

**GREEN ANNA
KATHARINE**

THE CHIEF LEGATEE

Anna Green
The Chief Legatee

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Anna Katharine Green

The Chief Legatee

PART I

A Woman of Mystery

CHAPTER I

A BRIDE OF FIVE HOURS

"What's up?"

This from the manager of the Hotel – to his chief clerk. "Something wrong in Room 81?"

"Yes, sir. I've just sent for a detective. You were not to be found and the gentleman is desperate. But very anxious to have it all kept quiet; very anxious. I think we can oblige him there, or, at least, we'll try. Am I right, sir?"

"Of course, if—"

"Oh! it's nothing criminal. The lady's missing, that's all; the lady whose name you see here."

The register lay open between them; the clerk's finger, running along the column, rested about half-way down.

The manager bent over the page.

"Roger J. Ransom and wife," he read out in decided astonishment. "Why, they are—"

"You're right. Married to-day in Grace Church. A great wedding; the papers are full of it. Well, she's the lady. They registered here a few minutes before five o'clock and in ten minutes the bride was missing. It's a queer story Mr. Ransom tells. You'd better hear it. Ah, there's our man! Perhaps you'll go up with him."

"You may bet your last dollar on that," muttered the manager. And joining the new-comer, he made a significant gesture which was all that passed between them till they stepped out on the second floor.

"Wanted in Room 81?" the manager now asked.

"Yes, by a man named Ransom."

"Just so. That's the door. Knock—or, rather, I'll knock, for I must hear his story as soon as you do. The reputation of the hotel—"

"Yes, yes, but the gentleman's waiting. Ah! that's better."

The manager had just knocked.

An exclamation from within, a hurried step, and the door fell open. The figure which met their eyes was startling. Distress, anxiety, and an impatience almost verging on frenzy, distorted features naturally amiable if not handsome.

"My wife," fell in a gasp from his writhing lips.

"We have come to help you find her," Mr. Gerridge calmly assured him. Mr. Gerridge was the detective. "Relate the circumstances, sir. Tell us where you were when you first missed her."

Mr. Ransom's glance wandered past him to the door. It was partly open. The manager, whose name was Loomis, hastily closed it. Mr. Ransom showed relief and hurried into his story. It was to this effect:

"I was married to-day in Grace Church. At the altar my bride—you probably know her name, Miss Georgian Hazen—wore a natural look, and was in all respects, so far as any one could see, a happy woman, satisfied with her choice and pleased with the éclat and elegancies of the occasion.

Half-way down the aisle this all changed. I remember the instant perfectly. Her hand was on my arm and I felt it suddenly stiffen. I was not alarmed, but I gave her a quick look and saw that something had happened. What, I could not at the moment determine. She didn't answer when I spoke to her and seemed to be mainly concerned in getting out of the church before her emotions overcame her. This she succeeded in doing with my help; and, once in the vestibule, recovered herself so completely, and met all my inquiries with such a gay shrug of the shoulders, that I should have passed the matter over as a mere attack of nerves, if I had not afterwards detected in her face, through all the hurry and excitement of the ensuing reception, a strained expression not at all natural to her. This was still more evident after the congratulations of a certain guest, who, I am sure, whispered to her before he passed on; and when the time came for her to go up-stairs she was so pale and unlike herself that I became seriously alarmed and asked if she felt well enough to start upon the journey we had meditated. Instantly her manner changed. She turned upon me with a look I have been trying ever since to explain to myself, and begged me not to take her out of town to-night but to some quiet hotel where we might rest for a few days before starting on our travels. She looked me squarely in the eye as she made this request and, seeing in her nothing more than a feverish anxiety lest I should make difficulties of some kind, I promised to do what she asked and bade her run away and get herself ready to go and say nothing to any one of our change of plan. She smiled and turned away towards her own room, but presently came hurrying back to ask if I would grant her one more favor. Would I be so good as not to speak to her or expect her to speak to me till we got to the hotel; she was feeling very nervous but was sure that a few minutes of complete rest would entirely restore her; something had occurred (she acknowledged this) which she wanted to think out; wouldn't I grant her this one opportunity of doing so? It was a startling request, but she looked so lovely—pardon me, I must explain my easy acquiescence—that I gave her the assurance she wished and went about my own preparations, somewhat disconcerted but still not at all prepared for what happened afterward. I had absolutely no idea that she meant to leave me."

Mr. Ransom paused, greatly affected; but upon the detective asking him how and when Mrs. Ransom had deserted him, he controlled himself sufficiently to say:

"Here; immediately after that silent and unnatural ride. She entered the office with me and was standing close at my side all the time I was writing our names in the register; but later, when I turned to ask her to enter the elevator with me, she was gone, and the boy who was standing by with our two bags said that she had slipped into the reception-room across the hall. But I didn't find her there or in any of the adjoining rooms. Nor has anybody since succeeded in finding her. She has left the building—left me, and—"

"You want her back again?"

This from the detective, but very dryly.

"Yes. For she was not following her own inclinations in thus abandoning me so soon after the words which made us one were spoken. Some influence was brought to bear on her which she felt unable to resist. I have confidence enough in her to believe that. The rest is mystery—a mystery which I am forced to ask you to untangle. I have neither the necessary calmness nor experience myself."

"But you surely have done something," protested Gerridge. "Telephoned to her late home or—"

"Oh yes, I have done all that, but with no result. She has not returned to her old home. Her uncle has just been here and he is as much mystified by the whole occurrence as I am. He could tell me nothing, absolutely nothing."

"Indeed! and the man, the one who whispered to her during the reception, couldn't you learn anything about him?"

Mr. Ransom's face took on an expression almost ferocious.

"No. He's a stranger to Mr. Fulton; yet Mr. Fulton's niece introduced him to me as a relative."

"A relative? When was that?"

"At the reception. He was introduced as Mr. Hazen (my wife's maiden name, you know), and when I saw how his presence disturbed her, I said to her, 'A cousin of yours?' and she answered with very evident embarrassment, 'A relative';—which you must acknowledge didn't locate him very definitely. Mr. Fulton doesn't know of any such relative. And I don't believe he is a relative. He didn't sit with the rest of the family in the church."

"Ah! you saw him in the church."

"Yes. I noticed him for two reasons. First, because he occupied an end seat and so came directly under my eye in our passage down the aisle. Secondly, because his face of all those which confronted me when I looked for the cause of her sudden agitation, was the only one not turned towards her in curiosity or interest. His eyes were fixed and vacant; his only. That made him conspicuous and when I saw him again I knew him."

"Describe the man."

Mr. Ransom's face lightened up with an expression of strong satisfaction.

"I am going to astonish you," said he. "The fellow is so plain that children must cry at him. He has suffered some injury and his mouth and jaw have such a twist in them that the whole face is thrown out of shape. So you see," continued the unhappy bridegroom, as his eyes flashed from the detective's face to that of the manager's, "that the influence he exerts over my wife is not that of love. No one could love *him*. The secret's of another kind. What kind, what, what, what? Find out and I'll pay you any amount you ask. She is too dear and of too sensitive a temperament to be subject to a wretch of his appearance. I cannot bear the thought. It stifles, it chokes me; and yet for three hours I've had to endure it. Three hours! and with no prospect of release unless you—"

"Oh, I'll do something," was Gerridge's bland reply. "But first I must have a few more facts. A man such as you describe should be easy to find; easier than the lady. Is he a tall man?"

"Unusually so."

"Dark or light?"

"Dark."

"Any beard?"

"None. That's why the injury to his jaw shows so plainly."

"I see. Is he what you would call a gentleman?"

"Yes, I must acknowledge that. He shows the manners of good society, if he did whisper words into my wife's ear which were not meant for mine."

"And Mr. Fulton knows nothing of him?"

"Nothing."

"Well, we'll drop him for the present. You have a photograph of your wife?"

"Her picture was in all the papers to-night."

"I noticed. But can we go by it? Does it resemble her?"

"Only fairly. She is far prettier. My wife is something uncommon. No picture ever does her justice."

"She looks like a dark beauty. Is her hair black or brown?"

"Black. So black it has purple shades in it."

"And her eyes? Black too?"

"No, gray. A deep gray, which look black owing to her long lashes."

"Very good. Now about her dress. Describe it as minutely as you can. It was a bride's traveling costume, I suppose."

