defence undertaken.

"You don't believe me," I went on, still without any great bitterness. "I am not surprised at it, after what the man Clarke has said of seeing me with my hands on her throat. Any man, friend or not, would take me for a villain after that. But, Charles, to you I will confess what cowardice kept me from owning to Dr. Perry at the proper, possibly at the only proper moment, that I did this out of a wild desire to see if those marks were really the marks of strangling fingers. I could not believe that she had been so killed and, led away by my doubts, I leaned over her and—You shall believe me, you must," I insisted, as I perceived his hard gaze remain unsoftened. "I don't ask it of the rest of the world. I hardly expect any one to give me credit for good impulses or even for speaking the plain truth after the discovery which has been made of my treacherous attitude towards these two virtuous and devoted women. But you—if you are to act as my counsel—must take this denial from me as gospel truth. I may disappoint you in other ways. I may try you and often make you regret that you undertook my case, but on this fact you may safely pin your faith. She was dead before I touched her. Had the police spy whose testimony is likely to hang me, climbed the tree a moment sooner than he did, he would have seen that. Are you ready to take my case?"

Clifton is a fair fellow and I knew if he once accepted the fact I thus urged upon him, he would work for me with all the skill and ability my desperate situation demanded. I, therefore, watched him with great anxiety for the least change in the constrained attitude and fixed, unpromising gaze with which he had listened to me, and was conscious of a great leap of heart as the set expression of his features relaxed, and he responded almost warmly:

"I will take your case, Ranelagh. God help me to make it good against all odds."

I was conscious of few hopes, but some of the oppression under which I laboured lifted at those words. I had assured one man of my innocence! It was like a great rock in the weary desert. My sigh of relief bespoke my feelings and I longed to take his hand, but the moment had not yet come. Something was wanting to a perfect confidence between us, and I was in too sensitive a frame of mind to risk the slightest rebuff.

He was ready to speak before I was. "Then, you had not been long on the scene of crime when the police arrived?"

"I had been in the room but a few minutes. I do not know how long I was searching the house."

"The police say that fully twenty minutes elapsed between the time they received Miss Cumberland's appeal for help and their arrival at the club-house. If you were there that long—"

"I cannot say. Moments are hours at such a crisis—I—"

My emotions were too much for me, and I confusedly stopped. He was surveying me with the old distrust. In a moment I saw why.

"You are not open with me," he protested. "Why should moments be hours to you previous to the instant when you stripped those pillows from the couch? You are not a fanciful man, nor have you any cowardly instincts. Why were you in such a turmoil going through a house where you could have expected to find nothing worse than some miserable sneak thief?"

This was a poser. I had laid myself open to suspicion by one thoughtless admission, and what was worse, it was but the beginning in all probability of many other possible mistakes. I had never taken the trouble to measure my words and the whole truth being impossible, I necessarily must make a slip now and then. He had better be warned of this. I did not wish him to undertake my cause blindfolded. He must understand its difficulties while believing in my innocence. Then, if he chose to draw back, well and good. I should have to face the situation alone.

"Charles," said I, as soon as I could perfectly control my speech, "you are quite just in your remark. I am not and can not be perfectly open with you. I shall tell you no lies, but beyond that I cannot promise. I am caught in a net not altogether of my own weaving. So far I will be frank with you. A common question may trip me up, others find me free and ready with my defence. You have chanced upon one of the former. I was in a turmoil of mind from the moment of my entrance into that fatal house, but I can give no reason for it unless I am, as you hinted, a coward."

He settled that supposition with a gesture I had rather not have seen. It would be better for him to consider me a poltroon than to suspect my real reasons for the agitation which I had acknowledged.

"You say you cannot be open with me. That means you have certain memories connected with that night which you cannot divulge."

"Right, Charles; but not memories of guilt—of active guilt, I mean. This I have previously insisted on, and this is what you must believe. I am not even an accessory before the fact. I am perfectly innocent so far as Adelaide's death is concerned. You may proceed on that basis without fear. That is, if you continue to take an interest in my case. If not, I shall be the last to blame you. Little honour is likely to accrue to you from defending me."

"I have accepted the case and I shall continue to interest myself in it," he assured me, with a dogged rather than genial persistence. "But I should like to know what I am to work upon, if it cannot be shown that her call for help came before you entered the building."

"That would be the best defence possible, of course," I replied; "but neither from your standpoint nor mine is it a feasible one. I have no proof of my assertion, I never looked at my watch from the time I left the station till I found it run down this very morning. The club-house clock has been out of order for some time and was not running. All I know and can swear to about the length of time I was in that building prior to the arrival of the police, is that it could not have been very long, since she was not only dead and buried under those accumulated cushions, but in a room some little distance from the telephone."

