GREEN ANNA KATHARINE

THE FILIGREE BALL

Anna Green

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Green A.

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Anna Katharine Green
The Filigree Ball / Being a full and true account of the solution of the mystery concerning the Jeffrey-Moore affair

BOOK I
THE FORBIDDEN ROOM

I
"THE MOORE HOUSE? ARE YOU SPEAKING OF THE MOORE HOUSE?"

For a detective whose talents, had not been recognized at headquarters, I possessed an ambition which, fortunately for my standing with the lieutenant of the precinct, had not yet been expressed in words. Though I had small reason for expecting great things of myself, I had always cherished the hope that if a big case came my way I should be found able to do something with it something more, that is, than I had seen accomplished by the police of the District of Columbia since I had had the honor of being one of their number. Therefore, when I found myself plunged, almost without my own volition, into the Jeffrey Moore affair, I believed that the opportunity had come whereby I might distinguish myself.

It had complications, this Jeffrey-Moore affair; greater ones than the public ever knew, keen as the interest in it ran both in and out of Washington. This is why I propose to tell the story of this great tragedy from my own standpoint, even if in so doing I risk the charge of attempting to exploit my own connection with this celebrated case. In its course I encountered as many disappointments as triumphs, and brought out of the affair a heart as sore as it was satisfied; for I am a lover of women and—

But I am keeping you from the story itself.

I was at the station-house the night Uncle David came in. He was always called Uncle David, even by the urchins who followed him in the street; so I am showing him no disrespect, gentleman though he is, by giving him a title which as completely characterized him in those days, as did his moody ways, his quaint attire and the persistence with which he kept at his side his great mastiff, Rudge. I had long since heard of the old gentleman as one of the most interesting residents of the precinct. I had even seen him more than once on the avenue, but I had never before been brought face to face with him, and consequently had much too superficial a knowledge of his countenance to determine offhand whether the uneasy light in his small gray eyes was natural to them, or simply the result of present excitement. But when he began to talk I detected an unmistakable tremor in his tones, and decided that he was in a state of suppressed agitation; though he appeared to have nothing more alarming to impart than the fact that he had seen a light burning in some house presumably empty.

It was all so trivial that I gave him but scant attention till he let a name fall which caused me to prick up my ears and even to put in a word. "The Moore house," he had said.

"The Moore house?" I repeated in amazement. "Are you speaking of the Moore house?"

A thousand recollections came with the name.

"What other?" he grumbled, directing toward me a look as keen as it was impatient. "Do you think that I would bother myself long about a house I had no interest in, or drag Rudge from his warm rug to save some ungrateful neighbor from a possible burglary? No, it is my house which some rogue has chosen to enter. That is," he suavely corrected, as he saw surprise in every eye, "the house which the law will give me, if anything ever happens to that chit of a girl whom my brother left behind him."

Growling some words at the dog, who showed a decided inclination to lie down where he was, the old man made for the door and in another moment would have been in the street, if I had not stepped after him.

"You are a Moore and live in or near that old house?" I asked.

The surprise with which he met this question daunted me a little.

"How long have you been in Washington, I should like to ask?" was his acrid retort.

"Oh, some five months."

His good nature, or what passed for such in this irascible old man, returned in an instant; and he curtly but not unkindly remarked:

"You haven't learned much in that time." Then, with a nod more ceremonious than many another man's bow, he added, with sudden dignity: "I am of the elder branch an live in the cottage fronting the old place. I am the only resident on the block. When you have lived here longer you will know why that especial neighborhood is not a favorite one with those who can not boast of the Moore blood. For the present, let us attribute the bad name that it holds to—malaria." And with a significant hitch of his lean shoulders which set in undulating motion every fold of the old-fashioned cloak he wore, he started again for the door.

But my curiosity was by this time roused to fever heat. I knew more about this house than he gave me credit for. No one who had read the papers of late, much less a man connected with the police, could help being well informed in all the details of its remarkable history. What I had failed to know was his close relationship to the family whose name for the last two weeks had been in every mouth.

"Wait!" I called out. "You say that you live opposite the Moore house. You can then tell me—"

But he had no mind to stop for any gossip.

"It was all in the papers," he called back. "Read them. But first be sure to find out who has struck a light in the house that we all know has not even a caretaker in it."

It was good advice. My duty and my curiosity both led me to follow it.

Perhaps you have heard of the distinguishing feature of this house; if so, you do not need my explanations. But if, for any reason, you are ignorant of the facts which within a very short time have set a final seal of horror upon this old, historic dwelling, then you will be glad to read what has made and will continue to make the Moore house in Washington one to be pointed at in daylight and shunned after dark, not only by superstitious colored folk, but by all who are susceptible to the most ordinary emotions of fear and dread.

It was standing when Washington was a village. It antedates the Capitol and the White House. Built by a man of wealth, it bears to this day the impress of the large ideas and quiet elegance of colonial times; but the shadow which speedily fell across it made it a marked place even in those early days. While it has always escaped the hackneyed epithet of "haunted," families that have moved in have as quickly moved out, giving as their excuse that no happiness was to be found there and that sleep was impossible under its roof. That there was some reason for this lack of rest within walls which were not without their tragic reminiscences, all must acknowledge. Death had often occurred there, and while this fact can be stated in regard to most old houses, it is not often that one can say, as in this case, that it was invariably sudden and invariably of one character. A lifeless man, lying outstretched on a certain hearthstone, might be found once in a house and awaken no special comment; but when this same discovery has been made twice, if not thrice, during the history of a single dwelling, one might surely be pardoned a distrust of its seemingly home-like appointments,

and discern in its slowly darkening walls the presence of an evil which if left to itself might perish in the natural decay of the e place, but which, if met and challenged, might strike again and make another blot on its thrice-crimsoned hearthstone.

But these are old fables which I should hardly, presume to mention, had it not been for the recent occurrence which has recalled them to all men's minds and given to this long empty and slowly crumbling building an importance which has spread its fame from one end of the country to the other. I refer to the tragedy attending the wedding lately celebrated there.

Veronica Moore, rich, pretty and wilful, had long cherished a strange liking for this frowning old home of her ancestors, and, at the most critical time of her life, conceived the idea of proving to herself and to society at large that no real ban lay upon it save in the imagination of the superstitious. So, being about to marry the choice of her young heart, she caused this house to be opened for the wedding ceremony; with what result, you know.

Though the occasion was a joyous one and accompanied by all that could give cheer to such a function, it had not escaped the old-time shadow. One of the guests straying into the room of ancient and unhallowed memory, the one room which had not been thrown open to the crowd, had been found within five minutes of the ceremony lying on its dolorous hearthstone, dead; and though the bride was spared a knowledge of the dreadful fact till the holy words were said, a panic had seized the guests and emptied the houses suddenly and completely as though the plague had been discovered there.

This is why I hastened to follow Uncle David when he told me that all was not right in this house of tragic memories.

II
I ENTER

Though past seventy, Uncle David was a brisk walker, and on this night in particular he sped along so fast that he was half-way down H Street by the time I had turned the corner at New Hampshire Avenue.

His gaunt but not ungraceful figure, merged in that of the dog trotting closely at his heels, was the only moving object in the dreary vista of this the most desolate block in Washington. As I neared the building, I was so impressed by the surrounding stillness that I was ready to vow that the shadows were denser here than elsewhere and that the few gas lamps, which flickered at intervals down the street, shone with a more feeble ray than in any other equal length of street in Washington.

Meanwhile, the shadow of Uncle David had vanished from the pavement. He had paused beside a fence which, hung with vines, surrounded and nearly hid from sight the little cottage he had mentioned as the only house on the block with the exception of the great Moore place; in other words, his own home.

As I came abreast of him I heard him muttering, not to his dog as was his custom, but to himself. In fact, the dog was not to be seen, and this desertion on the part of his constant companion seemed to add to his disturbance and affect him beyond all reason. I could distinguish these words amongst the many he directed toward the unseen animal:

"You're a knowing one, too knowing! You see that loosened shutter over the way as plainly as I do; but you're a coward to slink away from it. I don't. I face the thing, and what's more, I'll show you yet what I think of a dog that can't stand his ground and help his old master out with some show of courage. Creaks, does it? Well, let it creak! I don't mind its creaking, glad as I should be to know whose hand—Halloo! You've come, have you?" This to me. I had just stepped up to him.

"Yes, I've come. Now what is the matter with the Moore house?"

He must have expected the question, yet his answer was a long time coming. His voice, too, sounded strained, and was pitched quite too high to be natural. But he evidently did not expect me to show surprise at his manner.

"Look at that window over there!" he cried at last. "That one with the slightly open shutter! Watch and you will see that shutter move. There! it creaked; didn't you hear it?"

A growl—it was more like a moan—came from the porch behind us. Instantly the old gentleman turned and with a gesture as fierce as it was instinctive, shouted out:

"Be still there! If you haven't the courage to face a blowing shutter, keep your jaws shut and don't let every fellow who happens along know what a fool you are. I declare," he maundered on, half to himself and half to me, "that dog is getting old. He can't be trusted any more. He forsakes his master just when—" The rest was lost in his throat which rattled with something more than impatient anger.

Meanwhile I had been attentively scrutinizing the house thus pointedly brought to my notice.

I had seen it many times before, but, as it happened, had never stopped to look at it when the huge trees surrounding it were shrouded in darkness. The black hollow of its disused portal looked out from shadows which acquired some of their somberness from the tragic memories connected with its empty void.

Its aspect was scarcely reassuring. Not that superstition lent its terrors to the lonely scene, but that through the blank panes of the window, alternately appearing and disappearing from view as the shutter pointed out by Uncle David blew to and fro in the wind, I saw, or was persuaded that I saw, a beam of light which argued an unknown presence within walls which had so lately been declared unfit for any man's habitation.

"You are right," I now remarked to the uneasy figure at my side. "Some one is prowling through the house yonder. Can it possibly be Mrs. Jeffrey or her husband?"

"At night and with no gas in the house? Hardly."

The words were natural, but the voice was not. Neither was his manner quite suited to the occasion. Giving him another sly glance, and marking how uneasily he edged away from me in the darkness, I cried out more cheerily than he possibly expected:

"I will summon another officer and we three will just slip across and investigate."

"Not I!" was his violent rejoinder, as he swung open a gate concealed in the vines behind him. "The Jeffreys would resent my intrusion if they ever happened to hear of it."

"Indeed!" I laughed, sounding my whistle; then, soberly enough, for I was more than a little struck by the oddity of his behavior and thought him as well worth investigation as the house in which he showed such an interest: "You shouldn't let that count. Come and see what's up in the house you are so ready to call yours."

But he only drew farther into the shade.

"I have no business over there," he objected. "Veronica and I have never been on good terms. I was not even invited to her wedding though I live within a stone's throw of the door. No; I have done my duty in calling attention to that light, and whether it's the bull's-eye of a burglar—perhaps you don't know that there are rare treasures on the book shelves of the great library—or whether it is the fantastic illumination which frightens fool-folks and some fool-dogs, I'm done with it and done with you, too, for to-night."

As he said this, he mounted to his door and disappeared under the vines, hanging like a shroud over the front of the house. In another moment the rich peal of an organ sounded from within, followed by the prolonged howling of Rudge, who, either from a too keen appreciation of his master's music or in utter disapproval of it,—no one, I believe, has ever been able to make out which,—was accustomed to add this undesirable accompaniment to every strain from the old man's hand. The playing did not cease because of these outrageous discords. On the contrary, it increased in force and volume, causing Rudge's expression of pain or pleasure to increase also. The result can be imagined. As I listened to the intolerable howls of the dog cutting clean through the exquisite harmonies of his master, I wondered if the shadows cast by the frowning structure of the great Moore house were alone to blame for Uncle David's lack of neighbors.