"Yes. That is, I presume so. I know that it was all right and suitable to the occasion, but I don't remember much about it. I was thinking too much of the woman in the gown to notice the gown itself."

"Cannot you tell the color?"

"It was a dark one. I'm sure it was a dark one, but colors are not much in my line. I know she looked well—they can tell you about it at the house. All that I distinctly remember is the veil she had wound so tightly around her face and hat to keep the rice out of her hair that I could not get one glimpse of her features. All nonsense that veil, especially when I had promised not to address her or even to touch her in the cab. And she wore it into the office. If it had not been for that I might have foreseen her intention in time to prevent it."

"Perhaps she knew that."

"It looks as if she did."

"Which means that she was meditating flight from the first."

"From the time she saw that man," Mr. Ransom corrected.

"Just so; from the time she left her uncle's house. Your wife is a woman of means, I believe."

"Yes, unfortunately."

"Why unfortunately?"

"It makes her independent and offers a lure to irresponsible wretches like him."

"Her fortune is large, then?"

"Very large; larger than my own."

Every one knew Mr. Ransom to be a millionaire.

"Left her by her father?"

"No, by some great-uncle, I believe, who made his fortune in the Klondike."

"And entirely under her own control?"

"Entirely so."

"Who is her man of business?"

"Edward Harper, of—Wall Street."

"He's your man. He'll know sooner or later where she is."

"Yes, but later won't do. I must know to-night; or, if that is impossible, to-morrow. Were it not for the mortification it would cause her I should beg you to put on all your force and ransack the city for this bride of five hours. But such publicity is too shocking. I should like to give her a day to reconsider her treatment of me. She cannot mean to leave me for good. She has too much self-respect; to say nothing of her very positive and not to be questioned affection for myself."

The detective looked thoughtful. The problem had its difficulties.

"Are those hers?" he asked at last, pointing to the two trunks he saw standing against the wall.

"Yes. I had them brought up, in the hope that she had slipped away on some foolish errand or other and would yet come back."

"By their heft I judge them to be full; how about her hand-bag?"

"She had only a small bag and an umbrella. They are both here."

"How's that?"

"The colored boy took them at the door. She went away with nothing in her hands."

Gerridge glanced at the bag Mr. Ransom had pointed out, fingered it, then asked the young husband to open it.

He did so. The usual articles and indispensable adjuncts of a nice woman's toilet met their eyes. Also a pocketbook containing considerable money and a case holding more than one valuable jewel.

The eyes of the officer and manager met in ill disguised alarm.

"She must have been under the most violent excitement to slip away without these," suggested the former. "I'd better be at work. Give me two hours," were his parting words to Mr. Ransom. "By that time I'll either be back or telephone you. You had better stay here; she may return. Though I don't think that likely," he muttered as he passed the manager.

At the door he stopped. "You can't tell me the color of that veil?"

"No."

"Look about the room, sir. There's lots of colors in the furniture and hangings. Don't you see one somewhere that reminds you of her veil or even of her dress?"

The miserable bridegroom looked up from the bag into which he was still staring and, glancing slowly around him, finally pointed at a chair upholstered in brown and impulsively said:

"The veil was like that; I remember now. Brown, isn't it? a dark brown?"

"Yes. And the dress?"

"I can't tell you a thing about the dress. But her gloves—I remember something about them. They were so tight they gaped open at the wrist. Her hands looked quite disfigured. I wondered that so sensible a woman should buy gloves at least two sizes too small for her. I think she was ashamed of them herself, for she tried to hide them after she saw me looking."

"This was in the cab?"

"Yes."

"Where you didn't speak a word?"

"Not a word."

"Though she seemed so very much cut up?"

"No, she didn't seem cut up; only tired."

"How tired?"

"She sat with her head pressed against the side of the cab."

"And a little turned away?"

"Yes."

"As if she shrank from you?"

"A little so."

"Did she brighten when the carriage stopped?"

"She started upright."

"Did you help her out?"

"No, I had promised not to touch her."

"She jumped out after you?"

"Yes."

"And never spoke?"

"Not a word."

Gerridge opened the door, motioned for the manager to follow, and, once in the hall, remarked to that gentleman:

"I should like to see the boy who took her bag and was with them when she slipped away."

CHAPTER II

THE LADY IN NUMBER THREE

The boy was soon found and proved to be more observing in matters of dress than Mr. Ransom. He described with apparent accuracy both the color and cut of the garments worn by the lady who had flitted away so mysteriously. The former was brown, all brown; and the latter was of the tailor-made variety, very natty and becoming. "What you would call 'swell,'" was the comment, "if her walk hadn't spoiled the hang of it. How she did walk! Her shoes must have hurt her most uncommon. I never did see any one hobble so."

"How's that? She hobbled, and her husband didn't notice it?"

"Oh, he had hurried on ahead. She was behind him, and she walked like this."

The pantomime was highly expressive.

"That's a point," muttered Gerridge. Then with a sharp look at the boy: "Where were you that you didn't notice her when she slipped off?"

"Oh, but I did, sir. I was waiting for the clerk to give me the key, when I saw her step back from the gentleman's side and, looking quickly round to see if any one was noticing her, slide off into the reception-room. I thought she wanted a drink of water out of the pitcher on the center-table, but if she did, she didn't come back after she had got it. None of us ever saw her again."

"Did you follow Mr. Ransom when he walked through those rooms?"

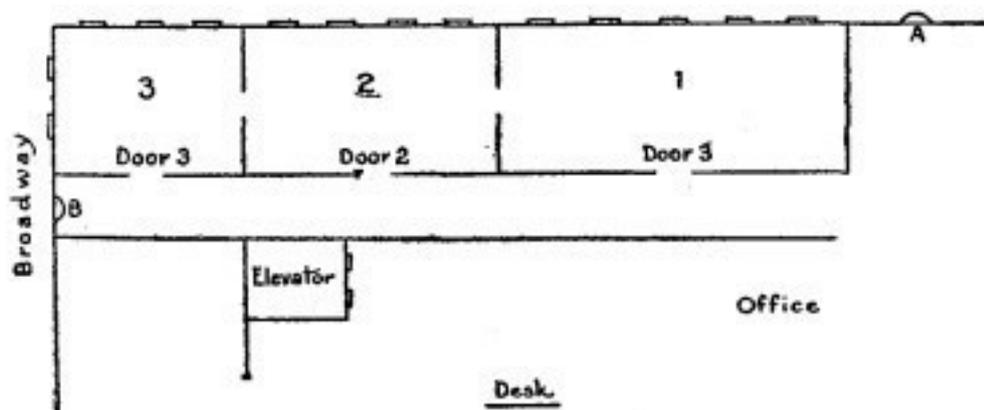
"No, sir; I stayed in the hall."

"Did the lady hobble when she slid thus mysteriously out of sight?"

"A little. Not so much as when she came in. But she wasn't at her ease, sir. Her shoes were certainly too small."

"I think I will take a peep at those rooms now," Gerridge remarked to the manager.

Mr. Loomis bowed, and together they crossed the office to the reception-room door. The diagram of this portion of the hotel will give you an idea of these connecting rooms.



There are three of them, as you will see, all reception-rooms. Mr. Ransom had passed through them all in looking for his wife. In No. 1 he found several ladies sitting and standing, all strangers. He encountered no one in No. 2, and in No. 3 just one person, a lady in street costume evidently waiting for some one. To this lady he had addressed himself, asking if she had seen any one pass that way the moment before. Her reply was a decided "No"; that she had been waiting in that same room for several minutes and had seen no one. This staggered him. It was as if his wife had dissolved into thin air. True, she might have eluded him by slipping out into the hall by means of door two at the

moment he entered door one; and alert to this possibility, he hastened back into the hall to look for her. But she was nowhere visible, nor had she been observed leaving the building by the man stationed at entrance A. But there was another exit, that of B. Had she gone out that way? Mr. Ransom had taken pains to inquire and had been assured by the man in charge that no lady had left by that door during the last ten minutes. This he had insisted on, and when Mr. Loomis and the detective came in their turn to question him on this point he insisted on it again. The mystery seemed complete,—at least to the manager. But the detective was not quite satisfied. He asked the man if at any time that day, before or after Mrs. Ransom's disappearance, he had swung the door open for a lady who walked lame. The answer was decisive. "Yes; one who walked as if her shoes were tight."

