

GREEN ANNA KATHARINE

THE MILL MYSTERY

Anna Green
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I

THE ALARM

*Life, struck sharp on death,
Makes awful lightning.*

—MRS. BROWNING.

I had just come in from the street. I had a letter in my hand. It was for my fellow-lodger, a young girl who taught in the High School, and whom I had persuaded to share my room because of her pretty face and quiet ways. She was not at home, and I flung the letter down on the table, where it fell, address downwards. I thought no more of it; my mind was too full, my heart too heavy with my own trouble.

Going to the window, I leaned my cheek against the pane. Oh, the deep sadness of a solitary woman's life! The sense of helplessness that comes upon her when every effort made, every possibility sounded, she realizes that the world has no place for her, and that she must either stoop to ask the assistance of friends or starve! I have no words for the misery I felt, for I am

a proud woman, and—But no lifting of the curtain that shrouds my past. It has fallen for ever, and for you and me and the world I am simply Constance Sterling, a young woman of twenty-five, without home, relatives, or means of support, having in her pocket seventy-five cents of change, and in her breast a heart like lead, so utterly had every hope vanished in the day's rush of disappointments.

How long I stood with my face to the window I cannot say. With eyes dully fixed upon the blank walls of the cottages opposite, I stood oblivious to all about me till the fading sunlight—or was it some stir in the room behind me?—recalled me to myself, and I turned to find my pretty room-mate staring at me with a troubled look that for a moment made me forget my own sorrows and anxieties.

"What is it?" I asked, going towards her with an irresistible impulse of sympathy.

"I don't know," she murmured; "a sudden pain here," laying her hand on her heart.

I advanced still nearer, but her face, which had been quite pale, turned suddenly rosy; and, with a more natural expression, she took me by the hand, and said:

"But you look more than ill, you look unhappy. Would you mind telling me what worries you?"

The gentle tone, the earnest glance of modest yet sincere interest, went to my heart. Clutching her hand convulsively, I burst into tears.

"It is nothing," said I; "only my last resource has failed, and I don't know where to get a meal for to-morrow. Not that this is any thing in itself," I hastened to add, my natural pride reasserting itself; "but the future! the future!—what am I to do with my future?"

She did not answer at first. A gleam—I can scarcely call it a glow—passed over her face, and her eyes took a far-away look that made them very sweet. Then a little flush stole into her cheek, and, pressing my hand, she said:

"Will you trust it to me for a while?"

I must have looked my astonishment, for she hastened to add:

"Your future I have little concern for. With such capabilities as yours, you must find work. Why, look at your face!" and she drew me playfully before the glass. "See the forehead, the mouth, and tell me you read failure there! But your present is what is doubtful, and that I can certainly take care of."

"But—" I protested, with a sensation of warmth in my cheeks.

The loveliest smile stopped me before I could utter a word more.

"As you would take care of mine," she completed, "if our positions were reversed." Then, without waiting for a further demur on my part, she kissed me, and as if the sweet embrace had made us sisters at once, drew me to a chair and sat down at my feet. "You know," she naively murmured, "I am almost rich; I have five hundred dollars laid up in the bank, and—"

I put my hand over her lips; I could not help it. She was such

a frail little thing, so white and so ethereal, and her poor five hundred had been earned by such weary, weary work.

"But that is nothing, nothing," I said. "You have a future to provide for, too, and you are not as strong as I am, if you have been more successful."

She laughed, then blushed, then laughed again, and impulsively cried:

"It is, however, more than I need to buy a wedding-dress with, don't you think?" And as I looked up surprised, she flashed out: "Oh, it's my secret; but I am going to be married in a month, and—and then I won't need to count my pennies any more; and, so I say, if you will stay here with me without a care until that day comes, you will make me very happy, and put me at the same time under a real obligation; for I shall want a great many things done, as you can readily conceive."

What did I say—what could I say, with her sweet blue eyes looking so truthfully into mine, but—"Oh, you darling girl!" while my heart filled with tears, which only escaped from overflowing my eyes, because I would not lessen her innocent joy by a hint of my own secret trouble.

"And who is the happy man?" I asked, at last, rising to pull down the curtain across a too inquisitive ray of afternoon sunshine.

"Ah, the noblest, best man in town!" she breathed, with a burst of gentle pride. "Mr. B—"

She went no further, or if she did, I did not hear her, for just

then a hubbub arose in the street, and lifting the window, I looked out.

"What is it?" she cried, coming hastily towards me.

"I don't know," I returned. "The people are all rushing in one direction, but I cannot see what attracts them."

"Come away then!" she murmured; and I saw her hand go to her heart, in the way it did when she first entered the room a half-hour before. But just then a sudden voice exclaimed below: "The clergyman! It is the clergyman!" And giving a smothered shriek, she grasped me by the arm, crying: "What do they say? '*The clergyman*'? Do they say '*The clergyman*'?"

"Yes," I answered, turning upon her with alarm. But she was already at the door. "Can it be?" I asked myself, as I hurriedly followed, "that it is Mr. Barrows she is going to marry?"

For in the small town of S— Mr. Barrows was the only man who could properly be meant by "The clergyman"; for though Mr. Kingston, of the Baptist Church, was a worthy man in his way, and the Congregational minister had an influence with his flock that was not to be despised, Mr. Barrows, alone of all his fraternity, had so won upon the affections and confidence of the people as to merit the appellation of "The clergyman."

"If I am right," thought I, "God grant that no harm has come to him!" and I dashed down the stairs just in time to see the frail form of my room-mate flying out of the front door.

I overtook her at last; but where? Far out of town on that dark and dismal road, where the gaunt chimneys of the deserted mill

rise from a growth of pine-trees. But I knew before I reached her what she would find; knew that her short dream of love was over, and that stretched amongst the weeds which choked the entrance to the old mill lay the dead form of the revered young minister, who, by his precept and example, had won not only the heart of this young maiden, but that of the whole community in which he lived and labored.

II

A FEARFUL QUESTION

*Nay, yet there's more in this:
I pray thee, speak to me as to thy thoughts,
As thou dost ruminate; and give thy worst of thoughts
The worst of words.*

—OTHELLO.

My room-mate was, as I have intimated, exceedingly frail and unobtrusive in appearance; yet when we came upon this scene, the group of men about the inanimate form of her lover parted involuntarily as if a spirit had come upon them; though I do not think one of them, until that moment, had any suspicion of the relations between her and their young pastor. Being close behind her, I pressed forward too, and so it happened that I stood by her side when her gaze first fell upon her dead lover. Never shall I forget the cry she uttered, or the solemn silence that fell over all, as her hand, rigid and white as that of a ghost's, slowly rose and pointed with awful question at the pallid brow upturned before her. It seemed as if a spell had fallen, enchaining the roughest there from answering, for the truth was terrible, and we knew it; else why those dripping locks and heavily soaked garments oozing, not with the limpid waters of the stream we could faintly

hear gurgling in the distance, but with some fearful substance that dyed the forehead blue and left upon the grass a dark stain that floods of rain would scarcely wash away?

"What is it? Oh, what does it mean?" she faintly gasped, shuddering backward with wondering dread as one of those tiny streams of strange blue moisture found its way to her feet.

Still that ominous silence.

"Oh, I must know!" she whispered. "I was his betrothed"; and her eyes wandered for a moment with a wild appeal upon those about her.

Whereupon a kindly voice spoke up. "He has been drowned, miss. The blue—" and there he hesitated.

"The blue is from the remains of some old dye that must have been in the bottom of the vat out of which we drew him," another voice went on.

"The vat!" she repeated. "The vat! Was he found—"

"In the vat? Yes, miss." And there the silence fell again.

It was no wonder. For a man like him, alert, busy, with no time nor inclination for foolish explorations, to have been found drowned in the disused vat of a half-tumbled-down old mill on a lonesome and neglected road meant—But what did it mean? What could it mean? The lowered eyes of those around seemed to decline to express even a conjecture.

My poor friend, so delicate, so tender, reeled in my arms. "In the vat!" she reiterated again and again, as if her mind refused to take in a fact so astounding and unaccountable.

"Yes, miss, and he might never have been discovered," volunteered a voice at last, over my shoulder, "if a parcel of school-children hadn't strayed into the mill this afternoon. It is a dreadful lonesome spot, you see, and—"

"Hush!" I whispered; "hush!" and I pointed to her face, which at these words had changed as if the breath of death had blown across it; and winding my arms still closer about her, I endeavored to lead her away.

But I did not know my room-mate. Pushing me gently aside, she turned to a stalwart man near by, whose face seemed to invite confidence, and said:

"Take me in and show me the vat."

He looked at her amazed; so did we.

"I must see it," she said, simply; and she herself took the first step towards the mill.

There was no alternative but to follow. This we did in terror and pity, for the look with which she led the way was not the look of any common determination, and the power which seemed to force her feeble body on upon its fearful errand was of that strained and unnatural order which might at any moment desert her, and lay her a weak and helpless burden at our feet.

"It must be dark by this time down there," objected the man she had appealed to, as he stepped doubtfully forward.

But she did not seem to heed. Her eyes were fixed upon the ruined walls before her, rising drear and blank against the pale-green evening sky.

"He could have had no errand here," I heard her murmur. "How then be drowned here?—how? how?"

Alas! that was the mystery, dear heart, with which every mind was busy!

The door of the mill had fallen down and rotted away years before, so we had no difficulty in entering. But upon crossing the threshold and making for the steps that led below, we found that the growing twilight was any thing but favorable to a speedy or even safe advance. For the flooring was badly broken in places, and the stairs down which we had to go were not only uneven, but strangely rickety and tottering.

But the sprite that led us paused for nothing, and long before I had passed the first step she had reached the bottom one, and was groping her way towards the single gleam of light that infused itself through the otherwise pitchy darkness.