Meantime, Hibbard, who was the first to hear my signal, came running down the block. As he joined me, the light, or what we chose to call a light, appeared again in the window toward which my attention had been directed.

"Some one's in the Moore house!" I declared, in as matter of-fact tones as I could command.

Hibbard is a big fellow, the biggest fellow on the force, and so far as my own experience with him had gone, as stolid and imperturbable as the best of us. But after a quick glance at the towering walls of the lonely building, he showed decided embarrassment and seemed in no haste to cross the street.

With difficulty I concealed my disgust.

"Come," I cried, stepping down from the curb, "let's go over and investigate. The property is valuable, the furnishings handsome, and there is no end of costly books on the library shelves. You have matches and a revolver?"

He nodded, quietly showing me first the one, then the other; then with a sheepish air which he endeavored to carry of with a laugh, he cried:

"Have you use for 'em? If so, I'm quite willing, to part with 'em for a half-hour."

I was more than amazed at this evidence of weakness in one I had always considered as tough and impenetrable as flint rock. Thrusting back the hand with which he had half drawn into view the weapon I had mentioned, I put on my sternest sir and led the way across the street. As I did so, tossed back the words:

"We may come upon a gang. You do not wish me to face some half-dozen men alone?"

"You won't find any half-dozen men there," was his muttered reply. Nevertheless he followed me, though with less spirit than I liked, considering that my own manner was in a measure assumed and that I was not without sympathy—well, let me, say, for a dog who preferred howling a dismal accompaniment to his master's music, to keeping open watch over a neighborhood dominated by the unhallowed structure I now propose to enter.

The house is too well known for me to attempt a minute description of it. The illustrations which have appeared in all the papers have already acquainted the general public with its simple facade and rows upon rows of shuttered windows. Even the great square porch with its bench for negro attendants has been photographed for the million. Those who have seen the picture in which the wedding-guests are shown flying from its yawning doorway, will not be especially interested in the quiet, almost solemn aspect it presented as I passed up the low steps and laid my hand upon the knob of the old-fashioned front door.

Not that I expected to win an entrance thereby, but because it is my nature to approach everything in a common-sense way. Conceive then my astonishment when at the first touch the door yielded. It was not even latched.

"So! so!" thought I. "This is no fool's job; some one is in the house."

I had provided myself with an ordinary pocket-lantern, and, when I had convinced Hibbard that I fully meant to enter the house and discover for myself who had taken advantage of the popular prejudice against it to make a secret refuge or rendezvous of its decayed old rooms, I took out this lantern and held it in readiness.

"We may strike a hornets' nest," I explained to Hibbard, whose feet seemed very heavy even for a man of his size. "But I'm going in and so are you. Only, let me suggest that we first take off our shoes. We can hide them in these bushes."

"I always catch cold when I walk barefooted," mumbled my brave companion; but receiving no reply he drew off his shoes and dropped them beside mine in the cluster of stark bushes which figure so prominently in the illustrations that I have just mentioned. Then he took out his revolver, and cocking it, stood waiting, while I gave a cautious push to the door.

Darkness! silence!

Rather had I confronted a light and heard some noise, even if it had been the ominous click to which eve are so well accustomed. Hibbard seemed to share my feelings, though from an entirely different cause.

"Pistols and lanterns are no good here," he grumbled. "What we want at this blessed minute is a priest with a sprinkling of holy water; and I for one—"

He was actually sliding off.

With a smothered oath I drew him back.

"See here!" I cried, "you're not a babe in arms. Come on or— Well, what now?"

He had clenched my arm and was pointing to the door which was slowly swaying to behind us.

"Notice that," he whispered. "No key in the lock! Men use keys but—"

My patience could stand no more. With a shake I rid myself of his clutch, muttering:

"There, go! You're too much of a fool for me. I'm in for it alone." And in proof of my determination, I turned the slide of the lantern and flashed the light through the house.

The effect was ghostly; but while the fellow at my side breathed hard he did not take advantage of my words to make his escape, as I half expected him to. Perhaps, like myself, he was fascinated by the dreary spectacle of long shadowy walls and an equally shadowy staircase emerging from a darkness which a minute before had seemed impenetrable. Perhaps he was simply ashamed. At all events he stood his ground, scrutinizing with rolling eyes that portion of the hall where two columns, with gilded Corinthian capitals, marked the door of the room which no man entered without purpose or passed without dread. Doubtless he was thinking of that which had so frequently been carried out between those columns. I know that I was; and when, in the sudden draft made by the open door,

some open draperies hanging near those columns blew out with a sudden swoop and shiver, I was not at all astonished to see him lose what little courage had remained in him. The truth is, I was startled myself, but I was able to hide the fact and to whisper back to him, fiercely:

"Don't be an idiot. That curtain hides nothing worse than some sneaking political refugee or a gang of counterfeiters."

"Maybe. I'd just like to put my hand on Upson and—"

"Hush!"

I had just heard something.

For a moment we stood breathless, but as the sound was not repeated I concluded that it was the creaking of that far-away shutter. Certainly there was nothing moving near us.

"Shall we go upstairs?" whispered Hibbard.

"Not till we have made sure that all is right down here"

A door stood slightly ajar on our left.

Pushing it open, we looked in. A well furnished parlor was before us.

"Here's where the wedding took place," remarked Hibbard, straining his head over my shoulder.

There were signs of this wedding on every side. Walls and ceilings had been hung with garlands, and these still clung to the mantelpiece and over and around the various doorways. Torn-off branches and the remnants of old bouquets, dropped from the hands of flying guests, littered the carpet, adding to the general confusion of overturned chairs and tables. Everywhere were evidences of the haste with which the place had been vacated as well as the superstitious dread which had prevented it being re-entered for the commonplace purpose of cleaning. Even the piano had not been shut, and under it lay some scattered sheets of music which had been left where they fell, to the probable loss of some poor musician. The clock occupying the center of the mantelpiece alone gave evidence of life. It had been wound for the wedding and had not yet run down. Its tick-tick came faint enough, however, through the darkness, as if it too had lost heart and would soon lapse into the deadly quiet of its ghostly surroundings.

"It's it's funeral-like," chattered Hibbard.

He was right; I felt as if I were shutting the lid of a coffin when I finally closed the door.

Our next steps took us into the rear where we found little to detain us, and then, with a certain dread fully justified by the event, we made for the door defined by the two Corinthian columns.

It was ajar like the rest, and, call me coward or call me fool—I have called Hibbard both, you will remember—I found that it cost me an effort to lay my hand on its mahogany panels. Danger, if danger there was, lurked here; and while I had never known myself to quail before any ordinary antagonist, I, like others of my kind, have no especial fondness for unseen and mysterious perils.

Hibbard, who up to this point had followed me almost too closely, now accorded me all the room that was necessary. It was with a sense of entering alone upon the scene that I finally thrust wide the door and crossed the threshold of this redoubtable room where, but two short weeks before, a fresh victim had been added to the list of those who had by some unheard-of, unimaginable means found their death within its recesses.

My first glance showed me little save the ponderous outlines of an old settle, which jutted from the corner of the fireplace half way out into the room. As it was seemingly from this seat that the men, who at various times had been found lying here, had fallen to their doom, a thrill passed over me as I noted its unwieldy bulk and the deep shadow it threw on the ancient and dishonored hearthstone. To escape the ghastly memories it evoked and also to satisfy myself that the room was really as empty as it seemed, I took another step forward. This caused the light from the lantern I carried to spread beyond the point on which it had hitherto been so effectively concentrated; but the result was to emphasize rather than detract from the extreme desolation of the great room. The settle was a fixture, as I afterwards found, and was almost the only article of furniture to be seen on the wide expanse of uncarpeted floor. There was a table or two in hiding somewhere amid the shadows at the

other end from where I stood, and possibly some kind of stool or settee; but the general impression made upon me was that of a completely dismantled place given over to moth and rust.

I do not include the walls. They were not bare like the floor, but covered with books from floor to ceiling. These books were not the books of to-day; they had stood so long in their places unnoted and untouched, that they had acquired the color of fungus, and smelt— Well, there is no use adding to the picture. Every one knows the spirit of sickening desolation pervading rooms which have been shut up for an indefinite length of time from air and sunshine.

The elegance of the heavily stuccoed ceiling, admitted to be one of the finest specimens of its kind in Washington, as well as the richness of the carvings ornamenting the mantel of Italian marble rising above the accursed hearthstone, only served to make more evident the extreme neglect into which the rest of the room had sunk. Being anything but anxious to subject myself further to its unhappy influence and quite convinced that the place was indeed as empty as it looked, I turned to leave, when my eyes fell upon something so unexpected and so extraordinary, seen as it was under the influence of the old tragedies with which my mind was necessarily full, that I paused, balked in my advance, and well-nigh uncertain whether I looked upon a real thing or on some strange and terrible fantasy of my aroused imagination.

A form lay before me, outstretched on that portion of the floor which had hitherto been hidden from me by the half-open door—a woman's form, which even in that first casual look impressed itself upon me as one of aerial delicacy and extreme refinement; and this form lay as only the dead lie; the dead! And I had been looking at the hearthstone for just such a picture! No, not just such a picture, for this woman lay face uppermost, and, on the floor beside her was blood.

A hand had plucked my sleeve. It was Hibbard's. Startled by my immobility and silence, he had stepped in with quaking members, expecting he hardly knew what. But no sooner did his eyes fall on the prostrate form which held me spellbound, than an unforeseen change took place in him. What had unnerved me, restored him to full self-possession. Death in this shape was familiar to him. He had no fear of blood. He did not show surprise at encountering it, but only at the effect it appeared to produce on me.

"Shot!" was his laconic comment as he bent over the prostrate body. "Shot through the heart! She must have died before she fell."

Shot!

That was a new experience for this room. No wound had ever before disfigured those who had fallen here, nor had any of the previous victims been found lying on any other spot than the one over which that huge settle kept guard. As these thoughts crossed my mind, I instinctively glanced again toward the fireplace for what I almost refused to believe lay outstretched at my feet. When nothing more appeared there than that old seat of sinister memory, I experienced a thrill which poorly prepared me for the cry which I now heard raised by Hibbard.

"Look here! What do you make of this?"

He was pointing to what, upon closer inspection, proved to be a strip of white satin ribbon running from one of the delicate wrists of the girl before us to the handle of a pistol which had fallen not far away from her side. "It looks as if the pistol was attached to her. That is something new in my experience. What do you think it means?"

Alas! there was but one thing it could mean. The shot to which she had succumbed had been delivered by herself. This fair and delicate creature was a suicide.

But suicide in this place! How could we account for that? Had the story of this room's ill-acquired fame acted hypnotically on her, or had she stumbled upon the open door in front and been glad of any refuge where her misery might find a solitary termination? Closely scanning her upturned face, I sought an answer to this question, and while thus seeking received a fresh shock which I did not hesitate to communicate to my now none-too-sensitive companion.

"Look at these features," I cried. "I seem to know them, do you?"

He growled out a dissent, but stooped at my bidding and gave the pitiful young face a pro longed stare. When he looked up again it was with a puzzled contraction of his eyebrows.

"I've certainly seen it somewhere," he hesitatingly admitted, edging slowly away toward the door. "Perhaps in the papers. Isn't she like—?"

"Like!" I interrupted, "it is Veronica Moore herself; the owner of this house and she who was married here two weeks since to Mr. Jeffrey. Evidently her reason was unseated by the tragedy which threw so deep a gloom over her wedding."