"When?"

"Oh a little while after the gentleman asked his questions."

"Was she dressed in brown?"

That he didn't know. He didn't look at ladies' dresses unless they were something special.

"But she walked lame and she came from Room 3?"

Yes. He remembered that much.

Gerridge, with a nod to the manager, stepped into the open compartment of the whirling door.

"I'm off," said he. "Expect to hear from me in two hours."

At twenty minutes to ten Mr. Ransom was called up on the telephone.

"One question, Mr. Ransom."

"Hello, who are you?"

"Gerridge."

"All right, go ahead."

"Did you see the face of the woman you spoke to in Room No. 3?"

"Of course. She was looking directly at me."

"You remember it? Could identify it if you saw it again?"

"Yes; that is—"

"That's all, good-by."

The circuit was cut off.

Another intolerable wait. Then there came a knock on the door and Gerridge entered. He held a photograph in his hand which he had evidently taken from his pocket on his way up.

"Look at this," said he. "Do you recognize the face?"

"The lady—"

"Just so; the one who said she had seen no one come into No. 3 on the first floor."

Mr. Ransom's expression of surprised inquiry was sufficient answer.

"Well, it's a pity you didn't look at her gloves instead of at her face. You might have had some dim idea of having seen them before. It was she who rode to the hotel with you; not your wife. The veil was wound around her face for a far deeper purpose than to ward off rice."

Mr. Ransom staggered back against the table before which he had been standing. The blow was an overwhelming one.

"Who is this woman?" he demanded. "She came from Mr. Fulton's house. More than that, from my wife's room. What is her name and what did she mean by such an outrage?"

"Her name is Bella Burton, and she is your wife's confidential maid. As for the meaning of this outrage, it will take more than two hours to ferret out that. I can only give you the single fact I've mentioned."

"And Mrs. Ransom?"

"She left the house at the same moment you did; you and Miss Burton. Only she went by the basement door."

"She? *She*?"

"Dressed in her maid's clothes. Oh, you'll have to hear worse things than that before we're out of this muddle. If you won't mind a bit of advice from a man of experience, I would suggest that you take things easy. It's the only way."

Shocked into silence by this cold-blooded philosophy, Mr. Ransom controlled both his anger and his humiliation; but he could not control his surprise.

"What does it mean?" he murmured to himself. "*What does it all mean?*"

CHAPTER III

"HE KNOWS THE WORD"

The next moment the doubt natural to the occasion asserted itself.

"How do you know all this? You state the impossible. Explain yourself."

Gerridge was only too willing to do so.

"I have just come from Mr. Fulton's house," said he. "Inquiries there elicited the facts which have so startled you. Neither Mr. Fulton nor his wife meant to deceive you. They knew nothing, suspected nothing of what took place, and you have no cause to blame them. It was all a plot between the two women."

"But how—why—"

"You see, I had a fact to go upon. You had noticed that your so-called bride's gloves did not fit her; the boy below, that her shoes were so tight she hobbled. That set me thinking. A woman of Mrs. Ransom's experience and judgment would not be apt to make a mistake in two such important particulars; which, taken with the veil and the promise she exacted from you not to address or touch her during your short ride to the hotel, led me to point my inquiries so that I soon found out that your wife had had the assistance of another woman in getting ready for her journey and that this woman was her own maid who had been with her for a long time, and had always given evidence of an especial attachment for her. Asking about this girl's height and general appearance (for the possibility of a substitution was already in my mind), I found that she was of slight figure and good carriage, and that her age was not far removed from that of her young mistress. This made the substitution I have mentioned feasible, and when I was told that she was seen taking her hat and bonnet into the bride's room, and, though not expected to leave till the next morning, had slid away from the house by the basement door at the same moment her mistress appeared on the front steps, my suspicions became so confirmed that I asked how this girl looked, in the hope that you would be able to recognize her, through the description, as the woman you had seen sitting in Reception-room No. 3. But to my surprise, Mrs. Fulton had what was better than any description, the girl's picture. This has simplified matters very much. By it you have been able to identify the woman who attempted to mislead you in the reception-room, and I the person who rode here with you from Mr. Fulton's house. Wasn't she dressed in brown? Didn't you notice a similarity in her appearance to that of the very lady you were then seeking?"

"I did not observe. Her face was all I saw. She was looking directly at me as I stepped into the room."

"I see. She had taken off her veil and trusted to your attention being caught by her strange features,—as it was. But that dress was brown; I'm sure of it. She was the very woman. Otherwise the mystery is impenetrable. A deep plot, Mr. Ransom; one that should prove to you that Mrs. Ransom's motive in leaving you was of a very serious character. Do you wish that motive probed to the bottom? I cannot do it without publicity. Are you willing to incur that publicity?"

"I must." Mr. Ransom had risen in great excitement. "Nothing can hide the fact that my bride left me on our wedding-day. It only remains now to show that she did it under an influence which robbed her of her own will; an influence from which she shrank even while succumbing to it. I can show her no greater kindness, and I am not afraid of the result. I have perfect confidence in her integrity"—he hesitated, then added with strong conviction—"and in her love."

The detective hid his surprise. He could not understand this confidence. But then he knew nothing of the memories which lay back of it. Not to him could this grievously humiliated and disappointed man reveal the secrets of a courtship which had fixed his heart on this one woman, and aroused in him such trust that even this uncalled-for outrage to his pride and affection had not

been able to shake it. Such secrets are sacred; but the reflection of his trust was strong on his face as he repeated:

"Perfect confidence, Mr. Gerridge. Whatever may have drawn Mrs. Ransom from my side, it was not lack of affection, or any doubt of my sincerity or undivided attachment to herself."

The detective may not have been entirely convinced on the first point, but he was discretion itself, and responded quite cheerfully with an emphatic:

"Very well. You still want me to find her. I will do my best, sir; but first, cannot you help me with a suggestion or two?"

"I?"

"There must be some clue to so sudden a freak on the part of a young and beautiful woman, who, I have taken pains to learn, has not only a clean record but a reputation for good sense. The Fultons cannot supply it. She has lived a seemingly open and happy life in their house, and the mystery is as great to them as to you. But *you*, as her lover and now her husband, must have been favored with confidences not given to others. Cannot you recall one likely to put us on the right track? Some fact prior to the events of to-day, I mean; some fact connected with her past life; before she went to live with the Fultons?"

"No. Yet let me think; let me think." Mr. Ransom dropped his face into his hands and sat for a moment silent. When he looked up again, the detective perceived that the affair was hopeless so far as he was concerned. "No," he repeated, this time with unmistakable emphasis, "she has always appeared buoyant and untrammelled. But then I have only known her six months."

"Tell me her history so far as you know it. What do you know of her life previous to your meeting her?"

"It was a very simple one. She had a country bringing up, having been born in a small village in Connecticut. She was one of three children and the only one who has survived; her sister, who was her twin, died when she was a small child, and a brother some five years ago. Her fortune was willed her, as I have already told you, by a great-uncle. It is entirely in her own hands. Left an orphan early, she lived first with her brother; then when he died, with one relative after another, till lastly she settled down with the Fultons. I know of no secret in her life, no entanglement, not even of any prior engagements. Yet that man with the twisted jaw was not unknown to her, and if he is a relative, as she said, you should have no difficulty in locating him."

"I have a man on his track," Gerridge replied. "And one on the girl's too; I mean, of course, Bela Burton's. They will report here up to twelve o'clock to-night. It is now half-past eleven. We should hear from one or the other soon."

"And my wife?"

"A description of the clothing she wore has gone out. We may hear from it. But I doubt if we do to-night unless she has rejoined her maid or the man with a scar. Somehow I think she will join the girl. But it's hard to tell yet."

Mr. Ransom could hardly control his impatience. "And I must sit helpless here!" he exclaimed. "I who have so much at stake!"

The detective evidently thought the occasion called for whatever comfort it was in his power to bestow.

"Yes," said he. "For it is here she will seek you if she takes a notion to return. But woman is an uncertain quantity," he dryly added.