"That will do for me," said he, "but scarcely for those who are prejudiced against you. Everything points so indisputably to your guilt. The note which you say you wrote to Carmel to meet you at the station looks very much more like one to Miss Cumberland to meet you at the club-house."

It was thus I first learned which part of this letter had been burned off.[1]

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[1] It was the top portion, leaving the rest to read:*"Come, come my darling, my life. She will forgive when all is done. Hesitation will only undo us. To-night at 10:30. I shall never marry any one but you."* It was also evident that I had failed to add those expressions of affection linked to Carmel's name which had been in my mind and awakened my keenest apprehension.

"Otherwise," he pursued, "what could have taken her there? Everybody who knew her will ask that. Such a night! so soon after seeing you! It is a mystery any way, but one entirely inconceivable without some such excuse for her. These lines said 'Come!' and she went, for reasons which may be clear to you who were acquainted with her weak as well as strong points. Went how? No one knows. By chance or by intention on her part or yours, every servant was out of the house by nine o'clock, and her brother, too. Only the sister remained, the sister whom you profess to have urged to leave the town with you that very evening; and she can tell us nothing,—may die without ever being able to do so. Some shock to her feelings—you may know its character and you may not—drove her from a state of apparent health into the wildest delirium in a few hours. It was not your letter—if your story is true about that letter—or she would have shown its effect immediately upon receiving it; that is, in the early evening. And she did not. Helen, one of the maids, declares that she saw her some time after you left the house, and that she wore anything but a troubled look; that, in fact, her countenance was beaming and so beautiful that, accustomed as the girl was to her young mistress's good looks, she was more than struck by her appearance and spoke of it afterwards at the ball. A telling circumstance against you, Ranelagh, not only contradicting your own story but showing that her after condition sprang from some sudden and extreme apprehension in connection with her sister. Did you speak?"

No, I had not spoken. I had nothing to say. I was too deeply shaken by what he had just told me, to experience anything but the utmost confusion of ideas. Carmel beaming and beautiful at an hour I had supposed her suffering and full of struggle! I could not reconcile it with the letter she had written me, or with that understanding with her sister which ended so hideously in The Whispering Pines.

The lawyer, seeing my helpless state, proceeded with his presentation of my case as it looked to unprejudiced eyes.

"Miss Cumberland comes to the club-house; so do you. You have not the keys and so go searching about the building till you find an unlocked window by which you both enter. There are those who say you purposely left this window unfastened when you went about the house the day before; that you dropped the keys in her house where they would be sure to be found, and drove down to the station and stood about there for a good half hour, in order to divert suspicion from yourself afterwards and create an alibi in case it should be wanted. I do not believe any of this myself, not since accepting your assurance of innocence, but there are those who do believe it firmly and discern in the whole affair a cool and premeditated murder. Your passion for Carmel, while not generally known, has not passed unsuspected by your or her intimates; and this in itself is enough to give colour to these suspicions, even if you had not gone so far as to admit its power over you and the extremes to which you were willing to go to secure the wife you wished. So much for the situation as it appears to outsiders. Of the circumstantial evidence which links you personally to this crime, we have already spoken. It is very strong and apparently unassailable. But truth is truth, and if you only felt free to bare your whole soul to me as you now decline to do, I should not despair of finding some weak link in the chain which seems so satisfactory to the police and, I am forced to add, to the general public."

"Charles—"

I was very near unbosoming myself to him at that moment. But I caught myself back in time. While Carmel lay ill and unconscious, I would not clear my name at her expense by so much as a suggestion.

"Charles," I repeated, but in a different tone and with a different purpose, "how do they account for the cordial that was drunk—the two emptied glasses and the flask which were found in the adjacent closet?"

"It's one of the affair's conceded incongruities. Miss Cumberland is a well-known temperance woman. Had the flask and glasses not come from her house, you would get no one to believe that she had had anything to do with them. Have you any hint to give on this point? It would be a welcome addition to our case."

Alas! I was as much puzzled by those emptied cordial glasses as he was, and told him so; also by the presence of the third unused one. As I dwelt in thought on the latter circumstance, I remembered the observation which Coroner Perry had made concerning it.

"Coroner Perry speaks of a third and unused glass which was found with the flask," I ventured, tentatively. "He seemed to consider it an important item, hiding some truth that would materially help this case. What do you think, or rather, what is the general opinion on this point?"

"I have not heard. I have seen the fact mentioned, but without comment. It is a curious circumstance. I will make a note of it. You have no suggestions to offer on the subject?"

"None."

"The clew is a small one," he smiled.