III
I REMAIN

Not for an instant did I doubt the correctness of this identification. All the pictures I had seen of this well-known society belle had been marked by an individuality of expression which fixed her face in the memory and which I now saw repeated in the lifeless features before me.

Greatly startled by the discovery, but quite convinced that this was but the dreadful sequel of an already sufficiently dark tragedy, I proceeded to take such steps as are common in these cases. Having sent the too-willing Hibbard to notify headquarters, I was on the point of making a memorandum of such details as seemed important, when my lantern suddenly went out, leaving me in total darkness.

This was far from pleasant, but the effect it produced upon my mind was not without its result. For no sooner did I find myself alone and in the unrelieved darkness of this grave-like room, than I became convinced that no woman, however frenzied, would make her plunge into an unknown existence from the midst of a darkness only too suggestive of the tomb to which she was hastening. It was not in nature, not in woman's nature, at all events. Either she had committed the final act before such daylight as could filter through the shutters of this closed-up room had quite disappeared,—an hypothesis instantly destroyed by the warmth which still lingered in certain portions of her body, —or else the light which had been burning when she pulled the fatal trigger had since been carried elsewhere or extinguished.

Recalling the uncertain gleams which we had seen flashing from one of the upper windows, I was inclined to give some credence to the former theory, but was disposed to be fair to both. So after relighting my lamp, I turned on one of the gas cocks of the massive chandelier over my head and applied a match. The result was just what I anticipated; no gas in the pipes. A meter had not been put in for the wedding. This the papers had repeatedly stated in dwelling upon the garish effect of the daylight on the elaborate costumes worn by the ladies. Candles had not even been provided—ah, candles! What, then, was it that I saw glittering on a small table at the other end of the room? Surely a candlestick, or rather an old-fashioned candelabrum with a half-burned candle in one of its sockets. Hastily crossing to it, I felt of the candlewick. It was quite stiff and hard. But not considering this a satisfactory proof that it had not been lately burning—the tip of a wick soon dries after the flame is blown out—I took out my penknife and attacked the wick at what might be called its root; whereupon I found that where the threads had been protected by the wax they were comparatively soft and penetrable. The conclusion was obvious. True to my instinct in this matter the woman had not lifted her weapon in darkness; this candle had been burning. But here my thoughts received a fresh shock. If burning, then by whom had it since been blown out? Not by her; her wound was too fatally sure for that. The steps taken between the table where the candelabrum stood and the place where she lay, were taken, if taken at all by her, before that shot was fired. Some one else—some one whose breath still lingered in the air about me—had extinguished this candle-flame after she fell, and the death I looked down upon was not a suicide, but a murder.

The excitement which this discovery caused to tingle through my every nerve had its birth in the ambitious feeling referred to in the opening paragraph of this narrative. I believed that my long-sought-for opportunity had come; that with the start given me by the conviction just stated, I should be enabled to collect such clues and establish such facts as would lead to the acceptance of this new theory instead of the apparent one of suicide embraced by Hibbard and about to be promulgated at police headquarters. If so, what a triumph would be mine; and what a debt I should owe to the crabbed old gentleman whose seemingly fantastic fears had first drawn me to this place!

Realizing the value of the opportunity afforded me by the few minutes I was likely to spend alone on this scene of crime, I proceeded to my task with that directness and method which I had always promised myself should characterize my first success in detective work.

First, then, for another look at the fair young victim herself! What a line of misery on the brow! What dark hollows disfiguring cheeks otherwise as delicate as the petals of a rose! An interesting, if not absolutely beautiful face, it told me something I could hardly put into words; so that it was like leaving a fascinating but unsolved mystery when I finally turned from it to study the hands, each of which presented a separate problem. That offered by the right wrist you already know—the long white ribbon connecting it with the discharged pistol. But the secret concealed by the left, while less startling, was perhaps fully as significant. All the rings were gone, even the wedding ring which had been placed there such a short time before. Had she been robbed? There were no signs of violence visible nor even such disturbances as usually follow despoliation by a criminal's hand. The boa of delicate black net which encircled her neck rose fresh and intact to her chin; nor did the heavy folds of her rich broadcloth gown betray that any disturbance had taken place in her figure after its fall. If a jewel had flashed at her throat, or earrings adorned her ears, they had been removed by a careful, if not a loving, hand. But I was rather inclined to think that she had entered upon the scene of her death without ornaments,—such severe simplicity marked her whole attire. Her hat, which was as plain and also as elegant as the rest of her clothing, lay near her on the floor. It had been taken off and thrown down, manifestly by an impatient hand. That this hand was her own was evident from a small but very significant fact. The pin which had held it to her hair had been thrust again into the hat. No hand but hers would have taken this precaution. A man would have flung it aside just as he would have flung the hat.

Question:

Did this argue a natural expectation on her part of resuming her hat? Or was the action the result of an unconscious habit?

Having thus noted all that was possible concerning her without infringing on the rights of the coroner, I next proceeded to cast about for clues to the identity of the person whom I considered responsible for the extinguished candle. But here a great disappointment awaited me. I could find nothing expressive of a second person's presence save a pile of cigar ashes scattered near the legs of a common kitchen chair which stood face to face with the book shelves in that part of the room where the candelabrum rested on a small table. But these ashes looked old, nor could I detect any evidence of tobacco smoke in the general mustiness pervading the place. Was the man who died here a fortnight since accountable for these ashes? If so, his unfinished cigar must be within sight. Should I search for it? No, for this would take me to the hearth and that was quite too deadly a place to be heedlessly approached.

Besides, I was not yet finished with the spot where I then stood. If I could gather nothing satisfactory from the ashes, perhaps I could from the chair or the shelves before which it had been placed. Some one with an interest in books had sat there; some one who expected to spend sufficient time over these old tomes to feel the need of a chair. Had this interest been a general one or had it centered in a particular volume? I ran my eye over the shelves within reach, possibly with an idea of settling this question, and though my knowledge of books is limited I could see that these were what one might call rarities. Some of them contained specimens of black letter, all moldy and smothered in dust; in others I saw dates of publication which placed them among volumes dear to a collector's heart. But none of them, so far as I could see, gave any evidence of having been lately handled; and anxious to waste no time on puerile details, I hastily quitted my chair, and was proceeding to turn my attention elsewhere, when I noticed on an upper shelf, a book projecting slightly beyond the others. Instantly my foot was on the chair and the book in my hand. Did I find it of interest? Yes, but not on account of its contents, for they were pure Greek to me; but because it lacked the dust on its upper edge which had marked every other volume I had handled. This, then, was what had attracted the unknown to these shelves, this—let me see if I can remember its title—Disquisition upon Old Coastlines. Pshaw! I was wasting my time. What had such a dry compendium as this to do with the body lying in its blood a few steps behind me, or with the hand which had put out the candle upon

this dreadful deed? Nothing. I replaced the book, but not so hastily as to push it one inch beyond the position in which I found it. For, if it had a tale to tell, then was it my business to leave that tale to be read by those who understood books better than I did.

My next move was toward the little table holding the candelabrum with the glittering pendants. This table was one of a nest standing against a near-by wall. Investigation proved that it had been lifted from the others and brought to its present position within a very short space of time. For the dust lying thick on its top was almost entirely lacking from the one which had been nested under it. Neither had the candelabrum been standing there long, dust being found under as well as around it. Had her hand brought it there? Hardly, if it came from the top of the mantel toward which I now turned in my course of investigation.

I have already mentioned this mantel more than once. This I could hardly avoid, since in and about it lay the heart of the mystery for which the room was remarkable. But though I have thus freely spoken of it, and though it was not absent from my thoughts for a moment, I had not ventured to approach it beyond a certain safe radius. Now, in looking to see if I might not lessen this radius, I experienced that sudden and overwhelming interest in its every feature which attaches to all objects peculiarly associated with danger.

I even took a step toward it, holding up my lamp so that a stray ray struck the faded surface of an old engraving hanging over the fireplace.

It was the well-known one—in Washington at least—of Benjamin Franklin at the Court of France; interesting no doubt in a general way, but scarcely calculated to hold the eye at so critical an instant. Neither did the shelf below call for more than momentary attention, for it was absolutely bare. So was the time-worn, if not blood-stained hearth, save for the impenetrable shadow cast over it by the huge bulk of the great settle standing at its edge.

I have already described the impression made on me at my first entrance by this ancient and characteristic article of furniture.

It was intensified now as my eye ran over the clumsy carving which added to the discomfort of its high straight back and as I smelt the smell of its moldy and possibly mouse-haunted cushions. A crawling sense of dread took the place of my first instinctive repugnance; not because superstition had as yet laid its grip upon me, although the place, the hour and the near and veritable presence of death were enough to rouse the imagination past the bounds of the actual, but because of a discovery I had made—a discovery which emphasized the tradition that all who had been found dead under the mantel had fallen as if from the end of this monstrous and patriarchal bench. Do you ask what this discovery was? It can be told in a word. This one end and only this end had been made comfortable for the sitter. For a space scarcely wide enough for one, the seat and back at this special point had been upholstered with leather, fastened to the wood with heavy wrought nails. The remaining portion stretched out bare, hard and inexpressibly forbidding to one who sought ease there, or even a moment of casual rest. The natural inference was that the owner of this quaint piece of furniture had been a very selfish man who thought only of his own comfort. But might he not have had some other reason for his apparent niggardliness? As I asked myself this question and noted how the long and embracing arm which guarded this cushioned retreat was flattened on top for the convenient holding of decanter and glass, feelings to which I can give no name and which I had fondly believed myself proof against, began to take the place of judgment and reason. Before I realized the nature of my own impulse or to what it was driving me, I found myself moving slowly and steadily toward this formidable seat, under an irresistible desire to fling myself down upon these old cushions and—

But here the creaking of some far-off shutter—possibly the one I had seen swaying from the opposite side of the street—recalled me to the duties of the hour, and, remembering that my investigations were but half completed and that I might be interrupted any moment by detectives from headquarters, I broke from the accursed charm, which horrified me the moment I escaped it,

and quitting the room by a door at the farther end, sought to find in some of the adjacent rooms the definite traces I had failed to discover on this, the actual scene of the crime.

It was a dismal search, revealing at every turn the almost maddened haste with which the house had been abandoned. The dining-room especially roused feelings which were far from pleasant. The table, evidently set for the wedding breakfast, had been denuded in such breathless hurry that the food had been tossed from the dishes and now lay in moldering heaps on the floor. The wedding cake, which some one had dropped, possibly in the effort to save it, had been stepped on; and broken glass, crumpled napery and withered flowers made all the corners unsightly and rendered stepping over the unwholesome floors at once disgusting and dangerous. The pantries opening out of this room were in no better case. Shrinking from the sights and smells I found there, I passed out into the kitchen and so on by a close and narrow passage to the negro quarters clustered in the rear.

Here I made a discovery. One of the windows in this long disused portion of the house was not only unlocked but partly open. But as I came upon no marks showing that this outlet had been used by the escaping murderer, I made my way back to the front of the house and thus to the stairs communicating with the upper floor.

It was on the rug lying at the foot of these stairs that I came upon the first of a dozen or more burned matches which lay in a distinct trail up the staircase and along the floors of the upper halls. As these matches were all burned as short as fingers could hold them, it was evident that they had been used to light the steps of some one seeking refuge above, possibly in the very room where we had seen the light which had first drawn us to this house. How then? Should I proceed or await the coming of the "boys" before pushing in upon a possible murderer? I decided to proceed, fascinated, I think, by the nicety of the trail which lay before me.