At that moment the telephone bell rang. Mr. Ransom leaped to answer; but the call was only an anxious one from the Fultons, who wanted to know what news. He answered as best he could, and was recrossing disconsolately to his chair when voices rose in the hall, and a man was ushered in, whom Gerridge immediately introduced as Mr. Sims.

A runner—and with news! Mr. Ransom, summoning up his courage, waited for the inevitable question and reply. They came quickly enough.

"What have you got? Have you found the man?"

"Yes. And the lady's been to see him; that is, if the description of her togs was correct."

"He means Mrs. Ransom," explained Gerridge. Then, as he marked his client's struggle for composure, he quietly asked, "A lady in a dark green suit with yellowish furs and a blue veil over her hat?"

"That's the ticket!"

"The clothes worn by the woman who went out of the basement door, Mr. Ransom."

The latter turned sharply aside. The shame of the thing was becoming intolerable.

"And this woman wearing those yellow furs and the blue veil visited the man of the broken jaw?" inquired Gerridge.

"Yes, sir."

"When?"

"About six this afternoon."

"And where?"

"At the hotel St. Denis where I have since tracked him."

"How long did she stay?"

"About an hour."

"In the parlor or—"

"In the parlor. They had a great deal to say. More than one noticed them, but no one heard anything. They talked very low but they meant business."

"Where is this man now?"

"At the same place. He has engaged a room there."

"The man with the twisted jaw?"

"Yes."

"Under what name?"

"Hugh Porter."

"Ah, it was Hazen only five hours ago," muttered Ransom. "Porter, did you say? I'll have a talk with this Porter at once."

"I think not to-night," put in the detective, with the mingled authority and deference natural to one of his kind. "To-morrow, perhaps, but to-night it would only provoke scandal."

This was certainly true, but Mr. Ransom was not an easy man to dominate.

"I must see him before I sleep," he insisted. "A single word may solve this mystery. He has the word. I'd be a fool to let the night go by—Ah! what's that?"

The telephone bell had rung again. A message from the office this time. A note had just been handed in for Mr. Ransom; should they send it up?

Gerridge was at the 'phone.

"Instantly," he shouted down, "and be sure you hold the messenger. It may be from your lady," he remarked to Mr. Ransom. "Stranger things than that have happened."

Mr. Ransom reeled to the door, opened it and stood waiting. The two detectives exchanged glances. What might not that note contain!

Mr. Ransom opened it in the hall. When he came back into the room, his hand was shaking and his face looked drawn and pale. But he showed no further disposition to go out. Instead, he sank into a chair, with a motion of dismissal to the two detectives.

"Question the boy who brought this," said he. "It is from Mrs. Ransom; written, as you see, at the St. Denis. She bids me farewell for a time, but does not favor me with any explanations. She cannot do differently, she says, and asks me to trust her and wait. Not very encouraging to sleep on; but it's something. She has not entirely forsaken me."

Gerridge with a shrug turned sharply towards the door. "I take it that you wouldn't object to knowing all the messenger can tell you?"

"No, no. Question him. Find out whether she gave this to him with her own hand."

Gerridge obeyed this injunction, but was told in reply that the note had been given him to deliver by a clerk in the hotel lobby. He could tell nothing about the lady.

This was unsatisfactory enough; but the man who had influenced her to this step had been placed under surveillance. To-morrow they would question him; the mystery was not without a promise of solution. So Gerridge felt; but not Mr. Ransom; for at the end of the lines whose purport he had just communicated to the detective were these few, significant words:

"Make no move to find me. If you love me well enough to wait in silence for developments, happiness may yet be ours."

CHAPTER IV

MR. RANSOM WAITS

Gerridge rose early, primed, as he said to himself, for business. But to his great disappointment he found Mr. Ransom in a frame of mind which precluded action. Indeed, that gentleman looked greatly changed. He not only gave evidence of a sleepless night but showed none of the spirit of the previous evening, and hesitated quite painfully when Gerridge asked him if he did not intend to go ahead with the interview they had promised themselves.

"That's as it may be," was the hesitating reply. "I hardly think that I shall visit the man you mean this morning. He interests me and I hope that none of his movements will escape you. But I'm not ready to talk to him. I prefer to wait a little; to give my wife a chance. I should feel better, and have less to forget."

"Just as you say," returned the detective stiffly. "He's under our thumb at present, I can't tell when he may wriggle out."

"Not while your eye's on him. And your eye won't leave him as long as you have confidence in the reward I've promised you."

"Perhaps not; but you take the life out of me. Last night you were too hot; this morning you are too cold. But it's not for me to complain. You know where to find me when you want me." And without more ado the detective went out.

Mr. Ransom remained alone and in no enviable frame of mind. He was distrustful of himself, distrustful of the man who had made all this trouble, and distrustful of her, though he would not acknowledge it. Every baser instinct in him drove him to the meeting he declined. To see the man—to force from him the truth, seemed the only rational thing to do. But the final words of his wife's letter stood in his way. She had advised patience. If patience would clear the situation and bring him the result he so ardently desired, then he would be patient—that is, for a day; he did not promise to wait longer. Yes, he would give her a day. That was time enough for a man suffering on the rack of such an intolerable suspense—one day.

But even that day did not pass without breaks in his mood and more than one walk in the direction of the St. Denis Hotel. If Gerridge's eye was on him as well as on the special object of his surveillance, he must have smiled, more than once, at the restless flittings of his client about the forbidden spot. In the evening it was the same, but the next morning he remained steadfastly at his hotel. He had laid out his future course in these words: "I will extend the time to three days; then if I do not hear from her I will get that wry-necked fellow by the throat and twist an explanation from him." But the three days passed and he found the situation unchanged. Then he set as his limit the end of the week, but before the full time had elapsed he was advised by Gerridge that he himself was being followed in his turn by a couple of private detectives; and while still under the agitation of this discovery was further disconcerted by having the following communication thrust into his hand in the open street by a young woman who succeeded in losing herself in the crowd before he had got so much as a good look at her.

You can judge of his amazement as he read the few lines it contained.

Read the papers to-night and forget the stranger at the St. Denis.

That was all. But the writing was hers. The hours passed slowly till the papers were cried in the street. What Mr. Ransom read in them increased his astonishment, I might say his anxiety. It was a paragraph about his wife, an almost incredible one, running thus:

A strange explanation is given of the disappearance of Mrs. Roger Ransom on her wedding-day. As our readers will remember, she accompanied her husband to the hotel, but managed to slip away and leave the house while he still stood at the

desk. This act, for which nothing in her previous conduct has in any way prepared her friends, is now said to have been due to the shock of hearing, some time during her wedding-day, that a sister whom she had supposed dead was really alive and in circumstances of almost degrading poverty. As this sister had been her own twin the effect upon her mind was very serious. To find and rescue this sister she left her newly made husband in the surreptitious manner already recorded in the papers. That she is not fully herself is shown by her continued secrecy as to her whereabouts. All that she has been willing to admit to the two persons she has so far taken into her confidence—her husband and the agent who conducts her affairs—is that she has found her sister and cannot leave her. Why, she does not state. The case is certainly a curious one and Mr. Ransom has the sympathy of all his friends.

Confused, and in a state of mind bordering on frenzy, Mr. Ransom returned to the hotel and sought refuge in his own room. He put no confidence in what he had just read; he regarded it as a newspaper story and a great fake; but she had bid him read it, and this fact in itself was very disturbing. For how could she have known about it if she had not been its author, and if she was its author, what purpose had she expected it to serve?

He was still debating this question when he reached his own room. On the floor, a little way from the sill, lay a letter. It had been thrust under the door during his absence. Lifting it in some trepidation, he cast a glance at its inscription and sank staggering into the nearest chair, asking himself if he had the courage to open and read it. For the handwriting, like that of the note handed him in the street, was Georgian's, and he felt himself in a maze concerning her which made everything in her connection seem dreamlike and unreal. It was not long, however, before he had mastered its contents. They were strange enough, as this transcription of them will show.

You have seen what has happened to me, but you cannot understand how I feel. *She looks exactly like me.* It is that which makes the world eddy about me. I cannot get used to it. It is like seeing my own reflected image step from the mirror and walk about doing things. Two of us, Roger, two! If you saw her you would call her Georgian. And she says that she knows *you*, admires *you!* *and she says it in my voice!* I try to shut my ears, but I hear her saying it even when her lips do not move. She is as ignorant as she is afflicted and I cannot leave her. She cannot hear a sound, though she can talk well enough about what is going on in her own mind, and she is so wayward and uncertain of temper, owing to her ignorance and her difficulty in understanding me, that I don't know what she would do if once let out of my sight. I love you—I love you—but I must stay right here.