"So is the one offered by the array of bottles found on the kitchen table; yet the latter may lead directly to the truth. Adelaide never dug those out of the cellar where they were locked up, and I'm sure I did not. Yet I suppose I'm given credit for doing so."

"Naturally. The key to the wine-vault was the only key which was lacking from the bunch left at Miss Cumberland's. That it was used to open the wine-vault door is evident from the fact that it was found in the lock."

This was discouraging. Everything was against me. If the whole affair had been planned with an intent to inculpate me and me only, it could not have been done with more attention to detail, nor could I have found myself more completely enmeshed. Yet I knew, both from circumstances and my own instinct that no such planning had occurred. I was a victim, not of malice but of blind chance, or shall I say of Providence? As to this one key having been slipped from the rest and used to open the wine-vault for wine which nobody wanted and nobody drank—this must be classed with the other incongruities which might yet lead to my enlargement.

"You may add this coincidence to the other," I conceded, after I had gone thus far in my own mind. "I swear that I had nothing to do with that key."

Neither could I believe that it had been used or even carried there by Adelaide or Carmel, though I knew that the full ring of keys had been in their hands and that they had entered the building by means of one of them. So assured was I of their innocence in this regard that the idea which afterwards assumed such proportions in all our minds had, at this moment, its first dawning in mine, as well as its first outward expression.

"Some other man than myself was thirsty that night," I firmly declared.

"We are getting on, Charles."

Evidently he did not consider the pace a very fast one, but being a cheerful fellow by nature, he simply expressed his dissatisfaction by an imperceptible shrug.

"Do you know exactly what the club-house's wine-vault contained?" he asked.

"An inventory was given me by the steward the morning we closed. It must be in my rooms."

"Your rooms have been examined. You expected that, didn't you? Probably this inventory has been found. I don't suppose it will help any."

"How should it?"

"Very true; how should it! No thoroughfare there, of course."

"No thoroughfare anywhere to-day," I exclaimed. "To-morrow some loop-hole of escape may suggest itself to me. I should like to sleep on the matter. I—I should like to sleep on it."

He saw that I had something in mind of which I had thus far given him no intimation, and he waited anxiously for me to reconsider my last words before he earnestly remarked:

"A day lost at a time like this is often a day never retrieved. Think well before you bid me leave you, unenlightened as to the direction in which you wish me to work."

But I was not ready, not by any means ready, and he detected this when I next spoke.

"I will see you to-morrow; any time to-morrow; meantime I will give you a commission which you are at liberty to perform yourself or to entrust to some capable detective. The letter, of which a

portion remains, *was* written to Carmel, and she sent me a reply which was handed me on the station platform by a man who was a perfect stranger to me. I have hardly any memory of how the man looked, but it should be an easy task to find him and if you cannot do that, the smallest scrap of the note he gave me, and which unfortunately I tore up and scattered to the winds, would prove my veracity in this one particular and so make it easier for them to believe the rest."

His eye lightened. I presume the prospect of making any practical attempt in my behalf was welcome.

"One thing more," I now added. "My ring was missing from Miss Cumberland's hand when I took away those pillows. I have reason to think—or it is natural for me to think—that she planned to return it to me by some messenger or in some letter. Do you know if such messenger or such letter has been received at my apartments? Have you heard anything about this ring? It was a notable one and not to be confounded with any other. Any one who knew us or who had ever remarked it on her hand would be able to identify it."

"I have heard the ring mentioned," he replied, "I have even heard that the police are interested in finding it; but I have not heard that they have been successful. You encourage me much by assuring me that it was missing from her hand when you first saw her. That ring may prove our most valuable clew."

"Yes, but you must also remember that she may have taken it off before she started for the club-house."

"That is very true."

"You do not know whether they have looked for it at her home?"

"I do not."

"Will you find out, and will you see that I get all my letters?"

"I certainly will, but you must not expect to receive the latter unopened."

"I suppose not."

I said this with more cheerfulness than he evidently expected. My heart had been lightened of one load. The ring had not been discovered on Carmel as I had secretly feared.

"I will take good care of your interests from now on," he remarked, in a tone much more natural than any he had before used. "Be hopeful and show a brave front to the district attorney when he comes to interview you. I hear that he is expected home to-morrow. If you are innocent, you can face him and his whole office with calm assurance." Which showed how little he understood my real position.

There was comfort in this very thought, however, and I quietly remarked that I did not despair.

"And I *will* not," he emphasised, rising with an assumption of ease which left him as he remained hesitating before me.

It was my moment of advantage, and I improved it by proffering a request which had been more or less in my mind during the whole of this prolonged colloquy.