But when, after a careful following in the steps of him who had so lately preceded me, I came upon a tightly closed door at the end of aside passage, I own that I stopped a moment before lifting hand to it. So much may lie behind a tightly closed door! But my hesitation, if hesitation it was, lasted but a moment. My natural impatience and the promptings of my vanity overcame the dictates of my judgment, and, reckless of consequences, perhaps disdainful of them, I soon had the knob in my grasp. I gave a slight push to the door and, on seeing a crack of light leap into life along the jamb, pushed the door wider and wider till the whole room stood revealed.

The instantaneous banging of a shutter in one of its windows proved the room to be the very one which we had seen lighted from below. Otherwise all was still; nor was I able to detect, in my first hurried glance, any other token of human presence than a candle sputtering in its own grease at the bottom of a tumbler placed on one corner of, an old-fashioned dressing table. This, the one touch of incongruity in a room otherwise rich if not stately in its appointments, was loud in its suggestion of some hidden presence given to expedients and reckless of consequences; but of this presence nothing was to be seen.

Not satisfied with this short survey,-a survey which had given me the impression of a spacious old-fashioned chamber, fully furnished but breathing of the by-gone rather than of the present—and resolved to know the worst, or, rather, to dare the worst and be done with it, I strode straight into the center of the room and cast about me quickly a comprehensive glance which spared nothing, not even the shadows lurking in the corners. But no low-lying figure started up from those corners, nor did any crouching head rise into sight from beyond the leaves of the big screen behind which I was careful to look.

Greatly reassured, and indeed quite convinced that wherever the criminal lurked at that moment he was not in the same room with me, I turned my attention to my surroundings, which had many points of interest. Foremost among these was the big four-poster which occupied a large space at my right. I had never seen its like in use before, and I was greatly attracted by its size and the air of mystery imparted to it by its closely drawn curtains of faded brocade. In fact, this bed, whether from its appearance or some occult influence inherent in it, had a fascination for me. I hesitated to

approach it, yet could not forbear surveying it long and earnestly. Could it be possible that those curtains concealed some one in hiding behind them? Strange to say I did not feel quite ready to lay hand on them and see.

A dressing table laden with woman's fixings and various articles of the toilet, all of an unexpected value and richness, occupied the space between the two windows; and on the floor, immediately in front of a high mahogany mantel, there lay, amid a number of empty boxes, an overturned chair. This chair and the conjectures its position awakened led me to look up at the mantel with which it seemed to be in some way connected, and thus I became aware of a wan old drawing hanging on the wall above it. Why this picture, which was a totally uninteresting sketch of a simpering girl face, should have held my eye after the first glance, I can not say even now. It had no beauty even of the sentimental kind and very little, if any, meaning. Its lines, weak at the best, were nearly obliterated and in some places quite faded out. Yet I not only paused to look at it, but in looking at it forgot myself and well-nigh my errand. Yet there was no apparent reason for the spell it exerted over me, nor could I account in any way for the really superstitious dread which from this moment seized me, making my head move slowly round with shrinking backward looks as that swaying shutter creaked or some of the fitful noises, which grow out of silence in answer to our inner expectancy, drew my attention or appalled my sense.

To all appearance there was less here than below to affect a man's courage. No inanimate body with the mark of the slayer upon it lent horror to these walls; yet sensations which I had easily overcome in the library below clung with strange insistence to me here, making it an effort for me to move, and giving to the unexpected reflection of my own image in the mirror I chanced to pass, a power to shock my nerves which has never been repeated in my experience.

It may seem both unnecessary and out of character for a man of my calling to acknowledge these chance sensations, but only by doing so can I account for the minutes which elapsed before I summoned sufficient self-possession to draw aside the closed curtains of the bed and take the quick look inside which my present doubtful position demanded. But once I had broken the spell and taken the look just mentioned, I found my manhood return and with it my old ardor for clues. The bed held no gaping, chattering criminal; yet was it not quite empty. Something lay there, and this something, while commonplace in itself, was enough out of keeping with the place and hour to rouse my interest and awaken my conjectures. It was a lady's wrap so rich in quality and of such a festive appearance that it was astonishing to find it lying in a neglected state in this crumbling old house. Though I know little of the cost of women's garments, I do know the value of lace, and this garment was covered with it.

Interesting as was this find, it was followed by one still more so. Nestled in the folds of the cloak, lay the withered remains of what could only have been the bridal bouquet. Unsightly now and scentless, it was once a beautiful specimen of the florist's art. As I noted how the main bunch of roses and lilies was connected by long satin ribbons to the lesser clusters which hung from it, I recalled with conceivable horror the use to which a similar ribbon had been put in the room below. In the shudder called up by this coincidence I forgot to speculate how a bouquet carried by the bride could have found its way back to this upstairs room when, as all accounts agree, she had fled from the parlor below without speaking or staying foot the moment she was told of the catastrophe which had taken place in the library. That her wrap should be lying here was not strange, but that the wedding bouquet—

That it really was the wedding bouquet and that this was the room in which the bride had dressed for the ceremony was apparent to the most casual observer. But it became an established fact when in my further course about the room I chanced on a handkerchief with the name Veronica embroidered in one corner.

This handkerchief had an interest apart from the name on it. It was of dainty texture and quite in keeping, so far as value went, with the other belongings of its fastidious owner. But it was not clean. Indeed it was strangely soiled, and this soil was of a nature I did not readily understand. A woman would doubtless have comprehended immediately the cause of the brown streaks I found on it, but

it took me several minutes to realize that this bit of cambric, delicate as a cobweb, had been used to remove dust. To remove dust! Dust from what? From the mantel-shelf probably, upon one end of which I found it. But no! one look along the polished boards convinced me that whatever else had been dusted in this room this shelf had not. The accumulation of days, if not of months, was visible from one end to the other of its unrelieved surface save where the handkerchief had lain, and—the greatest discovery yet—where five clear spots just to the left of the center showed where some man's finger-tips had rested. Nothing but the pressure of fingertips could have caused just the appearance presented by these spots. By scrutinizing them closely I could even tell where the thumb had rested, and at once foresaw the possibility of determining by means of these marks both the size and shape of the hand which had left behind it so neat and unmistakable a clue.

Wonderful! but what did it all mean? Why should a man rest his finger-tips on this out-of-the-way shelf? Had he done so in an effort to balance himself for a look up the chimney? No; for then the marks made by his fingers would have extended to the edge of the shelf, whereas these were in the middle of it. Their shape, too, was round, not oblong; hence, the pressure had come from above and—ah! I had it, these impressions in the dust of the shelf were just such as would be made by a person steadying himself for a close look at the old picture. And this accounted also for the overturned chair, and for the handkerchief used as a duster. Some one's interest in this picture had been greater than mine; some one who was either very near-sighted or whose temperament was such that only the closest inspection would satisfy an aroused curiosity.

This gave me an idea, or rather impressed upon me the necessity of preserving the outline of these tell-tale marks while they were still plain to the eye. Taking out my penknife, I lightly ran the point of my sharpest blade around each separate impression till I had fixed them for all time in the well worn varnish of the mahogany.

This done, my thoughts recurred to the question already raised. What was there in this old picture to arouse such curiosity in one bent on evil if not fresh from a hideous crime? I have said before that the picture as a picture was worthless, a mere faded sketch fit only for lumbering up some old garret. Then wherein lay its charm,—a charm which I myself had felt, though not to this extent? It was useless to conjecture. A fresh difficulty had been added to my task by this puzzling discovery, but difficulties only increased my interest. It was with an odd feeling of elation that, in a further examination of this room, I came upon two additional facts equally odd and irreconcilable.

One was the presence of a penknife with the file blade open, on a small table under the window marked by the loosened shutter. Scattered about it were some filings which shone as the light from my lantern fell upon them, but which were so fine as to call for a magnifying-glass to make them out. The other was in connection with a closet not far from the great bed. It was an empty closet so far as the hooks went and the two great drawers which I found standing half open at its back; but in the middle of the floor lay an overturned candelabrum similar to the one below, but with its prisms scattered and its one candle crushed and battered out of all shape on the blackened boards. If upset while alight, the foot which had stamped upon it in a wild endeavor to put out the flames had been a frenzied one. Now, by whom had this frenzy been shown, and when? Within the hour? I could detect no smell of smoke. At some former time, then? say on the day of the bridal?

Glancing from the broken candle at my feet to the one giving its last sputter in the tumbler on the dressing table, I owned myself perplexed.

Surely, no ordinary explanation fitted these extraordinary and seemingly contradictory circumstances.

IV
SIGNED, VERONICA

I am in some ways hypersensitive. Among my other weaknesses I have a wholesome dread of ridicule, and this is probably why I failed to press my theory on the captain when he appeared, and even forbore to mention the various small matters which had so attracted my attention. If he and the experienced men who came with him saw suicide and nothing but suicide in this lamentable shooting of a bride of two weeks, then it was not for me to suggest a deeper crime, especially as one of the latter eyed me with open scorn when I proposed to accompany them upstairs into the room where the light had been seen burning. No, I would keep my discoveries to myself or, at least, forbear to mention them till I found the captain alone, asking nothing at this juncture but permission to remain in the house till Mr. Jeffrey arrived.

I had been told that an officer had gone for this gentleman, and when I heard the sound of wheels in front I made a rush for the door, in my anxiety to catch a glimpse of him. But it was a woman who alighted.

As this woman was in a state of great agitation, one of the men hastened down to offer his arm. As she took it, I asked Hibbard, who had suddenly reappeared upon the scene, who she was.

He said that she was probably the sister of the woman who lay inside. Upon which I remembered that this lady, under the name of Miss Tuttle—she was but half-sister to Miss Moore—had been repeatedly mentioned by the reporters, in the accounts of the wedding before mentioned, as a person of superior attainments and magnificent beauty.

This did not take from my interest, and flinging decorum to the winds, I approached as near as possible to the threshold which she must soon cross. As I did so I was astonished to hear the strains of Uncle David's organ still pealing from the opposite side of the way. This at a moment so serious and while matters of apparent consequence were taking place in the house to which he had himself directed the attention of the police, struck me as carrying stoicism to the extreme. Not very favorably impressed by this display of open if not insulting indifference on the part of the sole remaining Moore, —an indifference which did not appear quite natural even in a man of his morbid eccentricity,—I resolved to know more of this old man and, above all, to make myself fully acquainted with the exact relations which had existed between him and his unhappy niece.

Meanwhile Miss Tuttle had stepped within the circle of light cast by our lanterns.

I have never seen a finer woman, nor one whose features displayed a more heart-rending emotion. This called for respect, and I, for one, endeavored to show it by withdrawing into the background. But I soon stepped forward again. My desire to understand her was too great, the impression made by her bearing too complex, to be passed over lightly by one on the lookout for a key to the remarkable tragedy before us.

Meanwhile her lips had opened with the cry:

"My sister! Where is my sister?"

The captain made a hurried movement toward the rear and then with the laudable intention, doubtless, of preparing her for the ghastly sight which awaited her, returned and opened a way for her into the drawing-room. But she was not to be turned aside from her course. Passing him by, she made directly for the library which she entered with a bound. Struck by her daring, we all crowded up behind her, and, curious brutes that we were, grouped ourselves in a semicircle about the doorway as she faltered toward her sister's outstretched form and fell on her knees beside it. Her involuntary shriek and the fierce recoil she made as her eyes fell on the long white ribbon trailing over the floor from her sister's wrist, struck me as voicing the utmost horror of which the human soul is capable. It was as though her very soul were pierced. Something in the fact itself, something in the appearance of this snowy ribbon tied to the scarce whiter wrist, seemed to pluck at the very root of her being; and

when her glance, in traveling its length, lighted on the death dealing weapon at its end, she cringed in such apparent anguish that we looked to see her fall in a swoon or break out into delirium. We were correspondingly startled when she suddenly burst forth with this word of stern command:

"Untie that knot! Why do you leave that dreadful thing fast to her? Untie it, I say, it is killing me; I can not bear the sight." And from trembling she passed to shuddering till her whole body shook convulsively.