Your affectionate and most unhappy
Georgian.

The sheet with its tear-stained lines fell from his grasp. Then he caught it up again and looked carefully at the signature. It was his wife's without doubt. Then he studied the rest of the writing and compared it with that of the note which had been thrust into his hands earlier in the day. There was no difference between them except that there were evidences of faltering in the latter, not noticeable in the earlier communication. As he noted these tokens of weakness or suffering, he caught up the telephone receiver in good earnest and called out Gerridge's number. When the detective answered, he shouted back:

"Have you read the evening papers? If you haven't, do so at once; then come directly to me. It's business now and no mistake; and our first visit shall be on the fellow at the St. Denis."

CHAPTER V IN CORRIDOR AND IN ROOM

Three quarters of an hour later Mr. Ransom and Gerridge stood in close conference before the last mentioned hotel. The former was peremptory in what he had to say.

"I haven't a particle of confidence in this newspaper story," he declared. "I haven't much confidence in her letter. It is this man who is working us. He has a hold on her and has given her this cock and bull story to tell. A sister! A twin sister come to light after fifteen years of supposed burial! I find the circumstance entirely too romantic. Nor does an explanation of this nature fit the conditions. She was happy before she saw *him* in the church. He isn't her twin sister. I tell you the game is a deep one and she is the sufferer. Her letters betray more than a disturbed mind; they betray a disturbed brain. That man is the cause and I mean to wring his secret from him. You are sure of his being still in the house?"

"He was early this morning. He has lived a very quiet life these last few days, the life of one waiting. He has not even had visitors, after that one interview he held with your wife. I have kept careful watch on him. Though a suspected character, he has done nothing suspicious while I've had him under my eye."

"That's all right and I thank you, Gerridge; but it doesn't shake my opinion as to his being the moving power in this fraud. For fraud it is and no mistake. Of that I am fully convinced. Shall we go up? I want to surprise him in his own room where he cannot slip away or back out."

"Leave that business to me; I'll manage it. If you want to see him in his room, you shall."

But this time the detective counted without his host. Mr. Porter was not in his room but in one of the halls. They encountered him as they left the elevator. He was standing reading a newspaper. The disfigured jaw could not be mistaken. They stopped where they were and looked at him.

He was intent, absorbed. As they watched, they saw his hands close convulsively on the sheet he was holding, while his lips muttered some words that made the detective look hard at his companion.

"Did you hear?" he cautiously inquired, as Mr. Ransom stood hesitating, not knowing whether to address the man or not.

"No; what did he say? Do you suppose he is reading that paragraph?"

"I haven't a doubt of it; and his words were, 'Here's a damned lie!'—very much like your own, sir."

Mr. Ransom drew the detective a few steps down the corridor.

"He said that?"

"Yes, I heard him distinctly."

"Then my theory is all wrong. This man didn't provide her with this imaginary twin sister."

"Evidently not."

"And is as surprised as we are."

"And about as much put out. Look at him! Nothing yellow there! We shall have to go easy with him."

Mr. Ransom looked and felt a recoil of more than ordinary dislike for the man. The latter had put the paper in his pocket and was coming their way. His face, once possibly handsome, for his eyes and forehead were conspicuously fine, showed a distortion quite apart from that given by his physical disfigurement. He was not simply angry but in a mental and moral rage, and it made him more than hideous; it made him appalling. Yet he said nothing and moved along very quietly, making, to all appearance, for his room. Would he notice them as he went by? It did not seem likely. Instinctively they had stepped to one side, and Mr. Ransom's face was in the shadow. To both it had seemed better not to accost him while he was in this mood. They would see him later.

But this was not to be. Some instinct made him turn, and Mr. Ransom, recognizing his opportunity, stepped forward and addressed him by the name under which he had introduced himself at the reception; that of his wife's family, Hazen.

The effect was startling. Instead of increasing his anger, as the detective had naturally expected, it appeared to have the contrary effect, for every vestige of passion immediately disappeared from his face, leaving only its natural disfigurement to plead against him. He approached them, and Ransom, at least, was conscious of a revulsion of feeling in his favor, there was such restraint and yet such undoubted power in his strange and peculiar personality.

"You know me?" said he, darting a keen and comprehensive look from one to the other.

"We should like a few words with you," ventured Gerridge. "This gentleman thinks you can give him very valuable information about a person he is greatly interested in."

"He is mistaken." The words came quick and decisive in a not unmelodious voice. "I am a stranger in New York; a stranger in this country. I have few, if any, acquaintances."

"You have *one*."

It was now Mr. Ransom's turn.

"A man with no acquaintances does not attend weddings; certainly not wedding receptions. I have seen you at one, my own. Do you not recognize me, Mr. Hazen?"

A twitch of surprise, not even Ransom could call it alarm, drew his mouth still further towards his ear; but his manner hardly altered and it was in the same affable tone that he replied:

"You must pardon my short-sightedness. I did not recognize you, Mr. Ransom."

"Did not want to," muttered Gerridge, satisfied in his own mind that this man was only deterred by his marked and unmistakable physiognomy from denying the acquaintanceship just advanced.

"Your congratulations did not produce the desired effect," continued Mr. Ransom. "My happiness was short lived. Perhaps you knew its uncertain tenure when you wished me joy. I remember that your tone lacked sincerity."

It was a direct attack. Whether a wise one or not remained to be seen. Gerridge watched the unfolding drama with interest.

"I have reason to think," proceeded Mr. Ransom, "that the unhappy termination of that day's felicities were in a measure due to you. You seem to know my bride very well; much too well for her happiness or mine."

"We will argue that question in my room," was the unmoved reply. "The open hall is quite unsuited to a conversation of this nature. Now," said he, turning upon them when they were in the privacy of his small but not uncomfortable apartment, "you will be kind enough to repeat what you just said. I wish to thoroughly understand you."

"You have the right," returned Mr. Ransom, controlling himself under the detective's eye. "I said that your presence at this wedding seemed to disturb my wife, which fact, considering the after occurrences of the day, strikes me as important enough for discussion. Are you willing to discuss it affably and fairly?"

"May I ask who your companion is?" inquired the other, with a slight inclination towards Gerridge.

"A friend; one who is in my confidence."

"Then I will answer you without any further hesitation. My presence may have disturbed your wife, it very likely did, but I was not to blame for that. No man is to blame for the bad effects of an unfortunate accident."

"Oh, I don't mean that," Mr. Ransom hastened to protest. "The cause of her very evident agitation was not personal. It had a deeper root than that. It led, or so I believe, to her flight from a love she cherished, at a moment when our mutual life seemed about to begin."

The impassive, I might almost say set features of this man of violent passions but remarkable self-restraint failed to relax or give any token of the feelings with which he listened to this attack.

"Then the news given of your wife in the papers to-night is false," was his quiet retort. "It professes to give a distinct, if somewhat fantastic, reason for her flight. A reason totally different from the one you suggest."

"A reason you don't believe in?"

"Certainly not. It is too bizarre."

"I share your incredulity. That is why I seek the truth from you rather than from the columns of a newspaper. And you owe me this truth. You have broken up my life."

"I? That's a strange accusation you make, Mr. Ransom."

"Possibly. But it's one which strikes hard on your conscience, for all that. This is evident enough even to a stranger like myself. I am convinced that if you had not come into her life she would have been at my side to-day. Now, who are you? She told me you were a relative."

"She told you the truth; I am. Her nearest relative. The story in the paper has a certain amount of truth in it. Her brother, not her sister, has come back from the grave. I am that brother. She was once devoted to me."

"You are—"

"Yes. Oh, there'll be no difficulty in my proving this relationship. I have evidence upon evidence of the fact right in this room with me; evidence much more convincing and far less disputable than this surprising twin can bring forward if *her* identity is questioned. Georgian had a twin sister, but she was buried years ago. I was never buried. I simply did not return from a well-known and dangerous voyage. The struggle I had for life—you cannot want the details now—has left its indelible impress in the scar which has turned me from a personable man into what some people might call a monstrosity. And it is this scar which has kept me so long from home and country. It has taken me four years to make up my mind to face again my family and friends. And now that I have, I find that it would have been better for us all if I had stayed away. Georgian saw me and her mind wavered. In no other way can I account for her wild behavior since that hour. That is all I have to say, sir. I think I am almost as much an object of pity as yourself."