"Be careful, miss; you may fall into the vat yourself!" exclaimed more than one voice behind her.

But she hurried on, her slight form showing like a spectre against the dim gleam towards which she bent her way, till suddenly she paused and we saw her standing with clasped hands, and bent head, looking down into what? We could readily conjecture.

"She will throw herself in," whispered a voice; but as, profoundly startled, I was about to hasten forward, she hurriedly turned and came towards us.

"I have seen it," she quietly said, and glided by us, and up the

stairs, and out of the mill to where that still form lay in its ghostly quietude upon the sodden grass.

For a moment she merely looked at it, then she knelt, and, oblivious to the eyes bent pityingly upon her, kissed the brow and then the cheeks, saying something which I could not hear, but which lent a look of strange peace to her features, that were almost as pallid and set now as his. Then she arose, and holding out her hand to me, was turning away, when a word uttered by some one, I could not tell whom, stopped her, and froze her, as it were, to the spot.

That word was *suicide!*

I think I see her yet, the pale-green twilight on her forehead, her lips parted, and her eyes fixed in an incredulous stare.

"Do you mean," she cried, "that *he* deserves any such name as that? That his death here was not one of chance or accident, mysterious, if you will, but still one that leaves no stigma on his name as a man and a clergyman?"

"Indeed, miss," came in reply, "we would not like to say."

"Then, *I* say, that unless Mr. Barrows was insane, he never premeditated a crime of this nature. He was too much of a Christian. And if that does not strike you as good reasoning, he was too—happy."

The last word was uttered so low that if it had not been for the faint flush that flitted into her cheek, it would scarcely have been understood. As it was, the furtive looks of the men about showed that they comprehended all that she would say; and, satisfied with

the impression made, she laid her hand on my arm, and for the second time turned towards home.

III

ADA

For, in my sense, 't is happiness to die.

—OTHELLO.

There was death in her face; I saw it the moment we reached the refuge of our room. But I was scarcely prepared for the words which she said to me.

"Mr. Barrows and I will be buried in one grave. The waters which drowned him have gone over my head also. But before the moment comes which proves my words true, there is one thing I wish to impress upon you, and that is: That no matter what people may say, or what conjectures they may indulge in, Mr. Barrows never came to his end by any premeditation of his own. And that you may believe me, and uphold his cause in the face of whatever may arise, I will tell you something of his life and mine. Will you listen?"

Would I listen? I could not speak, but I drew up the lounge, and sitting down by her side, pressed my cheek close to hers. She smiled faintly, all unhappiness gone from her look, and in sweet, soft tones, began:

"We are both orphans. As far as I know, neither of us have

any nearer relatives than distant cousins; a similarity of condition that has acted as a bond between us since we first knew and loved each other. When I came to S— he was just settled here, a young man full of zeal and courage. Whatever the experience of his college days had been—and he has often told me that at that time ambition was the mainspring of his existence,—the respect and appreciation which he found here, and the field which daily opened before him for work, had wakened a spirit of earnest trust that ere long developed that latent sweetness in his disposition which more than his mental qualities, perhaps, won him universal confidence and love.

"You have heard him preach, and you know he was not lacking in genius; but you have not heard him speak, eye to eye and hand to hand. It was there his power came in, and there, too, perhaps, his greatest temptation. For he was one for women to love, and it is not always easy to modify a naturally magnetic look and tone because the hand that touches yours is shy and white, and the glance which steals up to meet your own has within it the hint of unconscious worship. Yet what he could do he did; for, unknown, perhaps, to any one here, he was engaged to be married, as so many young ministers are, to a girl he had met while at college.

"I do not mean to go into too many particulars, Constance. He did not love this girl, but he meant to be true to her. He was even contented with the prospect of marrying her, till—Oh, Constance, I almost forget that he is gone, and that my own life is at an end, when I think of that day, six months ago—the day

when we first met, and, without knowing it, first loved. And then the weeks which followed when each look was an event, and a passing word the making or the marring of a day. I did not know what it all meant; but he realized only too soon the precipice upon which we stood, and I began to see him less, and find him more reserved when, by any chance, we were thrown together. His cheek grew paler, too, and his health wavered. A struggle was going on in his breast—a struggle of whose depth and force I had little conception then, for I dared not believe he loved me, though I knew by this time he was bound to another who would never be a suitable companion for him.

"At last he became so ill, he was obliged to quit his work, and for a month I did not see him, though only a short square separated us. He was slowly yielding to an insidious disease, some said; and I had to bear the pain of this uncertainty, as well as the secret agony of my own crushed and broken heart.

"But one morning—shall I ever forget it?—the door opened, and he, *he* came in where I was, and without saying a word, knelt down by my side, and drew my head forward and laid it on his breast. I thought at first it was a farewell, and trembled with a secret anguish that was yet strangely blissful, for did not the passionate constraint of his arms mean love? But when, after a moment that seemed a lifetime, I drew back and looked into his face, I saw it was not a farewell, but a greeting, he had brought me, and that we had not only got our pastor back to life, but that this pastor was a lover as well, who would marry the woman he

loved.

"And I was right. In ten minutes I knew, that a sudden freak on the part of the girl he was engaged to had released him, without fault of his own, and that with this release new life had entered his veins, for the conflict was over and love and duty were now in harmony.

"Constance, I would not have you think he was an absolutely perfect man. He was too sensitively organized for that. A touch, a look that was not in harmony with his thoughts, would make him turn pale at times, and I have seen him put to such suffering by petty physical causes, that I have sometimes wondered where his great soul got its strength to carry him through the exigencies of his somewhat trying calling. But whatever his weaknesses—and they were very few,—he was conscientious in the extreme, and suffered agony where other men would be affected but slightly. You can imagine his joy, then, over this unexpected end to his long pain; and remembering that it is only a month previous to the day set apart by us for our marriage, ask yourself whether he would be likely to seek any means of death, let alone such a horrible and lonesome one as that which has robbed us of him to-day?"

"No!" I burst out, for she waited for my reply. "A thousand times, no, no, no!"

"He has not been so well lately, and I have not seen as much of him as usual; but that is because he had some literary work he wished to finish before the wedding-day. Ah, it will never be

finished now! and our wedding-day is to-day! and the bride is almost ready. But!" she suddenly exclaimed, "I must not go yet—not till you have said again that he was no suicide. Tell me," she vehemently continued—"tell me from your soul that you believe he is not answerable for his death!"

"I do!" I rejoined, alarmed and touched at once by the fire in her cheek and eye.

"And that," she went, "you will hold to this opinion in the face of all opposition! That, whatever attack men may make upon his memory, you will uphold his honor and declare his innocence! Say you will be my deputy in this, and I will love you even in my cold grave, and bless you as perhaps only those who see the face of the Father can bless!"

"Ada!" I murmured, "Ada!"

"You will do this, will you not?" she persisted. "I can die knowing I can trust you as I would myself."

I took her cold hand in mine and promised, though I felt how feeble would be any power of mine to stop the tide of public opinion if once it set in any definite direction.

"He had no enemies," she whispered; "but I would sooner believe he had, than that he sought this fearful spot of his own accord."

And seemingly satisfied to have dropped this seed in my breast, she tremblingly arose, and going for her writing-desk, brought it back and laid it on the lounge by her side. "Go for Mrs. Gannon," she said.

Mrs. Gannon was our neighbor in the next room, a widow who earned her livelihood by nursing the sick; and I was only too glad to have her with me at this time, for my poor Ada's face was growing more and more deathly, and I began to fear she had but prophesied the truth when she said this was her wedding-day.

I was detained only a few minutes, but when I came back with Mrs.

Gannon, I found my room-mate writing.

"Come!" said she, in a voice so calm, my companion started and hastily looked at her face for confirmation of the fears I had expressed; "I want you both to witness my signature."

With one last effort of strength she wrote her name, and then handed the pen to Mrs. Gannon, who took it without a word.

"It is my will," she faintly smiled, watching me as I added my name at the bottom. "We have had to do without lawyers, but I don't think there will be any one to dispute my last wishes." And taking the paper in her hand, she glanced hastily at it, then folded it, and handed it back to me with a look that made my heart leap with uncontrollable emotion. "I can trust you," she said, and fell softly back upon the pillow.

"You had better go for Dr. Farnham," whispered Mrs. Gannon in my ear, with an ominous shake of her head.

And though I felt it to be futile, I hastened to comply.

But Dr. Farnham was out, attending to a very urgent case, I was told; and so, to my growing astonishment and dismay, were Dr. Spaulding and Dr. Perry. I was therefore obliged to come

back alone, which I did with what speed I could; for I begrudged every moment spent away from the side of one I had so lately learned to love, and must so soon lose.

Mrs. Gannon met me at the door, and with a strange look, drew me in and pointed towards the bed. There lay Ada, white as the driven snow, with closed eyes, whose faintly trembling lids alone betokened that she was not yet fled to the land of quiet shadows. At her side was a picture of the man she loved, and on her breast lay a bunch of withered roses I could easily believe had been his last gift. It was a vision of perfect peace, and I could not but contrast it with what my imagination told me must have been the frenzied anguish of that other death.

My approach, though light, disturbed her. Opening her eyes, she gave me one long, long look. Then, as if satisfied, she softly closed them again, breathed a little sigh, and in another moment was no more.

IV

THE POLLARDS

*There's something in his soul,
O'er which his melancholy sits on brood.*

—HAMLET.

Fearful as the experiences of this day had been, they were not yet at an end for me. Indeed, the most remarkable were to come. As I sat in this room of death—it was not far from midnight—I suddenly heard voices at the door, and Mrs. Gannon came in with Dr. Farnham.

"It is very extraordinary," I heard him mutter as he crossed the threshold. "One dying and another dead, and both struck down by the same cause."