The captain, with much consideration, drew back the hand he had impulsively stretched toward the ribbon.

"No, no," he protested; "we can not do that; we can do nothing till the coroner comes. It is necessary that he should see her just as she was found. Besides, Mr. Jeffrey has a right to the same privilege. We expect him any moment."

The beautiful head of the woman before us shook involuntarily, but her lips made no protest. I doubt if she possessed the power of speech at that moment. A change, subtle, but quite perceptible, had taken place in her emotions at mention of her sister's husband, and, though she exerted herself to remain calm, the effort seemed too much for her strength. Anxious to hide this evidence of weakness, she rose impetuously; and then we saw how tall she was, how the long lines of her cloak became her, and what a glorious creature she was altogether.

"It will kill him," she groaned in a deep inward voice. Then, with a certain forced haste and in a tone of surprise which to my ear had not quite a natural ring, she called aloud on her who could no longer either listen or answer:

"Oh, Veronica, Veronica! What cause had you for death? And why do we find you lying here in a spot you so feared and detested?"

"Don't you know?" insinuated the captain, with a mild persuasiveness, such as he was seldom heard to use. "Do you mean that you can not account for your sister's violent end, you, who have lived with her—or so I have been told-ever since her marriage with Mr. Jeffrey?"

"Yes."

Keen and clear the word rang out, fierce in its keenness and almost too clear to be in keeping with the half choked tones with which she added: "I know that she was not happy, that she never has been happy since the shadow which this room suggests fell upon her marriage. But how could I so much as dream that her dread of the past or her fear of the future would drive her to suicide, and in this place of all places! Had I done so—had I imagined in the least degree that she was affected to this extent—do you think that I would have left her for one instant alone? None of us knew that she contemplated death. She had no appearance of it; she laughed when I—"

What had she been about to say? The captain seemed to wonder, and after waiting in vain for the completion of her sentence, he quietly suggested:

"You have not finished what you had to say, Miss Tuttle."

She started and seemed to come back from some remote region of thought into which she had wandered. "I don't know—I forget," she stammered, with a heart-broken sigh. "Poor Veronica! Wretched Veronica! How shall I ever tell him! How, how, can we ever prepare him!"

The captain took advantage of this reference to Mr. Jeffrey to ask where that gentleman was. The young lady did not seem eager to reply, but when pressed, answered, though somewhat mechanically, that it was impossible for her to say; Mr. Jeffrey had many friends with any one of whom he might be enjoying a social evening.

"But it is far past midnight now," remarked the captain. "Is he in the habit of remaining out late?"

"Sometimes," she faintly admitted. "Two or three times since his marriage he has been out till one."

Were there other causes for the young bride's evident disappointment and misery besides the one intimated? There certainly was some excuse for thinking so.

Possibly some one of as may have shown his doubts in this regard, for the woman before us suddenly broke forth with this vehement assertion:

"Mr. Jeffrey was a loving husband to my sister. A very loving husband," she emphasized. Then, growing desperately pale, she added, "I have never known a better man," and stopped.

Some hidden anguish in this cry, some self-consciousness in this pause, suggested to me a possibility which I was glad to see ignored by the captain in his next question.

"When did you see your sister last?" he asked. "Were you at home when she left her husband's house?"

"Alas!" she murmured. Then seeing that a more direct answer was expected of her, she added with as little appearance of effort as possible: "I was at home and I heard her go out. But I had no idea that it was for any purpose other than to join some social gathering."

"Dressed this way?"

The captain pointed to the floor and her eyes followed. Certainly Mrs. Jeffrey was not appareled for an evening company. As Miss Tuttle realized the trap into which she had been betrayed, her words rushed forth and tripped each other up.

"I did not notice. She often wore black—it became her. My sister was eccentric."

Worse, worse than useless. Some slips can not be explained away. Miss Tuttle seemed to realize that this was one of them, for she paused abruptly, with the words half finished on her tongue. Yet her attitude commanded respect, and I for one was ready to accord it to her.

Certainly, such a woman was not to be seen every day, and if her replies lacked candor, there was a nobility in her presence which gave the lie to any doubt. At least, that was the effect she produced on me. Whether or not her interrogator shared my feeling I could not so readily determine, for his attention as well as mine was suddenly diverted by the cry which now escaped her lips.

"Her watch! Where is her watch? It is gone! I saw it on her breast and it's gone. It hung just —just where—"

"Wait!" cried one of the men who had been peering about the floor. "Is this it?"

He held aloft a small object blazing with jewels.

"Yes," she gasped, trying to take it.

But the officer gave it to the captain instead.

"It must have slipped from her as she fell," remarked the latter, after a cursory examination of the glittering trinket. "The pin by which she attached it to her dress must have been insecurely fastened." Then quickly and with a sharp look at Miss Tuttle: "Do you know if this was considered an accurate timepiece?"

"Yes. Why do you ask? Is it—"

"Look!" He held it up with the face toward us. The hands stood at thirteen minutes past seven. "The hour and the moment when it struck the floor," he declared. "And consequently the hour and the moment when Mrs. Jeffrey fell," finished Durbin.

Miss Tuttle said nothing, only gasped.

"Valuable evidence," quoth the captain, putting the watch in his pocket. Then, with a kind look at her, called forth by the sight of her misery:

"Does this hour agree with the time of her leaving the house?"

"I can not say. I think so. It was some time before or after seven. I don't remember the exact minute."

"It would take fifteen for her to walk here. Did she walk?"

"I do not know. I didn't see her leave. My room is at the back of the house."

"You can say if she left alone or in the company of her husband?"

"Mr. Jeffrey was not with her?"

"Was Mr. Jeffrey in the house?"

"He was not."

This last negative was faintly spoken.

The captain noticed this and ventured upon interrogating her further.

"How long had he been gone?"

Her lips parted; she was deeply agitated; but when she spoke it was coldly and with studied precision.

"Mr. Jeffrey was not at home to-night at all. He has not been in all day."

"Not at home? Did his wife know that he was going to dine out?"

"She said nothing about it."

The captain cut short his questions and in another moment I understood why. A gentleman was standing in the doorway, whose face once seen, was enough to stop the words on any man's lips. Miss Tuttle saw this gentleman almost as quickly as we did and sank with an involuntary moan to her knees.

It was Francis Jeffrey come to look upon his dead bride.

I have been present at many tragic scenes and have beheld men under almost every aspect of grief, terror and remorse; but there was something in the face of this man at this dreadful moment that was quite new to me, and, as I judge, equally new to the other hardy officials about me. To be sure he was a gentleman and a very high-bred one at that; and it is but seldom we have to do with any of his ilk.

Breathlessly we awaited his first words.

Not that he showed frenzy or made any display of the grief or surprise natural to the occasion. On the contrary, he was the quietest person present, and among all the emotions his white face mirrored I saw no signs of what might be called sorrow. Yet his appearance was one to wring the heart and rouse the most contradictory conjectures as to just what chord in his evidently highly strung nature throbbed most acutely to the horror and astonishment of this appalling end of so short a married life.

His eye, which was fixed on the prostrate body of his bride, did not yield up its secret. When he moved and came to where she lay and caught his first sight of the ribbon and the pistol attached to it, the most experienced among us were baffled as to the nature of his feelings and thoughts. One thing alone was patent to all. He had no wish to touch this woman whom he had so lately sworn to cherish. His eyes devoured her, he shuddered and strove several times to speak, and though kneeling by her side, he did not reach forth his hand nor did he let a tear fall on the appealing features so pathetically turned upward as if to meet his look.

Suddenly he leaped to his feet.

"Must she stay here?" he demanded, looking about for the person most in authority.

The captain answered by a question:

"How do you account for her being here at all? What explanation have you, as her husband, to give for this strange suicide of your wife?"

For reply, Mr. Jeffrey, who was an exceptionally handsome man, drew forth a small slip of crumpled paper, which he immediately handed over to the speaker.

"Let her own words explain," said he. "I found this scrap of writing in our upstairs room when I returned home to-night. She must have written it just before—before—"

A smothered groan filled up the break, but it did not come from his lips, which were fixed and set, but from those of the woman who crouched amongst us. Did he catch this expression of sorrow from one whose presence he as yet had given no token of recognizing? He did not seem to. His eye was on the captain, who was slowly reading, by the light of a lantern held in a detective's hand, the almost illegible words which Mr. Jeffrey had just said were his wife's last communication.

Will they seem as pathetic to the eye as they did to the ear in that room of awesome memories and present death?

> "I find that I do not love you as I thought I did. I can not live, knowing this to be so. I pray God that you may forgive me.

VERONICA"

A gasp from the figure in the corner; then silence. We were glad to hear the captain's voice again.

"A woman's heart is a great mystery," he remarked, with a short glance at Mr. Jeffrey.

It was a sentiment we could all echo; for he, to whom she had alluded in these few lines as one she could not love, was a man whom most women would consider the embodiment of all that was admirable and attractive.

That one woman so regarded him was apparent to all. If ever the heart spoke in a human face, it spoke in that of Miss Tuttle as she watched her sister's husband struggling for composure above the prostrate form of her who but a few hours previous had been the envy of all the fashionable young women in Washington. I found it hard to fix my attention on the next question, interesting and valuable as every small detail was likely to prove in case my theory of this crime should ever come to be looked on as the true one.

"How came you to search here for the wife who had written you this vague and far from satisfactory farewell? I see no hint in these lines of the place where she intended to take her life."

"No! no!" Even this strong man shrank from this idea and showed a very natural recoil as his glances flew about the ill-omened room and finally rested on the fireside over which so repellent a mystery hung in impenetrable shadow. "She said nothing of her intentions; nothing! But the man who came for me told me where she was to be found. He was waiting at the door of my house. He had been on a search for me up and down the town. We met on the stoop."

The captain accepted this explanation without cavil. I was glad he did. But to me the affair showed inconsistencies which I secretly felt it to be my especial duty to unravel.

V
MASTER AND DOG

No further opportunity was afforded me that night for studying the three leading characters in the remarkable drama I saw unfolding before me. A task was assigned me by the captain which took me from the house, and I missed the next scene—the arrival of the coroner. But I repaid myself for this loss in a way I thought justified by the importance of my own theory and the evident necessity there was of collecting each and every point of evidence which could give coloring to the charge, in the event of this crime coming to be looked on at headquarters as one of murder.

Observing that a light was still burning in Uncle David's domicile, I crossed to his door and rang the bell. I was answered by the deep and prolonged howl of a dog, soon cut short by his master's amiable greeting. This latter was a surprise to me. I had heard so often of Mr. Moore's churlishness as a host that I had expected some rebuff. But I encountered no such tokens of hostility. His brow was smooth and his smile cheerfully condescending. Indeed, he appeared anxious to have me enter, and cast an indulgent look at Rudge, whose irrepressible joy at this break in the monotony of his existence was tinged with a very evident dread of offending his master. Interested anew, I followed this man of contradictory impulses into the room toward which he led me.