First thanking him for his disinterestedness, I remarked that he had shown me so much consideration as a lawyer, that I now felt emboldened to ask something from him as my friend.

"You are free," said I; "I am not. Miss Cumberland will be buried before I leave these four walls. I hate to think of her going to her grave without one token from the man to whom she has been only too good and who, whatever outrage he may have planned to her feelings, is not without reverence for her character and a heartfelt repentance for whatever he may have done to grieve her. Charles, a few flowers,—white—no wreath, just a few which can be placed on her breast or in her hand. You need not say whom they are from. It would seem a mockery to any one but her. Lilies, Charles. I shall feel happier to know that they are there. Will you do this for me?"

"I will."

"That is all."

Instinctively he held out his hand. I dropped mine in it; there was a slight pressure, some few more murmured words and he was gone.

I slept that night.

VIII
A CHANCE! I TAKE IT

I entreat you then
From one that so imperfectly conjects,
You'd take no notice; nor build yourself a trouble
Out of his scattering and unsure observance:
It were not for your quiet, nor your good,
Nor for my manhood, honesty or wisdom,
To let you know my thoughts.

Othello

I slept, though a question of no small importance was agitating my mind, demanding instant consideration and a definite answer before I again saw this friend and adviser. I woke to ask if the suggestion which had come to me in our brief conversation about the bottles taken from the wine-vault, was the promising one it had then appeared, or only a fool's trick bound to end in disaster. I weighed the matter in every conceivable way, and ended by trusting to the instinct which impelled me to have resource to the one and only means by which the scent might be diverted from its original course, confusion be sown in the minds of the police, and Carmel, as well as myself, be saved from the pit gaping to receive us.

This was my plan. I would acknowledge to having seen a horse and cutter leave the club-house by the upper gateway, simultaneously with my entrance through the lower one. I would even describe the appearance of the person driving this cutter. No one by the greatest stretch of imagination would be apt to associate this description with Carmel; but it might set the authorities thinking, and if by any good chance a cutter containing a person wearing a derby hat and a coat with an extra high collar should have been seen on this portion of the road, or if, as I earnestly hoped, the snow had left any signs of another horse having been tethered in the clump of trees opposite the one where I had concealed my own, enough of the truth might be furnished to divide public opinion and start fresh inquiry.

That a woman's form had sought concealment under these masculine habiliments would not, could not, strike anybody's mind. Nothing in the crime had suggested a woman's presence, much less a woman's active agency.

On the contrary, all the appearances, save such as I believed known to myself alone, spoke so openly of a man's strength, a man's methods, a man's appetite, and a man's brutal daring that the suspicion which had naturally fallen on myself as the one and only person implicated, would in shifting pass straight to another man, and, if he could not be found, return to me, or be lost in a maze of speculation. This seemed so evident after a long and close study of the situation that I was ready with my confession when Mr. Clifton next came. I had even forestalled it in a short interview forced upon me by the assistant district attorney and Chief Hudson. That it had made an altogether greater impression upon the latter than I had expected, gave me additional courage when I came to discuss this new line of defence with the young lawyer. I was even able to tell him that, to all appearance, my long silence on a point so favourable to my own interests had not militated against me to the extent one would expect from men so alive to the subterfuges and plausible inventions of suspected criminals.

"Chief Hudson believes me, late as my statement is. I saw it in his eye." Thus I went on. "And the assistant district attorney, too. At least, the latter is willing to give me the benefit of the doubt, which was more than I expected. What do you suppose has happened? Some new discovery on their part? If so, I ought to know what it is. Believe me, Charles, I ought to know what it is."

"I have heard of no new discovery," he coldly replied, not quite pleased, as I could see, either with my words or my manner. "An old one may have served your purpose. If another cutter besides yours passed through the club-house grounds at the time you mention, it left tracks which all the fury of the storm would not have entirely obliterated in the fifteen minutes elapsing between that time and the arrival of the police. Perhaps they remember these tracks, and if you had been entirely frank that night—"

"I know, I know," I put in, "but I wasn't. Lay it to my confusion of mind—to the great shock I had received, to anything but my own blood-guiltiness, and take up the matter as it now stands. Can't you follow up my suggestion? A witness can certainly be found who encountered that cutter and its occupant somewhere on the long stretch of open road between The Whispering Pines and the resident district."

"Possibly. It would help. You have not asked for news from the Hill."

The trembling which seized and shook me at these words testified to the shock they gave me. "Carmel!" I cried. "She is worse—dead!"

"No. She's not worse and she's not dead. But the doctors say it will be weeks before they can allow a question of any importance to be put to her. You can see what that will do for us. Her testimony is too important to the case to be ignored. A delay will follow which may or may not be favourable to you. I am inclined to think now that it will redound to your interests. You are ready to swear to the sleigh you speak of; that you saw it leave the club-house grounds and turn north?"