I could not imagine what he mean, so I looked at him with some amazement. But he did not seem to heed me. Going straight to the bed, he gazed silently at Ada's pure features, with what I could not but consider a troubled glance. Then turning quickly to Mrs. Gannon, he said, in his somewhat brusque way:

"All is over here; you can therefore leave. I have a patient who demands your instant care."

"But—" she began.

"I have come on purpose for you," he put in, authoritatively.

"It is an urgent case; do not keep me waiting."

"But, sir," she persisted, "it is impossible. I am expected early in the morning at Scott's Corners, and was just going to bed when you came in, in order to get a little sleep before taking the train."

"Dr. Perry's case?"

"Yes."

He frowned, and I am not sure but what he uttered a mild oath. At all events, he seemed very much put out.

I immediately drew near.

"Oh, sir," I cried, "if you would have confidence in me. I am not unused to the work, and—"

His stare frightened me, it was so searching and so keen.

"Who are you?" he asked.

I told him, and Mrs. Gannon put in a word for me. I was reliable, she said, and if too much experience was not wanted, would do better than such and such a one—naming certain persons, probably neighbors.

But the doctor's steady look told me he relied more on his own judgment than on anything she or I could say.

"Can you hold your tongue?" he asked.

I started. Who would not have done so?

"I see that you can," he muttered, and glanced down at my dress. "When can you be ready?" he inquired. "You may be wanted for days, and it may be only for hours."

"Will ten minutes be soon enough?" I asked.

A smile difficult to fathom crossed his firm lip.

"I will give you fifteen," he said, and turned towards the door. But on the threshold he paused and looked back. "You have not asked who or what your patient is," he grimly suggested.

"No," I answered shortly.

"Well," said he, "it is Mrs. Pollard, and she is going to die."

Mrs. Pollard! Mrs. Gannon and I involuntarily turned and looked at each other.

"Mrs. Pollard!" repeated the good nurse, wonderingly. "I did not know she was sick."

"She wasn't this noon. It is a sudden attack. Apoplexy we call it. She fell at the news of Mr. Barrows' death."

And with this parting shot, he went out and closed the door behind him.

I sank, just a little bit weakened, on the lounge, then rose with renewed vigor. "The work has fallen into the right hands," thought I. "Ada would wish me to leave her for such a task as this."

And yet I was troubled. For though this sudden prostration of Mrs. Pollard, on the hearing of her young pastor's sorrowful death, seemed to betoken a nature of more than ordinary sensibility, I had always heard that she was a hard woman, with an eye of steel and a heart that could only be reached through selfish interests. But then she was the magnate of the place, the beginning and end of the aristocracy of S—; and when is not such a one open to calumny? I was determined to reserve my judgment.

In the fifteen minutes allotted me, I was ready. Suitable

arrangements had already been made for the removal of my poor Ada's body to the house that held her lover. For the pathos of the situation had touched all hearts, and her wish to be laid in the same grave with him met with no opposition. I could therefore leave with a clear conscience; Mrs. Gannon promising to do all that was necessary, even if she were obliged to take a later train than she had expected to.

Dr. Farnham was in the parlor waiting for me, and uttered a grunt of satisfaction as he saw me enter, fully equipped.

"Come; this is business," he said, and led the way at once to his carriage.

We did not speak for the first block. He seemed meditating, and I was summoning up courage for the ordeal before me. For, now that we were started, I began to feel a certain inward trembling not to be entirely accounted for by the fact that I was going into a strange house to nurse a woman of whom report did not speak any too kindly. Nor did the lateness of the hour, and the desolate aspect of the unlighted streets, tend greatly to reassure me.

Indeed, something of the weird and uncanny seemed to mingle with the whole situation, and I found myself dreading our approach to the house, which from its old-time air and secluded position had always worn for me an aspect of gloomy reserve, that made it even in the daylight, a spot of somewhat fearful interest.

Dr. Farnham, who may have suspected my agitation, though he gave no token of doing so, suddenly spoke up.

"It is only right to tell you," he said, "that I should never have accepted the service of an inexperienced girl like you, if any thing was necessary but watchfulness and discretion. Mrs. Pollard lies unconscious, and all you will have to do is to sit at her side and wait for the first dawning of returning reason. It may come at any moment, and it may never come at all. She is a very sick woman."

"I understand," I murmured, plucking up heart at what did not seem so very difficult a task.

"Her sons will be within call; so will I. By daybreak we hope to have her daughter from Newport with her. You do not know Mrs. Harrington?"

I shook my head. Who was I, that I should know these grand folks? And yet—But I promised I would say nothing about days now so completely obliterated.

"She will not be much of an assistance," he muttered. "But it is right she should come—quite right."

I remembered that I had heard that Mrs. Pollard's daughter was a beauty, and that she had made a fine match; which, said of Mrs. Pollard's daughter, must have meant a great deal. I, however, said nothing, only listened in a vague hope of hearing more, for my curiosity was aroused in a strange way about these people, and nothing which the good doctor could have said about them would have come amiss at this time.

But our drive had been too rapid, and we were too near the house for him to think of any thing but turning into the gateway

with the necessary caution. For the night was unusually dark, and it was difficult to tell just where the gate-posts were. We, however, entered without accident, and in another moment a gleam of light greeted us from the distant porch.

"They are expecting us," he said, and touched up his horse. We flew up the gravelled road, and before I could still the sudden heart-beat that attacked me at sight of the grim row of cedars which surrounded the house, we were hurrying up between the two huge lions rampant that flanked the steps, to where a servant stood holding open the door. A sense of gloom and chill at once overwhelmed me. From the interior, which I faintly saw stretching before me, there breathed even in that first moment of hurried entrance a cold and haughty grandeur that, however rich and awe-inspiring, was any thing but attractive to a nature like mine.

Drawing back, I let Dr. Farnham take the lead, which he did in his own brusque way. And then I saw what the dim light had not revealed before, a young man's form standing by the newel-post of the wide staircase that rose at our left. He at once came forward, and as the light from the lamp above us fell fully upon him, I saw his face, and started.

Why? I could not tell. Not because his handsome features struck me pleasantly, for they did not. There was something in their expression which I did not like, and yet as I looked at them a sudden sensation swept over me that made my apprehensions of a moment back seem like child's play, and I became conscious

that if a sudden call of life or death were behind me urging me on the instant to quit the house, I could not do it while that face was before me to be fathomed, and, if possible, understood.

"Ah, I see you have brought the nurse," were the words with which he greeted Dr. Farnham. And the voice was as thrilling in its tone as the face was in its expression. "But," he suddenly exclaimed, as his eyes met mine, "this is not Mrs. Gannon." And he hurriedly drew the doctor down the hall. "Why have you brought this young girl?" he asked, in tones which, however lowered, I could easily distinguish. "Didn't you know there were reasons why we especially wanted an elderly person?"

"No," I heard the doctor say, and then, his back being towards me, I lost the rest of his speech till the words, "She is no gossip," came to salute me and make me ask myself if there was a secret skeleton in this house, that they feared so much the eyes of a stranger.

"But," the young man went hurriedly on, "she is not at all the kind of person to have over my mother. How could we—" and there his voice fell so as to become unintelligible.

But the doctor's sudden exclamation helped me out.

"What!" he wonderingly cried, "do you intend to sit up too?"

"I or my brother," was the calm response, "Would you expect us to leave her alone with a stranger?"

The doctor made no answer, and the young man, taking a step sidewise, threw me a glance full of anxiety and trouble.

"I don't like it," he murmured; "but there must be a woman of

some kind in the room, and a stranger—"

He did not finish his words, but it seemed as if he were going to say: "And a stranger may, after all, be preferable to a neighbor." But I cannot be sure of this, for he was not a man easy to sound. But what I do know is that he stepped forward, to me with an easy grace, and giving me a welcome as courteous as if I had been the one of all others he desired to see, led me up the stairs to a room which he announced to be mine, saying, as he left me at the door:

"Come out in five minutes, and my brother will introduce you to your duties."

So far I had seen no woman in the house, and I was beginning to wonder if Mrs. Pollard had preferred to surround herself with males, when the door was suddenly opened and a rosy-cheeked girl stepped in.

"Ah, excuse me," she said, with a stare; "I thought it was the nurse as was here."

"And it is the nurse," I returned, smiling in spite of myself at her look of indignant surprise. "Do you want any thing of me?" I hastened to ask, for her eyes were like saucers and her head was tossing airily.

"No," she said, almost with spite. "I came to see if you wanted any thing?"

I shook my head with what good nature I could, for I did not wish to make an enemy in this house, even of a chambermaid.

"And you are really the nurse?" she asked, coming nearer and

looking at me in the full glare of the gas.

"Yes," I assured her, "really and truly the nurse."

"Well, I don't understand it!" she cried. "I was always Mrs. Pollard's favorite maid, and I was with her when she was took, and would be with her now, but they won't let me set a foot inside the door. And when I asked why they keep me out, who was always attentive and good to her, they say I am too young. And here you be younger than I, and a stranger too. I don't like it," she cried, tossing her head again and again. "I haven't deserved it, and I think it is mighty mean."

I saw the girl was really hurt, so I hastened to explain that I was not the nurse they expected, and was succeeding, I think, in mollifying her, when a step was heard in the hall, and she gave a frightened start, and hurried towards the door.

"So you are sure you don't want anything?" she cried, and was out of my sight before I could answer.

There was nothing to detain me, and I hastened to follow. As I crossed the sill I almost started too, at sight of the tall, slim, truly sinister figure that awaited me, leaning against the opposite wall. He was younger than his brother, and had similar features, but there was no charm here to make you forget that the eye was darkly glittering, and the lip formidable in its subtlety and power. He advanced with much of the easy nonchalance that had so characterized the other.

"Miss Sterling, I believe," said he; and with no further word, turned and led me down the hall to the sick-room. I noticed even

then that he paused and listened before he pushed open the door, and that with our first step inside he cast a look of inquiry at the bed that had something beside a son's loving anxiety in it. And I hated the man as I would a serpent, though he bowed as he set me a chair, and was careful to move a light he thought shone a little too directly in my eyes.