And for a moment he appeared to be so, not only to Gerridge, but to Mr. Ransom himself. Then something in the man—his unnatural coldness, the purpose which made itself felt through all his self-restraint—reawakened Mr. Ransom's distrust and led him to say:

"Your complaint is natural. If you are Mrs. Ransom's brother, there should be sympathy between us and not antagonism. But I feel only antagonism. Why is this?"

A shrug, followed by an odd smile.

"You should be able to account for that on very reasonable grounds," said he. "I do not expect much mercy from strangers. It is hard to make your good intentions felt through such a distorted medium as my expression has now become."

"Mrs. Ransom has been here," Ransom suddenly launched forth. "Within two hours of your encounter under Mr. Fulton's roof, she was talking with you in this hotel. I have proof positive of that, sir."

"I have no wish to deny the fact," was the steady answer. "She did come here and we had a talk; it was necessary; I wanted money."

The last phrase was uttered with such grim determination that the exclamation which had risen to Mr. Ransom's lips died in a conflict of feeling which forbade any rejoinder that savored of sarcasm. Hazen, however, must have noted his first look, for he added with an air of haughty apology:

"I repeat that we were once very fond of each other."

Ransom felt his perplexities growing with every moment he talked with this man. He remembered the money which both he and Gerridge had seen in her bag,—an amount too large for her to have retained very much on her person,—and following the instinct of the moment, he remarked:

"Mrs. Ransom is not the woman to hesitate when a person she loves makes an appeal for money. She handed you immediately a large sum, I have no doubt."

"She wrote me out a check," was the simple but cold answer.

Mr. Ransom felt the failure of his attempt and stole a glance at Gerridge.

The doubtful smile he received was not very encouraging. The same thought had evidently struck both. The money in the bag was a blind—she had carried her check-book with her and so could draw on her account for whatever she wished. But under what name? Her maiden one or his? Ransom determined to find out.

"I do not begrudge you the money," said he, "but Mrs. Ransom's signature had changed a few hours previous to her making out this check. Did she remember this?"

"She signed her married name promising to notify the bank at once."

"And you cashed the check?"

"No, sir; I am not in such immediate need of money as that. I have it still, but I shall endeavor to cash it to-morrow. Some question may come up as to her sanity, and I do not choose to lose the only money she has ever been in a position to give me."

"Mr. Hazen, you harp on the irresponsible condition of her mind. Did you see any tokens of this in the interview you had together?"

"No; she seemed sane enough then; a little shocked and troubled, but quite sane."

"You knew that she had stolen away from me—that she had resorted to a most unworthy subterfuge in order to hold this conversation with you?"

"No; I had asked her to come, and on that very afternoon if possible, but I never knew what means she took for doing so; I didn't ask and she didn't say."

"But she talked of her marriage? She must have said something about an event which is usually considered the greatest in a woman's life."

"Yes, she spoke of it."

"And of me?"

"Yes, she spoke of you."

"And in what terms? I cannot refrain from asking you, Mr. Hazen, I am in such ignorance as to her real attitude towards me; her conduct is so mysterious; the reasons she gives for it so puerile."

"She said nothing against you or her marriage. She mentioned both, but not in a manner that would add to your or my knowledge of her intentions. My sister disappointed me, sir. She was much less open than I wished. All that I could make out of her manner and conversation was the overpowering shock she felt at seeing me again and seeing me so changed. She didn't even tell me when and where we might meet again. When she left, she was as much lost to me as she was to you, and I am no less interested in finding her than you are yourself. I had no idea she did not mean to return to you when she went away from this hotel."

Mr. Ransom sprang upright in an agitation the other may have shared, but of which he gave no token.

"Do you mean to say," he asked, "that you cannot tell me where the woman you call your sister is now?"

"No more than you can give me the same necessary information in regard to your wife. I am waiting like yourself to hear from her—and waiting with as little hope."

Had he seen Ransom's hand close convulsively over the pocket in which her few strange words to him were lying, that a slight tinge of sarcasm gave edge to the last four words?

"But this is not like my wife," protested Ransom, hesitating to accuse the other of falsehood, yet evidently doubting him from the bottom of his heart. "Why deceive us both? She was never a disingenuous woman."

"In childhood she had her incomprehensible moments," observed Hazen, with an ambiguous lift of his shoulders; then, as Ransom made an impatient move, added with steady composure: "I have candidly answered all your questions whether agreeable or otherwise, and the fact that I am as much shocked as yourself by these mad and totally incredible statements of hers about a newly recovered

sister should prove to you that she is not following any lead of mine in this dissemination of a bare-faced falsehood."

There was truth in this which both Mr. Ransom and Gerridge felt obliged to own. Yet they were not satisfied, even after Mr. Hazen, almost against Mr. Ransom's will, had established his claims to the relationship he professed, by various well-attested documents he had at hand. Instinct could not be juggled with, nor could Ransom help feeling that the mystery in which he found himself entangled had been deepened rather than dispelled by the confidences of this new brother-in-law.

"The maze is at its thickest," he remarked as he left a few minutes later with the perplexed Gerridge. "How shall I settle this new question? By what means and through whose aid can I gain an interview with my wife?"

CHAPTER VI THE LAWYER

The answer was an unexpectedly sensible one.

"Hunt up her man of business and see what he can do for you. She cannot get along without money; nor could that statement of hers have got into the papers without somebody's assistance. Since she did not get it from the fellow we have just left, she must have had it from the only other person she would dare confide in."

Ransom answered by immediately hailing a down-town car.

The interview which followed was certainly a remarkable one. At first Mr. Harper would say nothing, declaring that his relations with Mrs. Ransom were of a purely business and confidential nature. But by degrees, moved by the persuasive influence of Mr. Ransom's candor and his indubitable right to consideration, he allowed himself to admit that he had seen Mrs. Ransom during the last three days and that he had every reason to believe that there was a twin sister in the case and that all Mrs. Ransom's eccentric conduct was attributable to this fact and the overpowering sense of responsibility which it seemed to have brought to her—a result which would not appear strange to those who knew the sensitiveness of her nature and the delicate balance of her mind.

Mr. Ransom recalled the tenor of her strange letter on this subject, but was not convinced. He inquired of Mr. Harper if he had heard her say anything about the equally astounding fact of a returned brother, and when he found that this was mere jargon to Mr. Harper, he related what he knew of Hazen and left the lawyer to draw his own inferences.

The result was some show of embarrassment on the part of Mr. Harper. It was evident that in her consultations with him she had entirely left out all allusion to this brother. Either the man had advanced a false claim or else she was in an irresponsible condition of mind which made her see a sister where there was a brother.

Ransom made some remark indicative of his appreciation of the dilemma in which they found themselves, but was quickly silenced by the other's emphatic assertion:

"I have seen the girl; she was with Mrs. Ransom the day she came here. She sat in the adjoining room while we talked over her case in this one."

"You saw her—saw her face?"

"No, not her face; she was too heavily veiled for that. Mrs. Ransom explained why. They were too absurdly alike, she said. It awoke comment and it gave her the creeps. But their figures were identical though their dresses were different."

"So! there *is* some one then; the girl is not absolutely a myth."

"Far from it. Nor is the will which Mrs. Ransom has asked me to draw up for her a myth."

"Her will! she has asked you to draw up her will!"

"Yes. That was the object of her visit. She had entered the married state, she said, and wished to make a legal disposition of her property before she returned to you. She was very nervous when she said this; very nervous through all the interview. There was nothing else for me to do but comply."

"And you have drawn up this will?"

"According to her instructions, yes."

"But she has not signed it?"

"Not yet."

"But she intends to?"

"Certainly."

"Then you will see her again?"

"Naturally."

"*Is the time set?*"

The lawyer rose to his feet. He understood the hint implied and for an instant appeared to waver. There was something very winsome about Roger Ransom; some attribute or expression which appealed especially to men.