The time has now come for a more careful description of this peculiar man. Mr. Moore was tall and of that refined spareness of shape which suggests the scholar. Yet he had not the scholar's eye. On the contrary, his regard was quick, if not alert, and while it did not convey actual malice or ill-will, it roused in the spectator an uncomfortable feeling, not altogether easy to analyze. He wore his iron gray locks quite long, and to this distinguishing idiosyncrasy, as well as to his invariable custom of taking his dog with him wherever he went, was due the interest always shown in him by street urchins. On account of his whimsicalities, he had acquired the epithet of Uncle David among them, despite his aristocratic connections and his gentlemanlike bearing. His clothes formed no exception to the general air of individuality which marked him. They were of different cut from those of other men, and in this as in many other ways he was a law to himself; notably so in the following instance: He kept one day of the year religiously, and kept it always in the same way. Long years before, he had been blessed with a wife who both understood and loved him. He had never forgotten this fact, and once a year, presumably on the anniversary of her death, it was his custom to go to the cemetery where she lay and to spend the whole day under the shadow of the stone he had raised to her memory. No matter what the weather, no matter what the condition of his own health, he was always to be seen in this spot, at the hour of seven, leaning against the shaft on which his wife's name was written, eating his supper in the company of his dog. It was a custom he had never omitted. So well known was it to the boys and certain other curious individuals in the neighborhood that he never lacked an audience, though woe betide the daring foot that presumed to invade the precincts of the lot he called his, or the venturesome voice which offered to raise itself in gibe or jeer. He had but to cast a glance at Rudge and an avenging rush scattered the crowd in a twinkling. But he seldom had occasion to resort to this extreme measure for preserving the peace and quiet of his solemn watch. As a rule he was allowed to eat his meal undisturbed, and to pass out unmolested even by ridicule, though his teeth might still be busy over some final tidbit. Often the great tears might be seen hanging undried upon his withered cheeks.

So much for one oddity which may stand as a sample of many others.

One glance at the room into which he ushered me showed why he cherished so marked a dislike for visitors. It was bare to the point of discomfort, and had it not been for a certain quaintness in the shape of the few articles to be seen there, I should have experienced a decided feeling of repulsion, so pronounced was the contrast between this poverty-stricken interior and the polished bearing of its owner. He, I am sure, could have shown no more elevated manners if he had been doing the honors of

a palace. The organ, with the marks of home construction upon it, was the only object visible which spoke of luxury or even comfort.

But enough of these possibly uninteresting details. I did not dwell on them myself, except in a vague way and while waiting for him to open the conversation. This he did as soon as he saw that I had no intention of speaking first.

"And did you find any one in the old house?" he asked.

Keeping him well under my eye, I replied with intentional brusqueness:

"She has gone there once too often!"

The stare he gave me was that of an actor who feels that some expression of surprise is expected from him.

"She?" he repeated. "Whom can you possibly mean by she?"

The surprise I expressed at this bold attempt at ingenuousness was better simulated than his, I hope.

"You don't know!" I exclaimed. "Can you live directly opposite a place of such remarkable associations and not interest yourself in who goes in and out of its deserted doors?"

"I don't sit in my front window," he peevishly returned.

I let my eye roam toward a chair standing suspiciously near the very window he had designated.

"But you saw the light?" I suggested.

"I saw that from the door-step when I went out to give Rudge his usual five minutes' breathing spell on the stoop. But you have not answered my question; whom do you mean by she?"

"Veronica Jeffrey," I replied. "She who was Veronica Moore. She has visited this haunted house of hers for the last time."

"Last time!" Either he could not or would not understand me.

"What has happened to my niece?" he cried, rising with an energy that displaced the great dog and sent him, with hanging head and trailing tail, to his own special sleeping-place under the table. "Has she run upon a ghost in those dismal apartments? You interest me greatly. I did not think she would ever have the pluck to visit this house again after what happened at her wedding."

"She has had the pluck," I assured him; "and what is more, she has had enough of it not only to reenter the house, but to reenter it alone. At least, such is the present inference. Had you been blessed with more curiosity and made more frequent use of the chair so conveniently placed for viewing the opposite house, you might have been in a position to correct this inference. It would help the police materially to know positively that she had no companion in her fatal visit."

"Fatal?" he repeated, running his finger inside his neckband, which suddenly seemed to have grown too tight for comfort. "Can it be that my niece has been frightened to death in that old place? You alarm me."

He did not look alarmed, but then he was not of an impressible nature. Yet he was of the same human clay as the rest of us, and, if he knew no more of this occurrence than he tried to make out, could not be altogether impervious to what I had to say next.

"You have a right to be alarmed," I assented. "She was not frightened to death, yet is she lying dead on the library floor." Then, with a glance at the windows about me, I added lightly: "I take it that a pistol-shot delivered over there could not be heard in this room."

He sank rather melodramatically into his seat, yet his face and form did not lose that sudden assumption of dignity which I had observed in him ever since my entrance into the house.

"I am overwhelmed by this news," he remarked. "She has shot herself? Why?"

"I did not say that she had shot herself," I carefully repeated. "Yet the facts point that way and Mr. Jeffrey accepts the suicide theory without question."

"Ah, Mr. Jeffrey is there!"

"Most certainly; he was sent for at once."

"And Miss Tuttle? She came with him of course?"

"She came, but not with him. She is very fond of her sister."

"I must go over at once," he cried, leaping again to his feet and looking about for his hat. "It is my duty to make them feel at home; in short, to—to put the house at their disposal." Here he found his hat and placed it on his head. "The property is mine now, you know," he politely explained, turning, with a keen light in his gray eye, full upon me and overwhelming me with the grand air of a man who has come unexpectedly into his own. "Mrs. Jeffrey's father was my younger brother—the story is an old and long one—and the property, which in all justice should have been divided between us, went entirely to him. But he was a good fellow in the main and saw the injustice of his father's will as clearly as I did, and years ago made one on his own account bequeathing me the whole estate in case he left no issue, or that issue died. Veronica was his only child; Veronica has died; therefore the old house is mine and all that goes with it, all that goes with it."

There was the miser's gloating in this repetition of a phrase sufficiently expressive in itself, or rather the gloating of a man who sees himself suddenly rich after a life of poverty. There was likewise a callousness as regarded his niece's surprising death which I considered myself to have some excuse for noticing.

"You accept her death very calmly," I remarked. "Probably you knew her to be possessed of an erratic mind."

He was about to bestow an admonitory kick on his dog, who had been indiscreet enough to rise at his master's first move, but his foot stopped in mid air, in his anxiety to concentrate all his attention on his answer.

"I am a man of few sentimentalities," he coldly averred. "I have loved but one person in my whole life. Why then should I be expected to mourn over a niece who did not care enough for me to invite me to her wedding? It would be an affectation unworthy the man who has at last come to fill his rightful position in this community as the owner of the great Moore estate. For great it shall be," he emphatically continued. "In three years you will not know the house over yonder. Despite its fancied ghosts and death-dealing fireplace, it will stand A Number One in Washington. I, David Moore, promise you this; and I am not a man to utter fatuous prophecies. But I must be missed over there." Here he gave the mastiff the long delayed kick. "Rudge, stay here! The vestibule opposite is icy. Besides, your howls are not wanted in those old walls tonight even if you would go with me, which I doubt. He has never been willing to cross to that side of the street," the old gentleman went on to complain, with his first show of irritation. "But he'll have to overcome that prejudice soon, even if I have to tear up the old hearthstone and reconstruct the walls. I can't live without Rudge, and I will not live in any other place than in the old home of my ancestors."

I was by this time following him out.

"You have failed to answer the suggestion I made you a minute since," I hazarded. "Will you pardon me if I put it now as a question? Your niece, Mrs. Jeffrey, seemed to have everything in the world to make her happy, yet she took her life. Was there a taint of insanity in her blood, or was her nature so impulsive that her astonishing death in so revolting a place should awaken in you so little wonder?"

A gleam of what had made him more or less feared by the very urchins who dogged his steps and made sport of him at a respectful distance shot from his eye as he glowered back at me from the open door. But he hastily suppressed this sign of displeasure and replied with the faintest tinge of sarcasm:

"There! you are expecting from me feelings which belong to youth or to men of much more heart than understanding. I tell you that I have no feelings. My niece may have developed insanity or she may simply have drunk her cup of pleasure dry at twenty-two and come to its dregs prematurely. I do not know and I do not care. What concerns me is that the responsibility of a large fortune has fallen upon me most unexpectedly and that I have pride enough to wish to show myself capable of sustaining the burden. Besides, they may be tempted to do some mischief to the walls or floors over there. The

police respect no man's property. But I am determined they shall respect mine. No rippings up or tearings down will I allow unless I stand by to supervise the job. I am master of the old homestead now and I mean to show it." And with a last glance at the dog, who uttered the most mournful of protests in reply, he shut the front door and betook himself to the other side of the street.

As I noticed his assured bearing as he disappeared within the forbidding portal which, according to his own story, had for so long a time been shut against him, I asked myself if the candle which I had noticed lying on his mantel-shelf was of the same make and size as those I had found in my late investigations in the house he was then entering.

VI
GOSSIP

Next morning the city was in a blaze of excitement. All the burning questions of the hour—the rapid mobilization of the army and the prospect of a speedy advance on Cuba—were forgotten in the one engrossing topic of young Mrs. Jeffrey's death and the awful circumstances surrounding it. Nothing else was in any one's mouth and but little else in any one's heart. Her youth, her prominence, her union with a man of such marked attractions as Mr. Jeffrey, the tragedy connected with her marriage, thrown now into shadow by the still more poignant tragedy which had so suddenly terminated her own life, gave to the affair an interest which for those first twenty-four hours did not call for any further heightening by a premature suggestion of murder.

Though I was the hero of the hour and, as such, subjected to an infinite number of questions, I followed the lead of my superiors in this regard and carefully refrained from advancing any theories beyond the obvious one of suicide. The moment for self-exploitation was not ripe; I did not stand high enough in the confidence of the major, or, I may say, of the lieutenant of my own precinct, to risk the triumph I anticipated ultimately by a premature expression of opinion.

I had an enemy at headquarters; or, rather, one of the men there had always appeared peculiarly interested in showing me up in the worst light. The name of this man was Durbin, and it was he who had uttered something like a slighting remark when on that first night I endeavored to call the captain's attention to some of the small matters which had offered themselves to me in the light of clues. Perhaps it was the prospect of surprising him some day which made me so wary now as well as so alert to fill my mind with all known facts concerning the Jeffreys. One of my first acts was to turn over the files of the Star and reread the following account of the great wedding. As it is a sensational description of a sensational event, I shall make no apology for the headlines which startled all Washington the night they appeared.

"STARTLING TERMINATION OF THE JEFFREY-MOORE WEDDING.

THE TRADITIONAL DOOM FOLLOWS THE OPENING OF THE OLD HOUSE ON WAVERLEY AVENUE.

ONE OF THE GUESTS FOUND LYING DEAD ON THE LIBRARY HEARTHSTONE.

LETTERS IN HIS POCKET SHOW HIM TO HAVE BEEN ONE W. PFEIFFER OF DENVER.

NO INTERRUPTION TO THE CEREMONY FOLLOWS THIS GHASTLY DISCOVERY, BUT THE GUESTS FLY IN ALL DIRECTIONS AS SOON AS THE NUPTIAL KNOT IS TIED.