The other brother was not present, and I could give my undivided attention to my charge. I found her what report had proclaimed her to be, a handsome woman of the sternly imposing type. Even with her age against her and the shadow of death lying on her brow and cheek, there was something strangely attractive in the features and the stately contour of her form. But it was attraction that was confined to the eye, and could by no means allure the heart, for the same seal of mysterious reserve was upon her that characterized her sons, and in her, as in the younger one of these, it inspired a distrust which I could imagine no smile as dissipating. She lay in a state of coma, and her heavy breathing was the only sound that broke the silence of the great room. "God help me!" thought I; but had no wish to leave. Instead of that, I felt a fearful pleasure in the prospect before me—such effect had a single look had upon me from eyes I trembled to meet again or read.

I do not know how long I sat there gazing in the one direction for that faint sign of life for which the doctor had bid me watch. That he who inspired me with dread was behind me, I knew; but I would not turn my head towards him. I was determined to resist

the power of this man, even if I must succumb a trifle to that of the other.

I was, therefore, surprised when a hand was thrust over my shoulder, and a fan dropped into my lap.

"It is warm here," was the comment which accompanied the action.

I thanked him, but felt that his sole object had been to cover his change of position. For, when he sat down again, it was where he could see my face. I therefore felt justified in plying the fan he had offered me, in such a way as to shut off his somewhat basilisk gaze. And so a dreary hour went by.

It was now well on towards morning, and I was beginning to suffer from the languor natural after so many harrowing excitements, when the door opened behind me, and the electric thrill shooting through all my members, testified as to whose step it was that entered. At the same moment the young man at my side arose, and with what I felt to be a last sharp look in my direction, hastened to where his brother stood, and entered into a whispered conversation with him. Then I heard the door close again, and almost at the same instant Mr. Pollard the elder advanced, and without seeking an excuse for his action, sat down close by my side. The fan at once dropped; I had no wish to avoid this man's scrutiny.

And yet when with a secret bracing of my nerves I looked up and met his eyes fixed with that baffling expression upon mine, I own that I felt an inward alarm, as if something vaguely

dangerous had reared itself in my path, which by its very charm instinctively bade me beware. I, however, subdued my apprehensions, thinking, with a certain haughty pride which I fear will never be eliminated from my nature, of the dangers I had already met with and overcome in my brief but troubled life, and meeting his look with a smile which I knew to contain a spice of audacity, I calmly waited for the words I felt to be hovering upon his lips. They were scarcely the ones I expected.

"Miss Sterling," said he, "you have seen Anice, my mother's waiting-maid?"

I bowed. I was too much disconcerted to speak.

"And she has told you her story of my mother's illness?" he went on, pitilessly holding me with his glance. "You need not answer," he again proceeded, as I opened my lips. "I know Anice; she has not the gift of keeping her thoughts to herself."

"An unfortunate thing in this house," I inwardly commented, and made a determination on the spot that whatever emotions I might experience from the mysteries surrounding me, this master of reserve should find there was one who could keep her thoughts to herself, even, perhaps, to his own secret disappointment and chagrin.

"She told you my mother was stricken at the sudden news of Mr. Barrows' death?"

"That was told me," I answered; for this was a direct question, put, too, with an effort I could not help but feel, notwithstanding the evident wish on his part to preserve an appearance of

calmness.

"Then some explanation is needed," he remarked, his eyes flashing from his mother's face to mine with equal force and intentness. "My mother"—his words were low, but it was impossible not to hear them—"has not been well since my father died, two months ago. It needed but the slightest shock to produce the result you unhappily see before you. That shock this very girl supplied by the inconsiderate relation of Mr. Barrows' fearful fate. We have taken a prejudice against the girl, in consequence. Do you blame us? This is our mother."

What could I feel or say but No? What could any one, under the circumstances? Why then did a sudden vision of Ada's face, as she gave me that last look, rise up before me, bidding me remember the cause to which I was pledged, and not put too much faith in this man and his plausible explanations.

"I only hope death will not follow the frightful occurrence," he concluded; and do what he would, his features became drawn, and his face white, as his looks wandered back to his mother.

A sudden impulse seized me.

"Another death, you mean," said I; "one already has marked the event, though it happened only a few short hours ago."

His eyes flashed to mine, and a very vivid and real horror blanched his already pallid cheek till it looked blue in the dim light.

"What do you mean?" he gasped; and I saw the doctor had refrained from telling him of Ada's pitiful doom.

"I mean," said I, with a secret compunction I strove in vain to subdue, "that Mr. Barrows' betrothed could not survive his terrible fate—that she died a few hours since, and will be buried in the same grave as her lover."

"His betrothed?" Young Mr. Pollard had risen to his feet, and was actually staggering under the shock of his emotions. "I did not know he had any betrothed. I thought she had jilted him—"

"It is another woman," I broke in, jealous for my poor dead Ada's fame. "The woman he was formerly engaged to never loved him; but this one—" I could not finish the sentence. My own agitation was beginning to master me.

He looked at me, horrified, and I could have sworn the hair rose on his forehead.

"What was her name?" he asked. "Is it—is it any one I know?" Then, as if suddenly conscious that he was betraying too keen an emotion for the occasion, pitiful as it was, he forced his lips into a steadier curve, and quietly said: "After what has happened here, I am naturally overcome by a circumstance so coincident with our own trouble."

"Naturally," I assented with a bow, and again felt that secret distrust warring with a new feeling that was not unlike compassion.

"Her name is Ada Reynolds," I continued, remembering his last question.

"She lived—"

"I know," he interrupted; and without another word walked

away, and for a long time stood silent at the other end of the room. Then he came back and sat down, and when I summoned up courage to glance at his face, I saw that a change had passed over it, that in all probability was a change for life.

And my heart sank—sank till I almost envied that unconscious form before which we sat, and from which alone now came the one sound which disturbed the ghostly silence of that dread chamber.

V

DOUBTS AND QUERIES

*And that well might
Advise him to a caution, to hold what distance
His wisdom can provide.*

—MACBETH.

At daybreak the doctor came in. Taking advantage of the occasion, I slipped away for a few minutes to my own room, anxious for any change that would relieve me from the gloom and oppression caused by this prolonged and silent *tete-a-tete* with a being that at once so interested and repelled me. Observing that my windows looked towards the east, I hastened to throw wide the blinds and lean out into the open air. A burst of rosy sunlight greeted me. "Ah!" thought I, "if I have been indulging in visions, this will dispel them"; and I quaffed deeply and long of the fresh and glowing atmosphere before allowing my thoughts to return for an instant to the strange and harrowing experiences I had just been through. A sense of rising courage and renewed power rewarded me; and blessing the Providence that had granted us a morning of sunshine after a night of so much horror, I sat down and drew from my breast the little folded paper which represented my poor Ada's will. Opening it with all the reverent

love which I felt for her memory, I set myself to decipher the few trembling lines which she had written, in the hope they would steady my thoughts and suggest, if not reveal, the way I should take in the more than difficult path I saw stretching before me.

My agitation may be conceived when I read the following:

"It is my last wish that all my personal effects, together with the sum of five hundred dollars, now credited to my name in the First National Bank of S—, should be given to my friend, Constance Sterling, who I hope will not forget the promise I exacted from her."

Five hundred dollars! and yesterday I had nothing. Ah, yes, I had *a friend!*

The thoughts awakened by this touching memorial from the innocent dead distracted me for a few moments from further consideration of present difficulties, but soon the very nature of the bequest recalled them to my mind, by that allusion to a promise which more than any thing else lay at the bottom of the dilemma in which I found myself. For, humiliating as it is to confess, the persistency with which certain impressions remained in my mind, in spite of the glowing daylight that now surrounded me, warned me that it would be for my peace to leave this house before my presentiments became fearful realities; while on the other hand my promise to Ada seemed to constrain me to remain in it till I had at least solved some of those mysteries of emotion which connected one and all of this family so intimately with the cause to which I had pledged myself.

"If the general verdict in regard to Mr. Barrows' death should be one of suicide," thought I, "how could I reconcile myself to the fact that I fled at the first approaching intimation that all was not as simple in his relations as was supposed, and that somewhere, somehow, in the breast of certain parishioners of his, a secret lay hidden, which, if known, would explain the act which otherwise must imprint an ineffaceable stain upon his memory?"

My heart and brain were still busy with this question when the sound of Mr. Pollard's footsteps passing my door recalled me to a sense of my present duty. Rising, I hurried across the hall to the sick-chamber, and was just upon the point of entering, when the doctor appeared before me, and seeing me, motioned me back, saying:

"Mrs. Harrington has just arrived. As she will doubtless wish to see her mother at once, you had better wait a few moments till the first agitation is over."

Glad of any respite, and particularly glad to escape an introduction to Mrs. Harrington at this time, I slipped hastily away, but had not succeeded in reaching my room before the two brothers and their sister appeared at the top of the stairs. I had thus a full opportunity of observing them, and being naturally quick to gather impressions, took in with a glance the one member of the Pollard family who was likely to have no mystery about her.

I found her pretty; prettier, perhaps, than any woman it had ever been my lot to meet before, but with a doll's prettiness

that bespoke but little dignity or force of mind. Dressed with faultless taste and with an attention to detail that at a moment like the present struck one with a sense of painful incongruity, she advanced, a breathing image of fashion and perhaps folly; her rustling robes, and fresh, if troubled face, offering a most striking contrast to the gloom and reserve of the two sombre figures that walked at her side.