"Quite ready; but you must not ask me to describe or in any way to identify its occupant. I saw nothing but the hat and coat I have told you about. It was just before the moon went under a cloud, or I could not have seen that much."

Is it so hard to preserve a natural aspect in telling or suggesting a lie that Charles's look should change as I uttered the last sentence? I do not easily flush, and since my self-control had been called upon by the dreadful experiences of the last few days, I had learned to conceal all other manifestations of feeling except under some exceptional shock. But a lie embodied in so many words, never came easy to my lips, and I suppose my voice fell, for his glance became suddenly penetrating, and his voice slightly sarcastic as he remarked:

"Those clouds obscured more than the moon, I fancy. I only wish that they had not risen between you and me. This is the blindest case that has ever been put in my hands. All the more credit to me if I see you through it, I suppose; but—"

"Tell me," I broke in, with equal desire to cut these recriminations short and to learn what was going on at the Cumberland house, "have you been to the Hill or seen anybody who has? Can't you give me some details of—of Carmel's condition; of the sort of nurse who cares for her, and how Arthur conducts himself under this double affliction?"

"I was there last night. Miss Clifford was in the house and received me. She told me that Arthur's state of mind was pitiful. He was never a very affectionate brother, you know, but now they cannot get him away from Carmel's door. He sits or stands all day just outside the threshold and casts jealous and beseeching looks at those who are allowed to enter. They say you wouldn't know him. I tried to get him to come down and see me, but he wouldn't leave his post."

"Doesn't he grieve for Adelaide? I always thought that of the two she had the greater influence over him."

"Yes, but they cannot get him to enter the place where she lies. His duty is to the living, he says; at least, his anxiety is there. He starts at every cry Carmel utters."

"She—cries out—then?"

"Very often. I could hear her from where I sat downstairs."

"And what does she say?"

"The one thing constantly. 'Lila! Lila!' Nothing more."

I kept my face in shadow. If he saw it at all, it must have looked as cold and hard as stone. After a moment, I went on with my queries:

"Does he—Arthur—mention me at all?"

"I did not discuss you greatly with Miss Clifford. I saw that she was prejudiced, and I preferred not to risk an argument; but she let fall this much: that Arthur felt very hard towards you and loudly insisted upon your guilt. She seemed to think him justified in this. You don't mind my telling you? It is better for you to know what is being said about you in town."

I understood his motive. He was trying to drive me into giving him my full confidence. But I would not be driven. I simply retorted quietly but in a way to stop all such future attempts:

"Miss Clifford is a very good girl and a true friend of the whole Cumberland family; but she is not the most discriminating person in the world, and even if she were, her opinion would not turn me from the course I have laid out for myself. Does the doctor—Dr. Carpenter, I presume,—venture to say how long Carmel's present delirium will hold?"

"He cannot, not knowing its real cause. Carmel fell ill before the news of her sister's death arrived at the house, you remember. Some frightful scene must have occurred between the two, previous to Adelaide's departure for The Whispering Pines. What that scene was can only be told by Carmel and for her account we must wait. Happily you have an alibi which will serve you in this instance. You were at the station during the time we are speaking of."

"Has that been proved?"

"Yes; several men saw you there."

"And the gentleman who brought me the—her letter?" It was more than difficult for me to speak Carmel's name. "He has not come forward?"

"Not yet; not to my knowledge, at least."

"And the ring?"

"No news."

"The nurse—you have told me nothing about her," I now urged, reverting to the topic of gravest interest to me. "Is she any one we know or an importation of the doctor's?"

"I did not busy myself with that. She's a competent woman, of course. I suppose that is what you mean?"

Could I tell him that this was not what I meant at all—that it was her qualities as woman rather than her qualifications as nurse which were important in this case? If she were of a suspicious, prying disposition, given to weighing every word and marking every gesture of a delirious patient, what might we not fear from her circumspection when Carmel's memory asserted itself and she grew more precise in the frenzy which now exhausted itself in unintelligible cries, or the ceaseless repetition of her sister's name. The question seemed of such importance to me that I was tempted to give expression to my secret apprehension on this score, but I bethought myself in time and passed the matter over with the final remark:

"Watch her, watch them all, and bring me each and every detail of the poor girl's sickness. You will never regret humouring me in this. You ordered the flowers for—Adelaide?"

"Yes; lilies, as you requested."

A short silence, then I observed:

"There will be no autopsy the papers say. The evidences of death by strangulation are too well defined."