"The festivities attendant upon the wedding of Miss Veronica Moore to Mr. Francis Jeffrey of this city met with a startling check to-day. As most of our readers know, the long-closed house on Waverley Avenue, which for nearly a century has been in possession of the bride's family, was opened for the occasion at the express wish of the bride. For a week the preparations for this great function have been going on. When at an early hour this morning a line of carriages drew up in front of the historic mansion and the bridal party entered under its once gloomy but now seemingly triumphant portal, the crowds, which blocked the street from curb to curb, testified to the interest felt by the citizens of Washington in this daring attempt to brave the traditions which have marked this house out as solitary, and by a scene of joyous festivity make the past forgotten and restore again to usefulness the decayed grandeurs of an earlier time. As Miss Moore is one of Washington's most charming women, and as this romantic effort naturally lent an extraordinary interest to the ceremony of her marriage, a large number of our representative people assembled to witness it, and by high noon the scene was one of unusual brilliancy.

"Halls which had moldered away in an unbroken silence for years echoed again with laughter and palpitated to the choicest strains of the Marine Band. All doors were open save those of the

library—an exception which added a pleasing excitement to the occasion—and when by chance some of the more youthful guests were caught peering behind the two Corinthian pillars guarding these forbidden precincts the memories thus evoked were momentary and the shadow soon passed.

"The wedding had been set for high noon, and as the clock in the drawing-room struck the hour every head was craned to catch the first glimpse of the bride coming down the old-fashioned staircase. But five minutes, ten minutes, a half-hour, passed without this expectation being gratified. The crowd above and below was growing restless, when suddenly a cry was heard from beyond the gilded pillars framing the library door, and a young lady was seen rushing from the forbidden quarter, trembling with dismay and white with horror. It was Miss Abbott of Stratford Circle, who in the interim of waiting had allowed her curiosity to master her dread, and by one peep into the room, which seemed to exercise over her the fascination of a Bluebeard's chamber, discovered the outstretched form of a man lying senseless and apparently dead on the edge of the hearthstone. The terror which instantly spread amongst the guests shows the hold which superstition has upon all classes of humanity. Happily, however, an unseemly panic was averted, by the necessity which all felt of preserving some sort of composure till the ceremony for which they had assembled had been performed. For simultaneously with this discovery of death in the library there had come from above the sound of the approaching bridal procession, and cries were hushed, and beating hearts restrained, as Miss Moore's charming face and exquisite figure appeared between the rows of flowering plants with which the staircase was lined. No need for the murmur to go about, 'Spare the bride! Let nothing but cheer surround her till she is Jeffrey's wife!' The look of joy which irradiated her countenance, and gave a fairy-like aspect to her whole exquisite person would have deterred the most careless and self-centered person there from casting a shadow across her pathway one minute sooner than necessity demanded. The richness of the ancestral veil which covered her features and the natural timidity which prevents a bride from lifting her eyes from the floor she traverses saved her from observing the strange looks by which her presence was hailed. She was consequently enabled to go through the ceremony in happy unconsciousness of the forced restraint which held that surging mass together.

"But the bridesmaids were not so happy. Miss Tuttle especially held herself upright simply by the exercise of her will; and though resplendent in `beauty, suffered so much in her anxiety for the bride that it was a matter of small surprise when she fainted at the conclusion of the ceremony.

"Mr. Jeffrey showed more composure, but the inward excitement under which he was laboring made him trip more than once in his responses, as many there noted whose minds were not fixed too strongly on flight.

"Only Doctor Auchincloss was quite himself, and by means of the solemnity with which he invested his words kept the hubbub down, which was already making itself heard on the outskirts of the crowd. But even his influence did not prevail beyond the moment devoted to the benediction. Once the sacred words were said, such a stampede followed that the bride showed much alarm, and it was left for Mr. Jeffrey to explain to her the cause of this astonishing conduct on the part of her guests. She bore the disclosure well, all things considered, and once she was fully assured that the unhappy man whose sudden death had thus interrupted the festivities was an intruder upon the scene, and quite unknown, not only to herself but to her newly-made husband, she brightened perceptibly, though, like every one around her, she seemed anxious to leave the house, and, indeed, did so as soon as Miss Tuttle's condition warranted it.

"The fact that the bride went through the ceremony without her bridal bouquet is looked upon by many as an unfavorable omen. In her anxiety not to impose any longer upon the patience of her guests, she had descended without it.

"As to the deceased, but little is known of him. Letters found on his person prove his name to be W. Pfeiffer, and his residence Denver. His presence in Miss Moores house at a time so inopportune is unexplained. No such name is on the list of wedding guests, nor was he recognized as one of Miss

Moore's friends either by Mr. Jeffrey or by such of her relatives and acquaintances as had the courage to enter the library to see him.

"With the exception of the discolored mark on his temple, showing where his head had come in contact with the hearthstone, his body presents an appearance of natural robustness, which makes his sudden end seem all the more shocking.

"His name has been found registered at the National Hotel."

Turning over the files, I next came upon the following despatch from Denver:

"The sudden death in Washington of Wallace Pfeiffer, one of our best known and most respected citizens, is deeply deplored by all who knew him and his unfortunate mother. He is the last of her three sons, all of whom have died within the year. The demise of Wallace leaves her entirely unprovided for. It was not known here that Mr. Pfeiffer intended to visit Washington. He was supposed to go in quite the opposite direction, having said to more than one that he had business in San Francisco. His intrusion into the house of Miss Moore during the celebration of a marriage in which he could have taken no personal interest is explained in the following manner by such as knew his mental peculiarities: Though a merchant by trade and latterly a miner in the Klondike, he had great interest in the occult and was a strong believer in all kinds of supernatural manifestations. He may have heard of the unhappy reputation attaching to the Moore house in Washington and, fascinated by the mystery involved, embraced the opportunity afforded by open doors and the general confusion incident to so large a gathering to enter the interesting old place and investigate for himself the fatal library. The fact of his having been found secluded in this very room, at a moment when every other person in the house was pushing forward to see the bride, lends color to this supposition; and his sudden death under circumstances tending to rouse the imagination shows the extreme sensitiveness of his nature.

"He will be buried here."

The next paragraph was short. Fresher events were already crowding this three-days-old wonder to the wall.

"Verdict in the case of Wallace Pfeiffer, found lying dead on the hearthstone of the old Moore house library.

"Concussion of the brain, preceded by mental shock or heart failure.

"The body went on to Denver to=day."

And below, separated by the narrowest of spaces:

"Mr. and Mrs. Francis Jeffrey have decided to give up their wedding tour and spend their honeymoon in Washington. They will occupy the Ransome house on K Street."

The last paragraph brought me back to the question then troubling my mind. Was it in the household of this newly married pair and in the possible secret passions underlying their union that one should look for the cause of the murderous crime I secretly imagined to be hidden behind this seeming suicide? Or were these parties innocent and old David Moore the one motive power in precipitating a tragedy, the result of which had been to enrich him and impoverish them? Certainly, a most serious and important question, and one which any man might be pardoned for attempting to answer, especially if that man was a young detective lamenting his obscurity and dreaming of a recognition which would yield him fame and the wherewithal to marry a certain clever but mischievous little minx of whom you are destined to hear more.

But how was that same young detective, hampered as he was, and held in thrall by a fear of ridicule and a total lack of record, to get the chance to push an inquiry requiring opportunities which could only come by special favor? This was what I continually asked myself, and always without result.

True, I might approach the captain or the major with my story of the tell-tale marks I had discovered in the dust covering the southwest chamber mantel-shelf, and, if fortunate enough to find that these had been passed over by the other detectives, seek to gain a hearing thereby and secure for myself the privileges I so earnestly desired. But my egotism was such that I wished to be sure of

the hand which had made these marks before I parted with a secret which, once told, would make or mar me. Yet to obtain the slight concession of an interview with any of the principals connected with this crime would be difficult without the aid of one or both of my superiors. Even to enter the house again where but a few hours before I had made myself so thoroughly at home would require a certain amount of pluck; for Durbin had been installed there, and Durbin was a watch-dog whose bite as well as his bark I regarded with considerable respect. Yet into that house I must sooner or later go, if only to determine whether or not I had been alone in my recognition of certain clues pointing plainly toward murder. Should I trust my lucky star and remain for the nonce quiescent? This seemed a wise suggestion and I decided to adopt it, comforting myself with the thought that if after a day or two of modest waiting I failed in obtaining what I wished, I could then appeal to the lieutenant of my own precinct. He, I had sometimes felt assured, did not regard me with an altogether unfavorable eye.

Meantime I spent all my available time in loitering around newspaper offices and picking up such stray bits of gossip as were offered. As no question had yet been raised of any more serious crime than suicide, these mostly related to the idiosyncrasies of the Moore family and the solitary position into which Miss Tuttle had been plunged by this sudden death of her only relative. As this beautiful and distinguished young woman had been and still was a great belle in her special circle, her present homeless, if not penniless, position led to many surmises. Would she marry, and, if so, to which of the many wealthy or prominent men who had openly courted her would she accord her hand? In the present egotistic state of my mind I secretly flattered myself that I was right in concluding that she would say yes to no man's entreaty till a certain newly-made widower's year of mourning had expired.

But this opinion received something of a check when in a quiet talk with a reporter I learned that it was openly stated by those who had courage to speak that the tie which had certainly existed at one time between Mr. Jeffrey and the handsome Miss Tuttle had been entirely of her own weaving, and that the person of Veronica Moore, rather than the large income she commanded, had been the attractive power which had led him away from the older sister. This seemed improbable; for the charms of the poor little bride were not to be compared with those of her maturer sister. Yet, as we all know, there are other attractions than those offered by beauty. I have since heard it broadly stated that the peculiar twitch of the lip observable in all the Moores had proved an irresistible charm in the unfortunate Veronica, making her a radiant image when she laughed. This was by no means a rare occurrence, so they said, before the fancy took her to be married in the ill-starred home of her ancestors.

The few lines of attempted explanation which she had left behind for her husband seemed to impose on no one. To those who knew the young couple well it was an open proof of her insanity; to those who knew them slightly, as well as to the public at large, it was a woman's way of expressing the disappointment she felt in her husband.

That I might the more readily determine which of these two theories had the firmest basis in fact, I took advantage of an afternoon off and slipped away to Alexandria, where, I had been told, Mr. Jeffrey had courted his bride. I wanted a taste of local gossip, you see, and I got it. The air was fully charged with it, and being careful not to rouse antagonism by announcing myself a detective, I readily picked up many small facts. Brought into shape and arranged in the form of a narrative, the result was as follows:

John Judson Moore, the father of Veronica, had fewer oddities than the other members of this eccentric family. It was thought, however, that he had shown some strain of the peculiar independence of his race when, in selecting a wife, he let his choice fall on a widow who was not only encumbered with a child, but who was generally regarded as the plainest woman in Virginia—he who might have had the pick of Southern beauty. But when in the course of time this despised woman proved to be the possessor of those virtues and social graces which eminently fitted her to conduct the large establishment of which she had been made mistress, he was forgiven his lack of taste. Little more

was said of his peculiarities until, his wife having died and his child proved weakly, he made the will in his brother's favor which has since given that gentleman such deep satisfaction.

Why this proceeding should have been so displeasing to their friends report says not; but that it was so, is evident from the fact that great rejoicing took place on all sides when Veronica suddenly developed into a healthy child and the probability of David Moore's inheriting the coveted estate decreased to a minimum. It was not a long rejoicing, however, for John Judson followed his wife to the grave before Veronica had reached her tenth year, leaving her and her half-sister, Cora, to the guardianship of a crabbed old bachelor who had been his father's lawyer. This lawyer was morose and peevish, but he was never positively unkind. For two years the sisters seemed happy enough when, suddenly and somewhat peremptorily, they were separated, Veronica being sent to a western school, where she remained, seemingly without a single visit east, till she was seventeen. During this long absence Miss Tuttle resided in Washington, developing under masters into an accomplished woman. Veronica's guardian, severe in his treatment of the youthful owner of the large fortune of which he had been made sole executor, was unexpectedly generous to the penniless sister, hoping, perhaps, in his close, peevish old heart, that the charms and acquired graces of this lovely woman would soon win for her a husband in the brilliant set in which she naturally found herself.