Knowing as by instinct that nothing but humiliation would follow any obtrusion of myself upon this petted darling of fortune, I withdrew as much as possible into the shadow, receiving for my reward a short look from both the brothers; the one politely deprecating in its saturnine courtesy, the other full of a bitter demand for what I in my selfish egotism was fain to consider sympathy. The last look did not tend to calm my already disturbed thoughts, and, anxious to efface its impression, I impulsively descended the stairs and strolled out on the lawn, asking myself what was meant by the difference in manner which I had discerned in these two brothers towards their sister. For while the whole bearing of the younger had expressed interest in this pretty, careless butterfly of a woman thus brought suddenly face to face with a grave trouble, the elder had only averted looks to offer, and an arm that seemed to shrink at her touch as if the weight of her light hand on his was almost more than he could bear. Could it be that affection and generosity were on the side of the younger after all, and that in this respect, at least, he was the truer man and more considerate brother?

I could find no more satisfactory answer for this question than for the many others that had suggested themselves since I had been in this house; and being determined not to allow myself to fall into a reverie which at this moment might be dangerous, I gave up consideration of all kinds, and yielded myself wholly to the pleasure of my ramble. And it was a pleasure! For however solemn and austere might be the interior of the Pollard mansion, without here on the lawn all was cheeriness, bloom, and verdure; the grim row of cedars encircling the house seeming to act as a barrier beyond which its gloom and secrecy could not pass. At all events such was the impression given to my excited fancy at the time, and, filled with the sense of freedom which this momentary escape from the house and its influences had caused, I hastened to enjoy the beauties of walk and *parterre*, stopping only when some fairer blossom than ordinary lured me from my path to inspect its loveliness or inhale its perfume.

The grounds were not large, though, situated as they were in the midst of a thickly populated district, they appeared so. It did not, therefore, take me long to exhaust their attractions, and I was about to return upon my course, when I espied a little summer-house before me, thickly shrouded in vines. Thinking what a charming retreat it offered, I stepped forward to observe it more closely, when to my great surprise I saw it was already occupied, and by a person whose attitude and appearance were such as to at once arouse my strongest curiosity. This person was a boy, slight of build, and fantastic in his dress, with a face like

sculptured marble, and an eye which, if a little contracted, had a strange glitter in it that made you look and look again. He was kneeling on the floor of the summer-house, and his face, seen by me in profile, was turned with the fixedness of an extreme absorption towards a small opening in the vines, through which he was intently peering. What he saw or wished to see I could not imagine, for nothing but the blank end of the house lay before him, and there could be very little which was interesting in that, for not one of its windows were open, unless you except the solitary one in my room. His expression, however, showed that he was engaged in watching something, and by the corrugation in his white brow and the peculiar compression of his fresh red lip, that something showed itself to be of great importance to him; a fact striking enough in itself if you consider the earliness of the hour and the apparent immaturity of his age, which did not appear to be more than fourteen.

Resolved to solve this simple mystery, I gave an admonitory cough, and stepped into the summer-house. He at once started to his feet, and faced me with a look I am pondering upon yet, there was so much in it that was wrathful, curious, dismayed, and defiant. The next moment a veil seemed to fall over his vision, the rich red lip relaxed from its expressive curve, and from being one of the most startling visions I ever saw, he became—what? It would be hard to tell, only not a fully responsible being, I am sure, however near he had just strayed to the border-land of judgment and good sense. Relieved, I scarcely knew why, and remembering

almost at the same instant some passing gossip I had once heard about the pretty imbecile boy that ran the streets of S—, I gave him a cheerful smile, and was about to bestow some encouraging word upon him, when he suddenly broke into a laugh, and looking at me with a meaningless stare, asked:

"Who are you?"

I was willing enough to answer, so I returned: "I am Constance Sterling"; and almost immediately added: "And who are you?"

"I am the cat that mews in the well." Then suddenly, "Do you live here?"

"No," I replied, "I am only staying here. Mrs. Pollard is sick —"

"Do they like you?"

The interruption was quick, like all his speech, and caused me a curious sensation. But I conquered it with a laugh, and cheerily replied:

"As I only came last night, it would be hard to say"—and was going to add more, when the curious being broke out:

"She only came last night!" and, repeating the phrase again and again, suddenly darted from my side on to the lawn, where he stood for an instant, murmuring and laughing to himself before speeding away through the shrubbery that led to the gate.

This incident, trivial as it seemed, made a vivid impression upon me, and it was with a mind really calmed from its past agitation that I re-entered the house and took up my watch in the sick-room. I found every thing as I had left it an hour or so

before, with the exception of my companion; the younger Mr. Pollard having taken the place of his brother. Mrs. Harrington was nowhere to be seen, but as breakfast had been announced I did not wonder at this, nor at the absence of the elder son, who was doubtless engaged in doing the honors of the house.

My own call to breakfast came sooner than I anticipated; soon enough, indeed, for me to expect to find Mr. Pollard and his sister still at the table. It therefore took some courage for me to respond to the summons, especially as I had to go alone, my companion, of course, refusing to leave his mother. But a glance in the hall-mirror, as I went by, encouraged me, for it was no weak woman's face I encountered, and if Mrs. Harrington was as beautiful as she was haughty, and as haughty as she was beautiful, Constance Sterling at least asked no favors and showed no embarrassment. Indeed, I had never felt more myself than when I lifted the *portiere* from before the dining-room door and stepped in under the gaze of these two contradictory beings, either of which exerted an influence calculated to overawe a person in my position. The past—But what have I promised myself and you? Not the past, then, but my present will and determination made the ordeal easy.

Mr. Pollard, who is certainly a man to attract any woman's eye, rose gravely as I approached, and presented me with what struck me as a somewhat emphasized respect, to his sister. Her greeting was nothing more nor less than what I expected—that is, indifferently civil,—though I thought I detected a little glimmer

of curiosity in the corner of her eye, as if some words had passed in regard to me that made her anxious to know what sort of a woman I was.

But my faculty for observation was very wide-awake that morning, and I may have imagined this, especially as she did not look at me again till she had finished her breakfast and rose to quit the room. Then, indeed, she threw me a hurried glance, half searching, half doubtful in its character, as if she hesitated whether she ought to leave us alone together. Instantly a wild thrill passed through me, and I came perilously near blushing. But the momentary emotion, if emotion it could be called, was soon lost in the deeper feeling which ensued when Mrs. Harrington, pausing at the door, observed, with a forced lightness:

"By-the-way, where is Mr. Barrows? I thought he was always on hand in time of trouble."

I looked at her; somehow, I dared not look at her brother; and, while making to myself such trivial observations as, "She has not been told the truth," and, "They took good care she should overhear no gossip at the station," I was inwardly agitating myself with the new thought, "Can *she* have had any thing to do with Mr. Barrows? Can she be the woman he was engaged to before he fell in love with Ada?"

The expression of her face, turned though

It was full upon us, told nothing, and my attention, though not my glances, passed to Mr. Pollard, who, motionless in his place,

hesitated what reply to give to this simple question.

"Guy has not told you, then," said he, "what caused the shock that has prostrated our mother?"

"No," she returned, coming quickly back.

"It was the news of Mr. Barrows' death, Agnes; the servants say so, and the servants ought to know."

"Mr. Barrows' death! Is Mr. Barrows dead, then?" she asked, in a tone of simple wonder, which convinced me that my surmise of a moment ago was without any foundation. "I did not know he was sick," she went on. "Was his death sudden, that it should affect mother so?"

A short nod was all her brother seemed to be able to give to this question. At sight of it I felt the cold chills run through my veins, and wished that fate had not obliged me to be present at this conversation.

"How did Mr. Barrows die?" queried Mrs. Harrington, after waiting in manifest surprise and impatience for her brother to speak.

"He was drowned."

"Drowned?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Yesterday."

"Where?"

This time the answer was not forthcoming. Was it because he knew the place too well? I dared not lift my eyes to see.

"Was it in the mill-stream?" she asked.

This time he uttered a hollow "No." Then, as if he felt himself too weak to submit to this cross-questioning, he pushed back his chair, and, hurriedly rising, said:

"It is a very shocking affair, Agnes. Mr. Barrows was found in a vat in the cellar of the old mill. He drowned *himself*. No one knows his motive."

"Drowned *himself*?" Did she speak or I? I saw her lips move, and I heard the words uttered as I thought in her voice; but it was to me he directed his look, and to me he seemed to reply:

"Yes; how else account for the circumstances? Is he a man to have enemies?—or is that a place a man would be likely to seek for pleasure?"

"But—" the trembling little woman at my side began.

"I say it is a suicide," he broke in, imperiously, giving his sister one look, and then settling his eyes back again upon my face. "No other explanation fits the case, and no other explanation will ever be given. Why he should have committed such a deed," he went on, in a changed voice, and after a momentary pause, "it would be impossible for me, and perhaps for any other man, to say; but that he did do it is evident, and that is all I mean to assert. The rest I leave for wiser heads than mine." And turning from me with an indescribable look that to my reason, if not to my head, seemed to belie his words, he offered his arm to his bewildered sister and quietly led her towards the door.

The breath of relief I gave as the *portiere* closed behind them

was, however, premature, for scarcely had he seen her on her way upstairs than he came back, and taking his stand directly before me, said:

"You and I do not agree on this question; I see it in your eyes. Now what explanation do you give of Mr. Barrows' death?"

The suddenness of the attack brought the blood to my cheeks, while the necessity of answering drove it as quickly away. He saw I was agitated, and a slight tremble—it could not be called a smile—disturbed the set contour of his lips. The sight of it gave me courage. I let my own curl as I replied:

"You do me too much honor to ask my opinion. But since you wish to know what I think, I consider it only justice to say that it would be easier for an unprejudiced mind to believe that Mr. Barrows had a secret enemy, or that his death was owing to some peculiar and perhaps unexplainable accident, than that he should seek it himself, having, as he did, every reason for living."

"He was very happy, then?" murmured my companion, looking for an instant away, as if he could not bear the intensity of my gaze.