"I wish I might help you out of your difficulty," said he. "But a client's wishes are paramount. Mrs. Ransom desired secrecy. She had every right to demand it of me."

Mr. Ransom's face fell. Hope had flashed upon him only to disappear again. The lawyer eyed him out of the corner of his eye, his mouth working slightly as he walked to and fro between his desk and the door.

"Mrs. Ransom will not always feel herself hampered by a sister, or, if you prefer it, a brother who has so inconveniently come back from the dead. You will have the pleasure of her society some day. There is no doubt about her affection for you."

"But that isn't it," exclaimed the now thoroughly discouraged husband. "I am afraid for her reason, afraid for her life. There is something decidedly wrong somewhere. Don't you see that I must have an immediate interview with her if only to satisfy myself that she aggravates her own danger? Why should she make a will in this underhanded way? Does she fear opposition from me? I have a fortune equal to her own. It is something else she dreads. What? I feel that I ought to know if only to protect her against herself. I would even promise not to show myself or to speak."

"I am sorry to have to say good afternoon, Mr. Ransom. Have you any commands that I can execute for you?"

"None but to give her my love. Tell her there is not a more unhappy man in New York; you may add that I trust her affection."

The lawyer bowed. Mr. Ransom and Gerridge withdrew. At the foot of the stairs they were stopped by the shout of a small boy behind them.

"Say, mister, did you drop something?" he called down, coming meanwhile as rapidly after them as the steepness of the flight allowed. "Mr. Harper says, he found this where you gentlemen were sitting."

Mr. Ransom, somewhat startled, took the small paper offered him. It was none of his property but he held to it just the same. In the middle of a torn bit of paper he had read these words written in his own wife's hand:

Hunter's Tavern,

Sitford, Connecticut

At 9 o'clock April the 15th

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, "no one will ever hear me say again that lawyers are devoid of heart?"

CHAPTER VII

RAIN

Mr. Ransom had never heard of Sitford, but upon inquiry learned that it was a small manufacturing town some ten miles from the direct route of travel, to which it was only connected by a stage-coach running once a day, late in the afternoon.

What a spot for a meeting of this kind! Why chosen by her? Why submitted to by this busy New York lawyer? Was this another mystery; or had he misinterpreted Mr. Harper's purpose in passing over to him the address of this small town? He preferred to think the former. He could hardly contemplate now the prospect of failing to see her again which must follow any mistake as to this being the place agreed upon for the signing of her will.

Meantime he had said nothing to Gerridge. This was a hope too personal to confide in a man of his position. He would go to Sitford and endeavor to catch a glimpse of his wife there. If successful, the whole temper of his mind might change towards the situation, if not toward her. He would at least have the satisfaction of seeing her. The detective had enough to do in New York.

April the fifteenth fell on Tuesday. He was not minded to wait so long but took the boat on Monday afternoon. This landed him some time before daylight at the time-worn village from which the coach ran to Sitford. A railway connected this village with New York, necessitating no worse inconvenience than crossing the river on a squat, old-fashioned ferry boat; but he calculated that both the lawyer and Mrs. Ransom would make use of this, and felt the risk would be less for him if he chose the slower and less convenient route.

He had given his name on the boat as Roger Johnston, which was true so far as it went, and he signed this same name at the hotel where he put up till morning. The place was an entirely unknown one to him and he was unknown to it. Both fortuitous facts, he thought, in the light of his own perplexity as to the position in which he really stood towards this mysterious wife of his.

The coach, as I have said, ran late in the afternoon. This was to accommodate the passengers who came by rail. But Mr. Ransom had not planned to go by coach. That would be to risk a premature encounter with his wife, or at least with the lawyer. He preferred to hire a team, and be driven there by some indifferent livery-stable man. Neither prospect was pleasing. It had been raining all night, and bade fair to rain all day. The river was clouded with mist; the hills, which are the glory of the place, were obliterated from the landscape, and the road—he had never seen such a road, all little pools and mud.

However, there was no help for it. The journey must be made, and seeing a livery-stable sign across the road, lost no time in securing the conveyance he needed. At nine o'clock he started out.

The rain drove so fiercely from the northwest,—the very direction in which they were traveling,—that enjoyment of the scenery was impossible. Nor could any pleasure be got out of conversation with the man who drove him. Rain, rain, that was all; and the splash of mud over the wheels which turned all too slowly for his comfort. And there were to be ten miles of this. Naturally he turned to his thoughts and they were all of her.

Why had he not known her better before linking his fate to hers? Why had he never encouraged her to talk to him more about herself and her early life? Had he but done so, he might now have some clew to the mystery devouring him. He might know why so rich and independent a woman had chosen this remote town on an inaccessible road, for the completion of an act which was in itself a mystery. Why could not the will have been signed in New York? But he was not inquisitive in those days. He had taken her for what she seemed—an untrammelled, gay-hearted girl, ready to love and be his happy wife and lifelong companion; and he had been contented to keep all conversation along natural lines and do no probing. And now,—this brother whom all had thought dead, come to life with menace in his acts and conversation! Also a sister,—but this sister he had no belief in. The

coincidence was too startlingly out of nature for him to accept a brother and a sister too. A brother or a sister; but not both. Not even Mr. Harper's assurances should influence his credulity to this extent. "Money! money is at the bottom of it all," was his final decision. "She knows it and is making her will, as a possible protection. But why come here?"

Thus every reflection ended.

Suddenly a vanished, half-forgotten memory came back. It brought a gleam of light into the darkness which had hitherto enveloped the whole matter. She had once spoken to him of her early life. She had mentioned a place where she used to play as a child; had mentioned it lovingly, longingly. There were hills, she had said; hills all around. And woods full of chestnut-trees, safe woods where she could wander at will. And the roads—how she loved to walk the roads. No automobiles then, not even bicycles. One could go miles without meeting man or horse. Sometimes a heavily-laden cart would go by drawn by a long string of oxen; but they were picturesque and added to the charm. Oxen were necessary where there was no railroad.

As he repeated these words to himself, he looked up. Through the downpour his eyes could catch a glimpse of the road before him, winding up a long hillside. Down this road was approaching a dozen yoke of oxen dragging a wagon piled with bales of some sort of merchandise. One question in his mind was answered. This spot was not an unknown one to her. It was connected with her childhood days. There was reason back of her choice of it as a place of meeting between her and her lawyer, or if not reason, association, and that of the tenderest kind. He felt himself relieved of the extreme weight of his oppression and ventured upon asking a question or two about Sitford, which he took pains to say he was visiting for the first time.

The information he obtained was but meager, but he did learn that there was a very fair tavern there and that the manufactures of the place were sufficient to account for a stranger's visit. The articles made were mostly novelties.

This knowledge he meant to turn to account, but changed his mind when they finally splashed into town and stopped before the tavern which had been so highly recommended by his driver. The house, dripping though it was from every eave, had such a romantic air that he thought he could venture to cite other reasons for his stay there than the prosaic one of business. That is, if the landlady should give any evidence of being at all in accord with her quaint home and picturesque surroundings.

She showed herself and he at once gave her credit for being all he could wish in the way of credulity and good-nature, and meeting her with the smile which had done good execution in its day, he asked if she had a room for a writer who was finishing a book, and who only asked for quiet and regular meals before his own cosy fire. This to rouse her imagination and make her amenable to his wishes for secrecy.

She was a simple soul and fell easily into the trap. In half an hour Mr. Ransom was ensconced in a pleasant room over the porch, a room which he soon learned possessed many advantages. For it not only overlooked the main entrance, but was so placed as to command a view of all the rooms on his hall. In two of those rooms he bade fair to be greatly interested, Mrs. Deo having remarked that they were being prepared for a lady who was coming that night. As he had no doubt who this lady was, he encouraged the good woman to talk, and presently had the satisfaction of hearing her say that she was very happy over this lady's coming, as she was a Sitford girl, one of the old family of Hazens, and though married now and very rich was much loved by every one in town because she had never forgotten Sitford or Sitford people.