"Very true. Yet I wonder at their laxity in this. There were signs of some other agency having been at work also. Those two empty glasses smelling of cordial—innocent perhaps—yet—"

"Don't! I can bear no more to-day. I shall be stronger to-morrow."

Another feeler turned aside. His cheek showed his displeasure, but the words were kind enough with which he speedily took his leave and left me to solitude and a long night of maddening thought.

BOOK TWO
SWEETWATER TO THE FRONT

IX
"WE KNOW OF NO SUCH LETTER"

O, he sits high in all the people's hearts;
And that, which would appear offence in us,
His countenance like richest alchemy
Will change to virtue, and to worthiness.

Julius Caesar.

And you still hold him?"

"Yes, but with growing uncertainty. He's one of those fellows who affect your judgment in spite of yourself. Handsome beyond the ordinary, a finished gentleman and all that, he has, in addition to these advantages, a way with him that goes straight to the heart in spite of prejudice and the claims of conscience. That's a dangerous factor in a case like this. It hampers a man in the exercise of his duties. You may escape the fascination, probably will; but at least you will understand my present position and why I telephoned to New York for an expert detective to help us on this job. I wish to give the son of my old friend a chance."

The man whom Coroner Perry thus addressed, leaned back in his chair and quietly replied:

"You're right; not because he's the son of your old friend, a handsome fellow and all that, but for the reason that every man should have his full chance, whatever the appearances against him. Personally, I have no fear of my judgment being affected by his attractions. I've had to do with too many handsome scamps for that. But I shall be as just to him as you will, simply because it seems an incredibly brutal crime for a gentleman to commit, and also because I lay greater stress than you do on the two or three minor points which seem to favour his latest declaration, that a man had preceded him in his visit to this lonely club-house,—a man whom he had himself seen leaving the grounds in a cutter just as he entered by the opposite driveway."

"Ah!" came in quick ejaculation from the coroner's lips, "I like to hear you say that. I was purposely careful not to lay emphasis on the facts you allude to. I wished you to draw your own inferences, without any aid from me. The police did find traces of a second horse and cutter having passed through the club-house grounds. It was snowing hard, and these traces were speedily obliterated, but Hexford and Clarke saw them in time to satisfy themselves that they extended from the northern clump of trees to the upper gateway where they took the direction of the Hill."

"That is not all. A grip-sack, packed for travelling, was in Mr. Ranelagh's cutter, showing that his story of an intended journey was not without some foundation."

"Yes. We have retained that grip-sack. It is not the only proof we have of his intention to leave the city for a while. He had made other arrangements, business arrangements—But that's neither here nor there. No one doubts that he planned an elopement with the beautiful Carmel; the question is, was his disappointment followed by the murder of the woman who stood in his way?"

District Attorney Fox (you will have guessed his identity before now) took his time, deliberating carefully with himself before venturing to reply. Then when the coroner's concealed impatience was about to disclose itself, he quietly remarked:

"I suppose that no conclusion can be drawn from the condition of the body when our men reached it. I judge that it was still warm."

"Yes, but so it would have been if she had met her fate several minutes earlier than was supposed. Clarke and Hexford differ about the length of time which intervened between the moment when the former looked into the room from the outside and that of their final entrance. But whether it was five minutes or ten, the period was long enough to render their testimony uncertain as to the exact length of time she had lain there dead. Had I been there—But it's useless to go into that. Let us take up something more tangible."

"Very good. Here it is. Of the six bottles of spirits which were surreptitiously taken from the club-house's wine-vault, four were found standing unopened on the kitchen table. Where are the other two?"

"That's it! That's the question I have put myself ever since I interrogated the steward and found him ready to swear to the correctness of his report and the disappearance of these two bottles. Ranelagh did not empty them, or the bottles themselves would have been found somewhere about the place. Now, who did?"

"No one within the club-house precincts. They were opened and emptied elsewhere. There's our clew and if the man you've got up from New York is worth his salt, he has his task ready to hand."

"A hard task for a stranger—and such a stranger! Not very prepossessing, to say the least. But he has a good eye, and will get along with the boys all right. Nothing assertive about him; not enough go, perhaps. Would you like to see him?"

"In a moment. I want to clear my mind in reference to these bottles. Only some one addicted to drink would drag those six bottles out of that cold, unlighted cellar."

"Yes, and a connoisseur at that. The two missing bottles held the choicest brand in the whole stock. They were kept far back too—hidden, as it were, behind the other bottles. Yet they were hauled to the front and carried off, as you say, and by some one who knows a good thing in spirits."

"What was in the four bottles found on the kitchen table?"

"Sherry, whiskey, and rum. Two bottles of rum and one each of sherry and whiskey."