"He loved deeply a noble woman; they were to have been married in a month; does that look like happiness?" I asked.

The roving eye came back, fixed itself upon me, and turned dangerously dark and deep.

"It *looks* like it," he emphasized, and a strange smile passed over his lips, the utter melancholy of which was all that was plain to me.

"And it *was!*" I persisted, determined not to yield an iota of my convictions to the persuasiveness of this man. "The woman who knew him best declared it to be so as she was dying; and I am forced to trust in her judgment, whatever the opinion of others may be."

"But happy men—" he began.

"Sometimes meet with accidents," I completed.

"And your credulity is sufficient to allow you to consider Mr. Barrows' death as the result of accident?"

Lightly as the question was put, I felt that nothing but a deep anxiety had prompted it, else why that earnest gaze from which my own could not falter, or that white line showing about the lip he essayed in vain to steady? Recoiling inwardly, though I scarcely knew why, I forced myself to answer with the calmness of an inquisitor:

"My credulity is not sufficient for me to commit myself to that belief. If investigation should show that Mr. Barrows had an enemy—"

"Mr. Barrows had no enemy!" flashed from Mr. Pollard's lips. "I mean," he explained, with instant composure, "that he was not a man to awaken jealousy or antagonism; that, according to all accounts, he had the blessing, and not the cursing, of each man in the community."

"Yes," I essayed.

"He never came to his death through the instrumentality of another person," broke in Mr. Pollard, with a stern insistence.

"He fell into the vat intentionally or unintentionally, but no man put him there. Do you believe me, Miss Sterling?"

Did I believe him? Was he upon trial, then, and was he willing I should see he understood it? No, no, that could not be; yet why asseverate so emphatically a fact of which no man could be sure unless he had been present at the scene of death, or at least known more of the circumstances attending it than was compatible with the perfect ignorance which all men professed to have of them. Did he not see that such words were calculated to awaken suspicion, and that it would be harder, after such a question, to believe he spoke from simple conviction, than from a desire to lead captive the will of a woman whose intuitions, his troubled conscience told him, were to be feared? Rising, as an intimation that the conversation was fast becoming insupportable to me, I confronted him with my proudest look.

"You must excuse me," said I, "if I do not linger to discuss a matter whose consequences just now are more important to us than the fact itself. While your mother lies insensible I cannot rest comfortable away from her side. You will therefore allow me to return to her."

"In a moment," he replied. "There are one or two questions it would please me to have you answer first." And his manner took on a charm that robbed his words of all peremptoriness, and made it difficult, if not impossible, for me to move. "You have spoken of Miss Reynolds," he resumed; "have told me that she declared upon her dying bed that the relations between Mr.

Barrows and herself were very happy. Were you with her then? Did you know her well?"

"She was my room-mate," I returned.

It was a blow; I saw it, though not a muscle of his face quivered. He had not expected to hear that I was upon terms of intimacy with her.

"I loved her," I went on, with a sense of cruel pleasure that must have sprung from the inward necessity I felt to struggle with this strong nature. "The proof that she loved me lies in the fact that she has made me heir to all her little savings. We were friends," I added, seeing he was not yet under sufficient control to speak.

"I see," he now said, moving involuntarily between me and the door. "And by friends you mean confidantes, I presume?"

"Perhaps," I answered, coolly, dropping my eyes.

His voice took a deeper tone; it was steel meeting steel, he saw.

"And she told you Mr. Barrows was happy?"

"That has been already discussed," said I.

"Miss Sterling"—I think I never heard such music in a human voice—"you think me inquisitive, presuming, ungentlemanly, persistent, perhaps. But I have a great wish to know the truth about this matter, if only to secure myself from forming false impressions and wrongfully influencing others by them. Bear with me, then, strangers though we are, and if you feel you can trust me"—here he forced me to look at him,—"let me hear, I pray, what reasons you have for declaring so emphatically that

Mr. Barrows did not commit suicide?"

"My reasons, Mr. Pollard? Have I not already given them to you? Is it necessary for me to repeat them?"

"No," he earnestly rejoined, charming me, whether I would or not, by the subtle homage he infused into his look, "if you will assure me that you have no others—that the ones you have given form the sole foundation for your conclusions. Will you?" he entreated; and while his eyes demanded the truth, his lip took a curve which it would have been better for me not to have seen if I wished to preserve unmoved my position as grand inquisitor.

I was compelled, or so it seemed to me, to answer without reserve. I therefore returned a quiet affirmative, adding only in qualification of the avowal, "What other reasons were necessary?"

"None, none," was the quick reply, "for *you* to believe as you do. A woman but proves her claim to our respect when she attaches such significance to the master-passion as to make it the argument of a perfect happiness."

I do not think he spoke in sarcasm, though to most minds it might appear so. I think he spoke in relief, a joyous relief, that was less acceptable to me at that moment than the sarcasm would have been. I therefore did not blush, but rather grew pale, as with a bow I acknowledged his words, and took my first step towards the doorway.

"I have wounded you," he murmured, softly, following me.

"You do not know me well enough," I answered, turning with

a sense of victory in the midst of my partial defeat.

"It is a misfortune that can be remedied," he smiled.

"Your brother waits for us," I suggested, and, lifting the *portiere* out of his hand, I passed through, steady as a dart, but quaking, oh, how fearfully quaking within! for this interview had not only confirmed me in my belief that something dark and unknown connected the life of this household with that which had suddenly gone out in the vat at the old mill, but deepened rather than effaced the fatal charm which, contrary to every instinct of my nature, held me in a bondage that more than all things else must make any investigation into this mystery a danger and a pain from which any woman might well recoil, even though she bore in her heart memories of a past like mine.

VI

MRS. POLLARD

*My mind she has mated, and amazed my sight;
I think but dare not speak.*

—MACBETH.

That day was a marked one in my life. It was not only the longest I have ever known, but it was by far the dreariest, and, if I may use the word in this connection, the most unearthly. Indeed, I cannot think of it to this day without a shudder; its effect being much the same upon my memory as that of a vigil in some underground tomb, where each moment was emphasized with horror lest the dead lying before me might stir beneath their cerements and wake. The continual presence of one or both of the brothers at my side did not tend to alleviate the dread which the silence, the constant suspense, the cold gloom of the ever dimly-lighted chamber were calculated to arouse; for the atmosphere of unreality and gloom was upon them too, and, saving the quick, short sigh that escaped from their lips now and then, neither of them spoke nor relaxed for an instant from that strain of painful attention which had for its focus their mother's stony face. Mrs. Harrington, who, in her youthful freshness and dimpled beauty, might have relieved the universal sombreness

of the scene, was not in the room all day; but whether this was on account of her inability to confront sickness and trouble, or whether it was the result of the wishes of her brothers, I have never been able to decide; probably the latter, for, though she was a woman of frivolous mind, she had a due sense of the proprieties, and was never known to violate them except under the stress of another will more powerful than her own.

At last, as the day waned, and what light there was gradually vanished from the shadowy chamber, Guy made a movement of discouragement, and, rising from his place, approached his brother, dropped a word in his ear, and quietly left the room. The relief I felt was instantaneous. It was like having one coil of an oppressive nightmare released from my breast. Dwight, on the contrary, who had sat like a statue ever since the room began to darken, showed no evidence of being influenced by this change, and, convinced that any movement towards a more cheerful order of things must come from me, I rose, and, without consulting his wishes, dropped the curtains and lighted the lamp. The instant I had done so I saw why he was so silent and immovable. Overcome by fatigue, and possibly by a long strain of suppressed emotion, he had fallen asleep, and, ignorant of the fact that Guy had left the room, slumbered as peacefully as if no break had occurred in the mysterious watch they had hitherto so uninterruptedly maintained over their mother and me.

The peacefulness of his sleeping face made a deep impression upon me. Though I knew that with his waking the old look would

come back, it was an indescribable pleasure to me to see him, if but for an instant, free from that shadowy something which dropped a veil of mistrust between us. It seemed to show me that evil was not innate in this man, and explained, if it did not justify, the weakness which had made me more lenient to what was doubtful in his appearance and character than I had been to that of his equally courteous but less attractive brother.

The glances I allowed myself to cast in his direction were fleeting enough, however. Even if womanly delicacy had not forbidden me to look too often and too long that way, the sense of the unfair advantage I was possibly taking of his weakness made the possibility of encountering his waking eye a matter of some apprehension. I knew that honor demanded I should rouse him, that he would not thank me for letting him sleep after his brother had left the room; and yet, whether from too much heart—he was in such sore need of rest—or from too little conscience—I was in such sore need of knowledge—I let him slumber on, and never made so much as a move after my first startled discovery of his condition.

And so five minutes, ten minutes, went by, and, imperceptibly to myself, the softening influence which his sleeping countenance exerted upon me deepened and strengthened till I began to ask if I had not given too much scope to my imagination since I had been in this house, and foolishly attributed a meaning to expressions and events that in my calmer moments would show themselves to possess no special significance.

The probability was that I had, and once allowing myself to admit this idea, it is astonishing how rapidly it gained possession of my judgment, altering the whole tenor of my thoughts, and if not exactly transforming the situation into one of cheerfulness and ease, at least robbing it of much of that sepulchral character which had hitherto made it so nearly unbearable to me. The surroundings, too, seemed to partake of the new spirit of life which had seized me. The room looked less shadowy, and lost some of that element of mystery which had made its dimly seen corners the possible abode of supernatural visitants. Even the clock ticked less lugubriously, and that expressionless face on the pillow—

Great God! it is looking at me! With two wide open, stony eyes it is staring into my very soul like a spirit from the tomb, awakening there a horror infinitely deeper than any I had felt before, though I knew it was but the signal of returning life to the sufferer, and that I ought to rouse myself and welcome it with suitable ministrations, instead of sitting there like a statue of fear in the presence of an impending fate. But do what I would, say to myself what I would, I could not stir. A nightmare of terror was upon me, and not till I saw the stony lips move and the face take a look of life in the effort made to speak, did I burst the spell that held me and start to my feet. Even then I dared not look around nor raise my voice to warn the sleeper behind me that the moment so long waited for had come. A power behind myself seemed to hold me silent, waiting, watching for those words that

struggled to life so painfully before me. At last they came, filling the room with echoes hollow as they were awful!