But Cora Tuttle was not easy to please, and the first men of Washington came and went before her eyes without awakening in her any special interest till she met Francis Jeffrey, who stole her heart with a look.

Those who remember her that winter say that under his influence she developed from a handsome woman into a lovely one. Yet no engagement was announced, and society was wondering what held Francis Jeffrey back from so great a prize, when Veronica Moore came home, and the question was forever answered.

Veronica was now nearly eighteen, and during her absence had blossomed into womanhood. She was not as beautiful as her sister, but she had a bright and pleasing expression with enough spice in her temperament to rob her girlish features of insipidity and make her conversation witty, if not brilliant. Yet when Francis Jeffrey turned his attentions from Miss Tuttle and fixed them without reserve, or seeming shame, upon this pretty butterfly, but one term could be found to characterize the proceeding, and that was, fortune hunting. Of small but settled income, he had hitherto shown a certain contentment with his condition calculated to inspire respect and make his attentions to Miss Tuttle seem both consistent and appropriate. But no sooner did Veronica's bright eyes appear than he fell at the young heiress' feet and pressed his suit so close and fast that in two months they were engaged and at the end of the half-year, married—with the disastrous consequences just made known.

So much for the general gossip of the town. Now for the special.

A certain gentleman, whom it is unnecessary to name, had been present at one critical instant in the lives of these three persons. He was not a scandalmonger, and if everything had gone on happily, if Veronica had lived and Cora settled down into matrimony, he would never have mentioned what he heard and saw one night in the great drawing-room of a hotel in Atlantic City.

It was at the time when the engagement was first announced between Jeffrey and the young heiress. This and his previous attentions to Cora had made much talk, both in Washington and elsewhere, and there were not lacking those who had openly twitted him for his seeming inconstancy. This had been over the cups of course, and Jeffrey had borne it well enough from his so-called friends and intimates. But when, on a certain evening in the parlor of one of the large hotels in Atlantic City, a fellow whom nobody knew and nobody liked accused him of knowing on which side his bread was buttered, and that certainly it was not on the side of beauty and superior attainments, Jeffrey got angry. Heedless of who might be within hearing, he spoke up very plainly in these words: "You are all of a kind, rank money-worshipers and self-seeker, or you would not be so ready to see greed in my admiration for Miss Moore. Disagreeable as I find it to air my sentiments in this public manner, yet since you provoke me to it, I will say once and for all, that I am deeply in love with Miss Moore,

and that it is for this reason only I am going to marry her. Were she the penniless girl her sister is, and Miss Tuttle the proud possessor of the wealth which, in your eyes, confers such distinction upon Miss Moore, you would still see me at the latter's feet, and at hers only. Miss Tuttle's charms are not potent enough to hold the heart which has once been fixed by her sister's smile."

This was pointed enough, certainly, but when at the conclusion of his words a tall figure rose from a year corner and Cora Tuttle passed the amazed group with a bow, I dare warrant that not one of the men composing it but wished himself a hundred miles away.

Jeffrey himself was chagrined, and made a move to follow the woman he had so publicly scorned, but the look she cast back at him was one to remember, and he hesitated. What was there left for him to say, or even to do? The avowal had been made in all its bald frankness and nothing could alter it. As for her, she behaved beautifully, and by no word or look, so far as the world knew, ever showed that her woman's pride, if not her heart, had been cut to the quick, by the one man she adored.

With this incident filling my mind, I returned to Washington. I had acquainted myself with the open facts of this family's history; but what of its inner life? Who knew it? Did any one? Even the man who confided to me the contretemps in the hotel parlor could not be sure what underlay Mr. Jeffrey's warm advocacy of the woman he had elected to marry. He could not even be certain that he had really understood the feeling shown by Cora Tuttle when she heard the man, who had once lavished attentions on her, express in this public manner a preference for her sister. A woman has great aptness in concealing a mortal hurt, and, from what I had seen of this one, I thought it highly improbable that all was quiet in her passionate breast because she had turned an impassive front to the world.

I was becoming confused in the maze of my own imaginings. To escape the results of this confusion, I determined to drop theory and confine myself to facts.

And thus passed the first few days succeeding the tragic discovery in the Moore house.

VII
SLY WORK

The next morning my duty led me directly in the way of that little friend of mine whom I have already mentioned. It is strange how often my duty did lead me in her way.

She is a demure little creature, with wits as bright as her eyes, which is saying a great deal; and while, in the course of our long friendship, I had admired without making use of the special abilities I saw in her, I felt that the time had now come when they might prove of inestimable value to me.

Greeting her with pardonable abruptness, I expressed my wishes in these possibly alarming words:

"Jinny, you can do something for me. Find out—I know you can, and that, too, without arousing suspicion or compromising either of us—where Mr. Moore, of Waverley Avenue, buys his groceries, and when you have done that, whether or not he has lately resupplied himself with candles."

The surprise which she showed had a touch of naivete in it which was very encouraging.

"Mr. Moore?" she cried, "the uncle of her who—who—"

"The very same," I responded, and waited for her questions without adding a single word in way of explanation.

She gave me a look—oh, what a look! It was as encouraging to the detective as it was welcome to the lover; after which she nodded, once in doubt, once in question and once in frank and laughing consent, and darted off.

I thanked Providence for such a self-contained little aide-decamp and proceeded on my way, in a state of great self-satisfaction.

An hour later I came upon her again. It is really extraordinary how frequently the paths of some people cross.

"Well?" I asked.

"Mr. Moore deals with Simpkins, just two blocks away from his house; and only a week ago he bought some candles there."

I rewarded her with a smile which summoned into view the most exasperating of dimples.

"You had better patronize Simpkins yourself for a little while," I suggested; and by the arch glance with which my words were received, I perceived that my meaning was fully understood.

Experiencing from this moment an increased confidence, not only in the powers of my little friend, but in the line of investigation thus happily established, I cast about for means of settling the one great question which was a necessary preliminary to all future action: Whether the marks detected by me in the dust of the mantel in the southwest chamber had been made by the hand of him who had lately felt the need of candles, albeit his house appeared to be fully lighted by gas?

The subterfuge by which, notwithstanding my many disadvantages, I was finally enabled to obtain unmistakable answer to this query was the fruit of much hard thought. Perhaps I was too proud of it. Perhaps I should have mistrusted myself more from the start. But I was a great egotist in those days, and reckoned quite above their inherent worth any bright ideas which I could safely call my own.

The point aimed at was this: to obtain without Moore's knowledge an accurate impression of his finger-tips.

The task presented difficulties, but these served duly to increase my ardor.

Confiding to the lieutenant of the precinct my great interest in the mysterious house with whose suggestive interior I had made myself acquainted under such tragic circumstances, I asked him as a personal favor to obtain for me an opportunity of spending another night there.

He was evidently surprised by the request, not cherishing, as I suppose, any great longings himself in this direction; but recognizing that for some reason I set great store on this questionable privilege,—I do not think that he suspected in the least what that reason was,—and being, as I have

intimated, favorably disposed to me, he exerted himself to such good effect that I was formally detailed to assist in keeping watch over the premises that very night.

I think that it was at this point I began to reckon on the success which, after many failures and some mischances, was yet to reward my efforts.

As I prepared to enter the old house at nightfall, I allowed myself one short glance across the way to see if my approach had been observed by the man whose secret, if secret he had, I was laying plans to surprise. I was met by a sight I had not expected. Pausing on the pavement in front of me stood a handsome elderly gentleman whose appearance was so fashionable and thoroughly up to date, that I should have failed to recognize him if my glance had not taken in at the same instant the figure of Rudge crouching obstinately on the edge of the curb where he had evidently posted himself in distinct refusal to come any farther. In vain his master,—for the well-dressed man before me was no less a personage than the whilom butt of all the boys between the Capitol and the Treasury building,—signaled and commanded him to cross to his side; nothing could induce the mastiff to budge from that quarter of the street where he felt himself safe.

Mr. Moore, glorying in the prospect of unlimited wealth, presented a startling contrast in more ways than one to the poverty-stricken old man whose curious garb and lonely habits had made him an object of ridicule to half the town. I own that I was half amused and half awed by the condescending bow with which he greeted my offhand nod and the affable way in which he remarked:

"You are making use of your prerogatives as a member of the police, I see."

The words came as easily from his lips as if his practice in affability had been of the very longest.

"I wonder how the old place enjoys its present distinction," he went on, running his eye over the dilapidated walls under which we stood, with very evident pride in their vast proportions and the air of gloomy grandeur which signalized them. "If it partakes in the slightest degree of the feelings of its owner, I can vouch for its impatience at the free use which is made of its time-worn rooms and halls. Are these intrusions necessary? Now that Mrs. Jeffrey's body has been removed, do you feel that the scene of her demise need hold the attention of the police any longer?"

"That is a question to put to the superintendent and not to me," was my deprecatory reply. "The major has issued no orders for the watch to be taken off, so we men have no choice. I am sorry if it offends you. Doubtless a few days will end the matter and the keys will be given into your hand. I suppose you are anxious to move in?"

He cast a glance behind him at his dog, gave a whistle which passed unheeded, and replied with dignity, if but little heart:

"When a man has passed his seventh decade he is not apt to be so patient with delay as when he has a prospect of many years before him. I am anxious to enter my own house, yes; I have much to do there."

I came very near asking him what, but feared to seem too familiar, in case he was the cold but upright man he would fain appear, and too interested and inquiring if he were the whited sepulcher I secretly considered him. So with a nod a trifle more pronounced than if I had been unaffected by either hypothesis, I remounted the steps, carelessly remarking:

"I'll see you again after taking a turn through the house. If I discover anything—ghost marks or human marks which might be of interest to you—I'll let you know."

Something like a growl answered me. But whether it came from master or dog, I did not stop to inquire. I had serious work before me; very serious, considering that it was to be done on my own responsibility and without the knowledge of my superiors. But I was sustained by the thought that no whisper of murder had as yet been heard abroad or at headquarters, and that consequently I was interfering in no great case; merely trying to formulate one.

It was necessary, for the success of my plan, that some time should elapse before I reapproached Mr. Moore. I therefore kept my word to him and satisfied my own curiosity by taking a fresh tour

through the house. Naturally, in doing this, I visited the library. Here all was dark. The faint twilight still illuminating the streets failed to penetrate here. I was obliged to light my lantern.

My first glance was toward the fireplace. Venturesome hands had been there. Not only had, the fender been drawn out and the grate set aside, but the huge settle had been wrenched free from the mantel and dragged into the center of the room. Rather pleased at this change, for with all my apparent bravado I did not enjoy too close a proximity to the cruel hearthstone, I stopped to give this settle a thorough investigation. The result was disappointing. To all appearance and I did not spare it the experiment of many a thump and knock—it was a perfectly innocuous piece of furniture, clumsy of build, but solid and absolutely devoid of anything that could explain the tragedies which had occurred so near it. I even sat down on its musty old cushion and shut my eyes, but was unrewarded by alarming visions, or disturbance of any sort. Nor did the floor where it had stood yield any better results to the inquiring eye. Nothing was to be seen there but the marks left by the removal of its base from the blackened boards.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.