"The thief meant to carry them all off, but had not time."

"The *gentleman* thief! No common man such as we are looking for, would make choice of just those bottles. So there we are again! Contradictions in every direction."

"Don't let us bother with the contradictions, but just follow the clew.

Those bottles, full or empty, must be found. You know the labels?"

"Yes, and the shape and colour of the bottles, both of which are peculiar."

"Good! Now let us see your detective."

But Sweetwater was not called in yet. Just as Coroner Perry offered to touch his bell, the door opened and Mr. Clifton was ushered in. Well and favourably known to both men, he had no difficulty in stating his business and preferring his request.

"I am here in the interests of Elwood Ranelagh," said he. "He is willing to concede, and so am I, that under the circumstances his arrest was justifiable, but not his prolonged detention. He has little excuse to offer for the mistakes he has made, or the various offences of which he has been guilty. His best friends must condemn his hypocrisy and fast-and-loose treatment of Miss Cumberland; but he vows that he had no hand in her violent death, and in this regard I feel not only bound but forced to believe him. At all events, I am going to act on that conviction, and have come here to entreat your aid in clearing up one or two points which may affect your own opinion of his guilt.

"As his counsel I have been able to extract from him a fact or two which he has hitherto withheld from the police. Reticent as he has shown himself from the start,—and considering the character of

the two women involved in this tragedy, this cannot be looked upon as entirely to his discredit,—he has confided to me a circumstance, which in the excitement attendant on Miss Carmel Cumberland's sudden illness, may have escaped the notice of the family and very naturally, of the police. It is this:

"The ring which Miss Cumberland wore as the sign and seal of her engagement to him was not on her hand when he came upon her, as he declares he did, dead. It was there at dinner-time—a curious ring which I have often noted myself and could accurately describe if required. If she took it off before starting for The Whispering Pines, it should be easily found. But if she did not, what a clew it offers to her unknown assailant! Up till now, Mr. Ranelagh has been anticipating receiving this ring back in a letter, written before she left her home. But he has heard of no such letter, and doubts now if you have. May I ask if he is correct in this surmise?"

"We know of no such letter. None has come to his rooms," replied the coroner.

"I thought not. The whereabouts of this ring, then, is still to be determined. You will pardon my having called your attention to it. As Mr. Ranelagh's legal adviser, I am very anxious to have that ring found."

"We are glad to receive your suggestion," replied the district attorney. "But you must remember that some of its force is lost by its having originated with the accused."

"Very true; but Mr. Ranelagh was only induced to speak of this matter after I had worked with him for an hour. There is a mystery in his attitude which I, for one, have not yet fathomed. You must have noticed this also, Coroner Perry? Your inquest, when you hold it, will reveal some curious facts; but I doubt if it will reveal the secret underlying this man's reticence. That we shall have to discover for ourselves."

"He has another secret, then, than the one involving his arrest as a suspected murderer?" was the subtle conclusion of the district attorney.

"Yes, or why does he balk so at the simplest inquiries? I have my notion as to its nature; but I'm not here to express notions unless you call my almost unfounded belief in him a notion. What I want to present to you is fact, and fact which can be utilised."

"In the cause of your client!"

"Which is equally the cause of justice."

"Possibly. We'll search for the ring, Mr. Clifton."

"Meanwhile, will you cast your eye over these fragments of a note which Mr. Ranelagh says he received from Miss Carmel Cumberland while waiting on the station platform for her coming."

Taking an envelope from his pocket, Mr. Clifton drew forth two small scraps of soiled and crumpled paper, one of which was the half of another envelope presenting very nearly the following appearance:

As he pointed this out, he remarked:

"Elwood is not so common a baptismal name, that there can be any doubt as to the person addressed."

The other scraps, also written in pencil and by the same hand, contained but two or three disconnected words; but one of those words was *Adelaide*.

"I spent an hour and a half in the yards adjoining the station before I found those two bits," explained the young lawyer with a simple earnestness not displeasing to the two seasoned men he addressed. "One was in hiding under a stacked-up pile of outgoing freight, and the other I picked out of a cart of stuff which had been swept up in the early morning. I offer them in corroboration of Mr. Ranelagh's statement that the '*Come!*' used in the partially consumed letter found in the clubhouse chimney was addressed to Miss Carmel Cumberland and not to Adelaide, and that the place of meeting suggested by this word was the station platform, and not the spot since made terrible by death."

"You are acquainted with Miss Carmel Cumberland's handwriting?"

"If I am not, the town is full of people who are. I believe these words to have been written by Carmel Cumberland."

Mr. Fox placed the pieces back in their envelope and laid the whole carefully away.