"Dwight! Guy! If you do not want me to haunt you, swear you will never divulge what took place between you and Mr. Barrows at the mill."

"*Mother!*" rang in horror through the room. And before I could turn my head, Dwight Pollard leaped by me, and hiding the face of the dying woman on his breast, turned on me a gaze that was half wild, half commanding, and said:

"Go for my brother! He is in the northwest room. Tell him our mother raves." Then, as I took a hurried, though by no means steady, step towards the door, he added: "I need not ask you to speak to no one else?"

"No," my cold lips essayed to utter, but an unmeaning murmur was all that left them. The reaction from hope and trust to a now really tangible fear had been too sudden and overwhelming.

But by the time I had reached the room to which I had been directed, I had regained in a measure my self-control. Guy Pollard at least should not see that I could be affected by any thing which could happen in this house. Yet when, in answer to my summons, he joined me in the hall, I found it difficult to preserve the air of respectful sympathy I had assumed, so searching was his look, and so direct the question with which he met his brother's message.

"My mother raves, you say; will you be kind enough to tell me what her words were?"

"Yes," returned I, scorning to prevaricate in a struggle I at least meant should be an honest one. "She called upon her sons, and said that she would haunt them if ever they divulged what took place between them and Mr. Barrows at the mill."

"Ah!" he coldly laughed; "she does indeed rave." And while I admired his self-control, I could not prevent myself from experiencing an increased dread of this nature that was so ready for all emergencies and so panoplied against all shock.

I might have felt a more vivid apprehension still, had I known what was passing in his mind as we traversed the hall back to the sick-chamber. But the instinct which had warned me of so much, did not warn me of that, and it was with no other feeling than one of surprise that I noted the extreme deference with which he opened his mother's door for me, and waited even in that moment of natural agitation and suspense for me to pass over the threshold before he presumed to enter himself.

Dwight Pollard, however, did not seem to be so blind, for a change passed over his face as he saw us, and he half rose from the crouching position he still held over his mother's form. He subsided back, however, as I drew to one side and let Guy pass unheeded to the bed, and it was in quite a natural tone he bade me seat myself in the alcove towards which he pointed, till his mother's condition required my services.

That there was really nothing to be done for her, I saw myself in the one glimpse I caught of her face as he started up. She was on the verge of death, and her last moments were certainly due

to her children. So I passed into the alcove, which was really a small room opening out of the large one, and flinging myself on the lounge I saw there, asked myself whether I ought to shut the door between us, or whether my devotion to Ada's cause bade me listen to whatever came directly in my way to hear? The fact that I was in a measure prisoned there, there being no other outlet to the room than the one by which I had entered, determined me to ignore for once the natural instincts of my ladyhood; and pale and trembling to a degree I would not have wished seen by either of these two mysterious men, I sat in a dream of suspense, hearing and not hearing the low hum of their voices as they reasoned with or consoled the mother, now fast drifting away into an endless night.

Suddenly—shall I ever forget the thrill it gave me?—her voice rose again in those tones whose force and commanding power I have found it impossible to describe.

"The oath! the oath! Dwight, Guy, by my dying head—"

"Yes, mother," I heard one voice interpose; and by the solemn murmur that followed, I gathered that Guy had thought it best to humor her wishes.

The long-drawn sigh which issued from her lips testified to the relief he had given her, and the "Now Dwight!" which followed was uttered in tones more gentle and assured.

But to this appeal no solemn murmur ensued, for at that instant a scream arose from the bed, and to the sound of an opening door rang out the words: "Keep her away! What do you let her come

in here for, to confound me and make me curse the day she was born! Away! I say, away!"

Horrified, and unable to restrain the impulse that moved me, I sprang to my feet and rushed upon the scene. The picture that met my eyes glares at me now from the black background of the past. On the bed, that roused figure, awful with the shadows of death, raised, in spite of the constraining hands of her two sons, into an attitude expressive of the most intense repulsion, terror, and dread; and at the door, the fainting form of the pretty, dimpled, care-shunning daughter, who, struck to the heart by this poisoned dart from the hand that should have been lifted in blessing, stood swaying in dismay, her wide blue eyes fixed on the terrible face before her, and her hands outstretched and clutching in vague fear after some support that would sustain her, and prevent her falling crushed to the floor.

To bound to her side, and lift her gently out of her mother's sight, was the work of a moment. But in that moment my eyes had time to see such a flash of infinite longing take the place of the fierce passions upon that mother's face, that my heart stood still, and I scarcely knew whether to bear my burden from the room, or to rush with it to that bedside and lay it, in all its childlike beauty, on that maddened mother's dying breast. A low, deep groan from the bed decided me. With that look of love on her face, otherwise distorted by every evil passion, Mrs. Pollard had fallen back into the arms of her two sons, and quietly breathed her last.

VII

ADVANCES

*For they are actions that a man might play;
But I have that within which passeth show.*

—HAMLET.

"Miss Sterling?"

I was sitting by the side of Mrs. Harrington in her own room. By a feverish exertion of strength I had borne her thither from her mother's chamber, and was now watching the returning hues of life color her pale cheek. At the sound of my name, uttered behind me, I arose. I had expected a speedy visit from one of the brothers, but I had been in hopes that it would be Dwight, and not Guy, who would make it.

"I must speak to you at once; will you follow me?" asked that gentleman, bowing respectfully as I turned.

I glanced at Mrs. Harrington, but he impatiently shook his head.

"Anice is at the door," he remarked. "She is accustomed to Mrs. Harrington, and will see that she is properly looked after." And, leading the way, he ushered me out, pausing only to cast one hurried glance back at his sister, as if to assure himself she was not yet sufficiently recovered to note his action.

In the hall he offered me his arm.

"The gas has not yet been lighted," he explained, "and I wish you to go with me to the parlor."

This sounded formidable, but I did not hesitate. I felt able to confront this man.

"I am at your service," I declared, with a comfortable sensation that my tone conveyed something of the uncompromising spirit I felt.

The room to which he conducted me was on the first floor, and was darkness itself when we entered. It was musty, too, and chill, as with the memory of a past funeral and the premonition of a new one.

Even the light which he soon made did not seem to be at home in the spot, but wavered and flickered with faint gasps, as if it longed to efface itself and leave the grand and solitary apartment to its wonted atmosphere of cold reserve. By its feeble flame I noted but two details: one was the portrait of Mrs. Pollard in her youth, and the other was my own reflection in some distant mirror. The first filled me with strange thoughts, the face was so wickedly powerful, if I may so speak; handsome, but with that will beneath its beauty which, when allied to selfishness, has produced the Lucretia Borgias and Catherine de Medicis of the world.

The reflection of which I speak, dimly seen as it was, had, on the contrary, a calming effect upon my mind. Weary as I undoubtedly was, and pale if not haggard with the emotions I

had experienced, there was still something natural and alive in my image that recalled happier scenes to my eyes, and gave me the necessary strength to confront the possibilities of the present interview..

Mr. Pollard, who in his taciturn gloom seemed like the natural genius of the spot, appeared to be struck by this same sensation also, for his eyes wandered more than once to the mirror, before he summoned up courage, or, perhaps, I should say, before he took the determination to look me in the face and open the conversation. When he did, it was curious to note the strife of expression between his eye and lip: the one hard, cold, and unyielding; the other deprecating in its half-smile and falsely gentle, as if the mind that controlled it was even then divided between its wish to subdue and the necessity it felt to win.

"Miss Sterling," so he began, "it would be only folly for me to speak as if nothing had occurred but an ordinary and natural death. It would be doing your good sense and womanly judgment but little honor, and putting myself, or, rather, ourselves—for we children are but one in this matter—in a position which would make any after-explanations exceedingly difficult. For explanations can be given, and in a word; for what has doubtless struck you as strange and terrible in my mother's last hours,—explanations which I am sure you will be glad to accept, as it is not natural for one so blooming in her womanliness to wish to hamper her youth with dark thoughts, or to nurse suspicions contrary to her own candid and noble nature."

He paused, but meeting with no response beyond a rather cool bow, the strife between his eye and lip became more marked. He went on, however, as if perfectly satisfied, his voice retaining its confident tone, whatever the disturbance communicated to his inward nature.

"The explanation to which I allude is this," said he. "My mother for the past three months has been the victim of many unwholesome delusions. The sickness of my father, which was somewhat prolonged, made great inroads upon her strength; and his death, followed by the necessity of parting with Mrs. Harrington—whom you perhaps know was for family reasons married immediately upon my father's decease,—sowed the seed of a mental weakness which culminated on her deathbed into a positive delirium. She had a notion, and has had it for weeks, unknown to every one but my brother and myself, that Mrs. Harrington had been the occasion of some great misfortune to us; whereas the innocent girl had done nothing but follow out her mother's wishes, both in her marriage and in her settlement in a distant town. But the love my mother had felt for her was always the ruling passion of her life, and when she came to find herself robbed of a presence that was actually necessary to her well-being, her mind, by some strange subtlety of disease I do not profess to understand, confounded the source of her grief with its cause, attributing to this well-beloved daughter's will the suffering, which only sprang out of the circumstances of the case. As to her wild remarks in regard to Mr. Barrows," he added, with

studied indifference, "and the oath she wished us to take, that was but an outgrowth of the shock she had received in hearing of the clergyman's death. For, of course, I need not assure you, Miss Sterling, that for all our readiness to take the oath she demanded, neither my brother nor myself ever were at the mill, or knew any more of the manner or cause of Mr. Barrows' death than you do."