She was coming! He had made no mistake. And this was the place of her birth, just as he had decided when he saw that long line of oxen! He realized how fortunate he was, or rather how indebted he was to Mr. Harper, since in this place only could he hope to gain satisfaction on the mooted point raised by that same gentleman. If she had been born here, so had her twin sister; so had the brother whose claims lay counter to that sister's. Both must have been known to these people, their persons, their history and the circumstances of their supposed deaths. The clues thus afforded must prove

invaluable to him. From them he must soon be able to ascertain in which story to place faith and which claimant to believe. He might have interrogated his hostess, but feared to show his interest in the supposed stranger. He preferred to wait a few hours and gather his facts from other lips.

Meantime it rained.

CHAPTER VIII

ELIMINATION

At about three o'clock in the afternoon Mr. Ransom left his room. He had been careful almost from his first arrival to sit with his door ajar. He had, therefore, only to give it a slight push and walk out when he heard the bustle of preparation going on in the two rooms in whose future occupancy he was so vitally interested. A maid stood in the hall. A man within was pushing about furniture. The landlady was giving orders. His course down-stairs did not lead him so far as those rooms, so he called out pleasantly:

"I have written till my head aches, Mrs. Deo. I must venture out notwithstanding the rain. In which direction shall I find the best walking?"

She came to him all eagerness and smiles. "It's all bad, such a day," said she, "but it's muddiest down by the factories. You had better climb the hill."

"Where the cemetery is?" he asked.

"Yes; do you object to cemeteries? Ours is thought to be very interesting. We have stones there whose inscriptions are a hundred and fifty years old. But it's a bad day to walk amongst graves. Perhaps you had better go east. I'm sorry we should have such a storm on your first day. Must you go out?"

He forced a suffering look into his eyes, and insisting that nothing but outdoor air would help him when he had a headache, hastened down-stairs and so out. A blinding gust seized him as he faced the hill, but he drew down his umbrella and hurried on. He had a purpose in following her suggestion as to a walk in this direction. Dark as the grasses were, he meant to search the cemetery for the graves of the Hazens and see what he could learn from them.

He met three persons on his way, all of whom turned to look at him. This was in the village. On the hillside he met nobody. Wind and rain and mud were all; desolation in the prospect and all but desolation in his heart. At the brow he first caught sight of the broken stone wall which separated the old burying place from the road. There lay his path. Happily he could tread it unnoticed and unwatched. There was no one within sight, high or low.

He spent a half hour among the tombs before he struck the name he was looking for. Another ten minutes before he found those of his wife's family. Then he had his reward. On a low brown shaft he read the names of father and mother, and beneath them the following lines:

Sacred to the memory of

Anitra

Died June 7, 1885

Aged 6 years and one day

Of such is the Kingdom of heaven

The twin! Georgian was mad. This record showed that her little sister lay here. Anitra,—yes, that was the name of her other half. He remembered it well. Georgian had mentioned it to him more than once. And this child, this Anitra, had been buried here for fifteen years.

Deeply indignant at his wife's duplicity, he took a look at the opposite side of the shaft where still another surprise awaited him. Here was the record of the brother; the brother he had so lately talked to and who had seemingly proven his claim to the name he now read:

Alfred Francesco

only son of

Georgian Toritti afterwards Georgian Hazen

Lost at sea February, 1895

Aged twenty-five years

An odd inscription opening up conjectures of the most curious and interesting nature. But it was not this fact which struck him at the time, it was the possibility underlying the simple statement, Lost at sea. This, as the wry-necked man had said, admitted of a possible resurrection. Here was no body. A mound showed where Anitra had been laid away; a little mound surmounted by a headstone carved with her name. But only these few words gave evidence of the young man's death, and inscriptions of this nature are sometimes false.

The conclusion was obvious. It was the brother and not the sister who had reappeared. Georgian was not only playing him false but deceiving the general public. In fact, knowingly or unknowingly, she was perpetrating a great fraud. He was inclined to think unknowingly. He began to regard with less incredulity Hazen's declaration that the shock of her brother's return had unsettled her mind.

Distressed, but no longer the prey of distracting doubt, he again examined the inscription before him and this time noticed its peculiarities. *Alfred Francesco, only son of Georgian Toritti afterwards Georgian Hazen.* Afterwards! What was meant by that *afterwards*? That the woman had been married twice, and that this Alfred Francesco was the son of her first husband rather than of the one whose name he bore? It looked that way. There was a suggestion of Italian parentage in the Francesco which corresponded well with the decidedly Italian Toritti.

Perplexed and not altogether satisfied with his discoveries, he turned to leave the place when he found himself in the presence of a man carrying a kit of tools and wearing on his face a harsh and discontented expression. As this man was middle-aged and had no other protection from the rain than a rubber cape for his shoulders, the cause of his discontent was easy enough to imagine; though why he should come into this place with tools was more than Mr. Ransom could understand.

"Hello, stranger." It was this man who spoke. "Interested in the Hazen monument, eh? Well, I'll soon give you reason to be more interested yet. Do you see this inscription—On June 7, 1885; Anitra, aged six, and the rest of it? Well, I cut them letters there fifteen years ago. Now I'm to cut 'em out. The orders has just come. The youngster didn't die it seems, and I'm commanded to chip the fifteen-year-old lie out. What do you think of that? A sweet job for a day like this. Mor'n likely it'll put me under a stone myself. But folks won't listen to reason. It's been here fifteen years and seventeen days and now it must come out, rain or shine, before night-fall. 'Before the sun sets,' so the telegram ran. I'll be blessed but I'll ask a handsome penny for this job."

Mr. Ransom, controlling himself with difficulty, pointed to the little mound. "But the child seems to have been buried here," he said.

"Lord bless you, yes, a child was buried here, but we all knew years ago that it mightn't be Hazen's. The schoolhouse burned and a dozen children with it. One of the little bodies was given to Mr. Hazen for burial. He believed it was his Anitra, but a good while after, a bit of the dress she wore that day was found hanging to a bush where some gipsies had been. There were lots of folks who remembered that them gipsies had passed the schoolhouse a half hour before the fire, and they now say found the little girl hiding behind the wood-pile, and carried her off. No one ever knew; but her death was always thought doubtful by every one but Mr. and Mrs. Hazen. They stuck to the old idee and believed her to be buried under this mound where her name is."

"But one of the children was buried here," persisted Ransom. "You must have known the number of those lost and would surely be able to tell if one were missing, as must have been the case if the gipsies had carried off Anitra before the fire."

"I don't know about that," objected the stone-cutter. "There was, in those days, a little orphan girl, almost an idiot, who wandered about this town, staying now in one house and now in another as folks took compassion on her. She was never seen agin after that fire. If she was in the schoolhouse that day, as she sometimes was, the number would be made up. No one was left to tell us. It was an awful time, sir. The village hasn't got over it yet."

Mr. Ransom made some sympathetic rejoinder and withdrew towards the gateway, but soon came strolling back. The man had arranged his tools and was preparing to go to work.

"It seems as if the family was pretty well represented here," remarked Ransom. "Is it the girl herself,—Anitra, I believe you called her,—who has ordered this record of her death removed?"

"Oh, no, you don't know them Hazens. There's one of 'em who has quite a story; the twin of this Anitra. She lived to grow up and have a lot of money left her. If you lived in Sitford, or lived in New York, you'd know all about her; for her name's been in the papers a lot this week. She's the great lady who married and left her husband all in one day; and for what reason do you think? We know, because she don't keep no secrets from her old friends. *She's found this sister*, and it's her as has ordered me to chip away this name. She wants it done to-day, because she's coming here with this gal she's found. Folks say she ran across her in the street and knew her at once. Can you guess how?"

"From her name?"

"Lord, no; from what I hear, she hadn't any name. *From her looks!* She saw her own self when she looked at her."

"How interesting, how very interesting," stammered Mr. Ransom, feeling his newly won convictions shaken again. "Quite remarkable the whole story. And so is this inscription," he added, pointing to the words *Georgian Toritti*, etc. "Did the woman have two husbands, and was the Alfred Hazen, whose death at sea is commemorated here, the son of Toritti or of Hazen?"

"Of Toritti," grumbled the man, evidently displeased at the question. "A black-browed devil who it won't do to talk about here. Mrs. Hazen was only a slip of a gal when she married him, and as he didn't live but a couple o' months folks have sort o' forgiven her and forgotten him. To us Mrs. Hazen was always Mrs. Hazen; and Alf—well, he was just Alf Hazen too; a lad with too much good in him to perish in them murderous waters a thousand miles from home."

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