"For a second time we are obliged to you," said he.

"You can cancel the obligation," was the quick retort, "by discovering the identity of the man who in derby hat and a coat with a very high collar, left the grounds of The Whispering Pines just as Mr. Ranelagh drove into them. I have no facilities for the job, and no desire to undertake it."

He had endeavoured to speak naturally, if not with an off-hand air; but he failed somehow—else why the quick glance of startled inquiry which Dr. Perry sent him from under his rather shaggy eyebrows.

"Well, we'll undertake that, too," promised the district attorney.

"I can ask no more," returned Charles Clifton, arising to depart. "The confronting of that man with Ranelagh will cause the latter to unseal his lips. Before you have finished with my client, you will esteem him much more highly than you do now."

The district attorney smiled at what seemed the callow enthusiasm of a youthful lawyer; but the coroner who knew his district well, looked very thoughtfully down at the table before which he sat, and failed to raise his head until the young man had vanished from the room and his place had been taken by another of very different appearance and deportment. Then he roused himself and introduced the newcomer to the prosecuting attorney as Caleb Sweetwater, of the New York police department.

Caleb Sweetwater was no beauty. He was plain-featured to the point of ugliness; so plain-featured that not even his quick, whimsical smile could make his face agreeable to one who did not know his many valuable qualities. His receding chin and far too projecting nose were not likely to create a favourable impression on one ignorant of his cheerful, modest, winsome disposition; and the district attorney, after eyeing him for a moment with ill-concealed disfavour, abruptly suggested:

"You have brought some credentials with you, I hope."

"Here is a letter from one of the department. Mr. Gryce wrote it," he added, with just a touch of pride.

"The letter is all right," hastily remarked Dr. Perry on looking it over. "Mr. Sweetwater is commended to us as a man of sagacity and becoming reserve."

"Very good. To business, then. The sooner we get to work on this new theory, the better. Mr. Sweetwater, we have some doubts if the man we have in hand is the man we really want. But first, how much do you know about this case?"

"All that's in the papers."

"Nothing more?"

"Very little. I've not been in town above an hour."

"Are you known here?"

"I don't think so; it's my first visit this way."

"Then you are as ignorant of the people as they are of you. Well, that has its disadvantages."

"And its advantages, if you will permit me to say so, sir. I have no prejudices, no preconceived notions to struggle against. I can take persons as I find them; and if there is any deep family secret to unearth, it's mighty fortunate for a man to have nothing stand in the way of his own instincts. No likings, I mean—no leanings this way or that, for humane or other purely unprofessional reasons."

The eye of District Attorney Fox stole towards that of his brother official, but did not meet it. The coroner had turned his attention to the table again, and, while betraying no embarrassment, was not quite his usual self. The district attorney's hand stole to his chin, which he softly rubbed with his lean forefinger as he again addressed Sweetwater.

"This tragedy—the most lamentable which has ever occurred in this town—is really, and without exaggeration, a tragedy in high life. The lady who was strangled by a brute's clutch, was a woman of the highest culture and most estimable character. Her sister, who is supposed to have been

the unconscious cause of the crime, is a young girl of blameless record. Of the man who was seen bending over the victim with his hands on her throat, we cannot speak so well. He has the faults and has lived the life of a social favourite. Gifted in many ways, and popular with both men and women, he has swung on his course with an easy disregard of the claims of others, which, while leaving its traces no doubt in many a humble and uncomplaining heart, did not attract notice to his inherent lack of principle, until the horrors of this tragedy lifted him into public view stripped of all his charms. He's an egotist, of the first water; there is no getting over that. But did he strangle the woman? He says not; that he was only following some extraordinary impulse of the moment in laying his thumbs on the marks he saw on Miss Cumberland's neck. A fantastic story—told too late, besides, for perfect credence, and not worthy of the least attention if—"

The reasons which followed are too well known to us for repetition. Sweetwater listened with snapping eyes to all that was said; and when he had been given the various clews indicating the presence of a third—and as yet unknown—party on the scene of crime, he rose excitedly to his feet and, declaring that it was a most promising case, begged permission to make his own investigations at The Whispering Pines, after which he would be quite ready to begin his search for the man in the derby hat and high coat-collar, whose love for wine was so great that he chose and carried off the two choicest bottles that the club-house contained.

"A hardy act for any man, gentleman or otherwise, who had just strangled the life out of a fine woman like that. If he exists and the whole story is not a pure fabrication of the entrapped Ranelagh, he shouldn't be hard to find. What do you say, gentlemen? He shouldn't be hard to find."

"*We* have not found him," emphasised the district attorney, with the shortest possible glance at the coroner's face.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.