This distinct denial, made in quiet but emphatic tones, caused me to look up at him with what was perhaps something of an expressive glance. For at its utterance the longing cry had risen in my heart, "Oh, that it were Dwight who had said that!" And the realization which it immediately brought of the glad credence which it would have received from me had it only fallen from *his* lips caused an inward tremble of self-consciousness which doubtless communicated itself to my glance. For Guy Pollard, without waiting for any words I might have to say, leaned towards me with a gratified air, and with what I would like to call a smile, exclaimed:

"You have been in the house scarce twenty-four hours, but I feel as if I could already give you the title of friend. Will you accept it from me, Miss Sterling, and with it my most cordial appreciation and esteem?"

"Ah, this is mere bait!" I thought, and was tempted to indignantly repel the hand he held out; but something restrained me which I am too proud to call fear, and which in reality I do not think was fear, so much as it was wonder and a desire to understand the full motive of a condescension I could not but feel

was unprecedented in this arrogant nature. I therefore gave him my hand, but in a steady, mechanical way that I flattered myself committed me to nothing; though the slight but unmistakable pressure he returned seemed to show that he took it for a sign of amity, if not of absolute surrender.

"You relieve me of a great weight," he acknowledged. "Had you been of the commonplace type of woman, you might have made it very uncomfortable for us." "And what have I said and done," I could not help remarking, though neither so bitterly nor with so much irony as I might have done had that desire of which I have spoken been less keen than it was, "to lead you to think I shall not yet do so?"

"Your glance is your surety," was the response he made. "That and your honest hand, which does not lightly fall in that of a stranger." And with a real smile now, though it was by no means the reassuring and perhaps attractive one he doubtless meant it to be, he fixed me with his subtle glance, in which I began to read a meaning, if not a purpose, that made the blood leap indignantly to my heart, and caused me to feel as if I had somehow stumbled into a snare from which it would take more than ordinary skill and patience to escape.

A look down the shadowy room restored my equanimity, however. It was all so unreal, so ghostly, I could not help acknowledging to myself that I was moving in a dream which exaggerated every impression I received, even that which might be given by the bold gaze of an unscrupulous man. So I

determined not to believe in it, or in any thing else I should see that night, unless it were in the stern soul of the woman who had just died; a qualification which my mind could not help making to itself as my eyes fell again upon her portrait, with its cruel, unrelenting expression.

"You do not feel at home!" exclaimed Guy, interpreting according to his needs my silence and the look I had thrown about me. "I do not wonder," he pursued. "Dreariness like this has little to do with youth and beauty. But I hope"—here he took a step nearer, while that meaning look—oh, my God! was I deceiving myself?—deepened in his eyes—"I hope the day will come when you will see the sunshine stream through the gloom of these dim recesses, and in the new cheer infused into the life of this old mansion forget the scenes of horror that encompassed the beginning of our friendship." And with a bow that seemed to intimate that necessity, and not his wishes, forced him to terminate this interview, he was stepping back, when the door opened quickly behind him, and the face of Dwight Pollard showed itself on the threshold.

The look he cast first at his brother and then at me caused a fresh tumult to take place in my breast. Was it displeasure he showed? I was pleased to think so. I could not be sure of his feeling, however, for almost on the instant his brow cleared, and advancing with an excuse for his interruption, he spoke a few low words to Guy. The latter gravely bowed, and with just a slight glance in my direction, immediately left the room. I was once

more alone with Dwight Pollard.

He seemed to feel the situation as much as I did, for it was several moments before he spoke, and when he did, his voice had a subdued tremble in it which I had not noticed before.

"Miss Sterling," he remarked, "my brother has been talking to you, trying, I presume, to explain to you the distressing scene to which you have just been witness."

I bowed, for I seemed to have no words to say, though he evidently longed to hear me speak.

"My brother is not always considerate in his manner of address," he went on, after a moment's intent scrutiny of my face. "I hope he has not made you feel other than satisfied of our goodwill towards you?"

"No," I faintly smiled, wishing I knew what feeling prompted this subtle attempt to learn the nature of the interview which had just passed. "Mr. Guy Pollard has never been any thing but polite to me."

He looked at me again as if he would read my very soul, but I gave him no help to its understanding, and he presently dropped his eyes.

"Did he tell you," he at last resumed, with some effort, "that it is our wish for you to remain in this house till our mother is buried?"

"No," I returned, "he said nothing about it."

"But you will do so?" he queried, in that rich and deep tone which thrilled so dangerously to my heart.

"I—I must have time to think," I faltered, taken by surprise, and not seeing my way as clearly as I could wish. "It is my desire to attend the funeral of Mr. Barrows and Miss Reynolds, and—Mr. Pollard!" I suddenly exclaimed, taking perhaps the most courageous resolution of my life, "I must be honest with you. It is useless for me to deny that the manner and circumstances of your mother's death have made a great impression upon me; that I cannot, in spite of all explanations, but connect some special significance to the oath you were requested to take; and that, weakened as your mother may have been, something more terrible than the mere shock of hearing of her pastor's sudden decease must have occasioned emotions so intense as to end in death and delirium. If, therefore, you are willing to assure me, as your brother has done, that it was entirely a fancy of hers that you ever held any communication with Mr. Barrows at the mill, I will gladly promise to disabuse my mind of all unfavorable impressions, and even promise to stay here, if such be your desire, till the days of your trouble are over, and the body of your mother is laid in her grave."

"And has my brother given you such an assurance as you speak of?"

"He has," I returned.

"Then why do you ask one from me?"

Was it possible for me to tell him?

"If it was not enough coming from his lips, how could it be coming from mine?" he continued.

Shame and confusion kept me silent.

"Would it be?" he persisted, this time with feeling and something like a hint of eagerness in his voice.

I dared not say "Yes," and yet I must have the assurance I demanded, if ever I was to know peace again.

"You no not answer; but I think, I feel confident you would believe my word, Miss Sterling."

"I have asked for it," I returned.

He turned frightfully pale; it seemed as if he would speak, but the words did not come. I felt, my heart growing sick, and as for him, he started violently away from my side, and took a turn or two up and down the room.

"I cannot deny what looks like an accusation," he declared at last, coming and standing before me with a sombre but determined air. "My pride alone is sufficient to deter me. Will you accept from me any thing less. I am not such a man as my brother."

"I will accept your assurance that as the true friend to Ada Reynolds I may remain in this house without stain to her memory or love."

"Then you think—"

"No," said I, with a burst I could not control, "I do not think; I do not want to think; do not make me, I entreat."

He smiled, a sad and fearful smile, and took another turn up and down the seemingly darkening room. When he came back I was cold as marble, and almost as insensible.

"Miss Sterling," were his words, "do you remember a conversation we had this morning?"

I bowed, with a sudden rush of hope that almost melted me again.

"In that conversation I made a solemn assertion; do you recollect what it was?"

"Yes," I looked, if I did not audibly reply.

"I make that assertion again—is it sufficient?" he asked.

At that moment it seemed to me that it was. I looked and felt as if a great weight had been lifted from my heart, and though he flushed deeply, as any man of spirit, let alone one of such a proud and aristocratic nature as his, would be apt to under the circumstances, I saw that he experienced a relief also, and giving way to an impulse I do not yet know whether to regret or not, I held out my hand, saying calmly:

"I will remain, Mr. Pollard."

VIII

A FLOWER FROM THE POLLARD CONSERVATORY

You may wear your rue with a difference.

—HAMLET.

Mrs. Harrington did not immediately recover from the shock she had received. I therefore found myself fully employed the next day. Towards evening, however, a respite came, and I took the opportunity for a stroll up-street, as much for the sake of hearing the gossip of the town as to escape from the atmosphere of sorrow and perplexity by which I was surrounded.

My walk down to the gate was full of a certain uneasy apprehension. I had made no secret of my intentions at the supper-table, and for the reason that neither of the brothers had ventured upon any reply to my remark, I expected one, if not both, of them to join me on the way. But I reached the last turn of the path without meeting any one, and I was congratulating myself upon the prospect of having an hour of perfect freedom, when I detected, leaning on the gate before me, the firm, well-knit figure of a man.

As the two Pollards were more or less alike in form, I could

not distinguish at first glance which of the brothers it was. I therefore faltered back a step, and was indeed debating whether I should not give up my project and return to the house, when I saw the gentleman's head turn, and realized that it was too late to retreat. I therefore advanced with as much calmness as I could assume, determined not to vary my conduct, no matter which of the brothers it should turn out to be. But, to my great surprise, the gentleman before me gave me no opportunity to test my resolution. No sooner did he perceive me than he made a hurried gesture that I did not at that moment understand; and, just lifting his hat in courteous farewell, vanished from my sight in the thick bushes which at that place encumbered the grounds.

"It was Dwight; it was Guy," I alternately explained to myself, and knew not whether it would give me most relief to find myself shunned by the one or the other. My final conclusion, that I wished to have nothing further to do with either of them, received, notwithstanding, a rude shock when I arrived at the gate-post. For there, on its broad top, lay a magnificent blossom, the choicest fruit of the hot-house, and it was to beg my acceptance of this that the gentleman had made the peculiar gesture I had noticed—an act which, if it came from Dwight, certainly possessed a significance which I was not yet ready to ignore; while, if it proceeded from his cold and crafty brother—But I would not allow myself to dwell upon that possibility. The flower must be mine, and if afterwards I found that it was to Guy I owed its possession, it would be time enough then for me

to determine what to do. So I took the gorgeous blossom off the post and was speeding away down the street, when I was suddenly stopped by the thought that only Guy would have the egotism to bestow a gift upon me in this way; that Dwight, if he had wished to present it at all, would have done so with his own hand, and not left it lying on a gate-post with the assurance it would be gathered up by the fortunate recipient of his favor.

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