

GREEN ANNA KATHARINE

THE MAYOR'S WIFE

Anna Green
The Mayor's Wife

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=36094749

The Mayor's Wife:

Содержание

CHAPTER I. A SPY'S DUTY	4
CHAPTER II. QUESTIONS	13
CHAPTER III. IN THE GABLE WINDOW	24
CHAPTER IV. LIGHTS—SOUNDS	36
CHAPTER V. THE STRANGE NEIGHBORS NEXT DOOR	47
CHAPTER VI. AT THE STAIR-HEAD	64
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	68

Anna Katharine Green

The Mayor's Wife

CHAPTER I. A SPY'S DUTY

I am not without self-control, yet when Miss Davies entered the room with that air of importance she invariably assumes when she has an unusually fine position to offer, I could not hide all traces of my anxiety.

I needed a position, needed it badly, while the others—

But her eyes are on our faces, she is scanning us all with that close and calculating gaze which lets nothing escape. She has passed me by—my heart goes down, down—when suddenly her look returns and she singles me out.

“Miss Saunders.” Then, “I have a word to say to you.”

There is a rustle about me; five disappointed girls sink back into their seats as I quickly rise and follow Miss Davies out.

In the hall she faced me with these words:

“You are discreet, and you evidently desire a position. You will find a gentleman in my sitting-room. If you come to terms with him, well and good. If not, I shall expect you to forget all about him and his errand the moment you leave his presence. You understand me?”

“I think so,” I replied, meeting her steady look with one

equally composed. Part of my strength—and I think I have some strength—lies in the fact that I am quietest when most deeply roused. “I am not to talk whatever the outcome.”

“Not even to me,” she emphasized.

Stirred still further and therefore outwardly even more calm than before, I stopped her as she was moving on and ventured a single query.

“This position—involving secrecy—is it one you would advise me to take, even if I did not stand in need of it so badly?”

“Yes. The difficulties will not be great to a discreet person. It is a first-class opportunity for a young woman as experienced as yourself.”

“Thank you,” was my abrupt but grateful rejoinder; and, obeying her silent gesture, I opened the door of the sitting-room and passed in. A gentleman standing at one of the windows turned quickly at the sound of my step and came forward. Instantly whatever doubt I may have felt concerning the nature of the work about to be proposed to me yielded to the certainty that, however much it might involve of the strange and difficult, the man whose mission it was to seek my aid was one to inspire confidence and respect.

He was also a handsome man, or no, I will not go so far as that; he was only one in whom the lines of form and visage were fine enough not to interfere with the impression made by his strong nature and intense vitality. A man to sway women and also quite capable of moving men [this was evident at a glance]; but a man

under a cloud just at present,—a very heavy cloud which both irked and perplexed him.

Pausing in the middle of the room, he surveyed me closely for an instant before speaking. Did I impress him as favorably as he did me? I soon had reason to think so, for the nervous trembling of his hands ceased after the first moment or two of silent scrutiny, and I was sure I caught the note of hope in his voice as he courteously remarked:

“You are seeking a place, young lady. Do you think you can fill the one I have to offer? It has its difficulties, but it is not an onerous one. It is that of companion to my wife.”

I bowed; possibly I smiled. I do smile sometimes when a ray of real sunshine darts across my pathway.

“I should be very glad to try such a situation,” I replied.

A look of relief, so vivid that it startled me, altered at once the whole character of his countenance; and perceiving how intense was the power and fascination underlying his quiet exterior, I asked myself who and what this man was; no ordinary personage, I was sure, but who? Had Miss Davies purposely withheld his name? I began to think so.

“I have had some experience,” I was proceeding—

But he waved this consideration aside, with a change back to his former gloomy aspect, and a careful glance at the door which did not escape me.

“It is not experience which is so much needed as discretion.”

Again that word.

“The case is not a common one, or, rather,”—he caught himself up quickly, “the circumstances are not. My wife is well, but—she is not happy. She is very unhappy, deeply, unaccountably so, and I do not know why.”

Anxious to watch the effect of these words, he paused a moment, then added fervently:

“Would to God I did! It would make a new man of me.”

The meaning, the deep meaning in his tone, if not in the adjuration itself, was undeniable; but my old habit of self-control stood me in good stead and I remained silent and watchful, weighing every look and word.

“A week ago she was the lightest hearted woman in town,—the happiest wife, the merriest mother. To-day she is a mere wreck of her former self, pallid, drawn, almost speechless, yet she is not ill. She will not acknowledge to an ache or a pain; will not even admit that any change has taken place in her. But you have only to see her. And I am as ignorant of the cause of it all—as you are!” he burst out.

Still I remained silent, waiting, watchful.

“I have talked with her physician. He says there is something serious the matter with her, but he can not help her, as it is not in any respect physical, and advises me to find out what is on her mind. As if that had not been my first care! I have also consulted her most intimate friends, all who know her well, but they can give me no clue to her distress. They see the difference in her, but can not tell the cause. And I am obliged to go away and leave

her in this state. For two weeks, three weeks now, my movements will be very uncertain. I am at the beck and call of the State Committee. At any other time I would try change of scene, but she will neither consent to leave home without me nor to interrupt my plans in order that I may accompany her.”

“Miss Davies has not told me your name,” I made bold to interpolate.

He stared, shook himself together, and quietly, remarked:

“I am Henry Packard.”

The city’s mayor! and not only that, the running candidate for governor. I knew him well by name, even if I did not know, or rather had not recognized his face.

“I beg pardon,” I somewhat tremulously began, but he waved the coming apology aside as easily, as he had my first attempt at ingratiation. In fact, he appeared to be impatient of every unnecessary word. This I could, in a dim sort of way, understand. He was at the crisis of his fate, and so was his party. For several years a struggle had gone on between the two nearly matched elements in this western city, which, so far, had resulted in securing him two terms of office—possibly because his character appealed to men of all grades and varying convictions. But the opposite party was strong in the state, and the question whether he could carry his ticket against such odds, and thus give hope to his party in the coming presidential election, was one yet to be tested. Forceful as a speaker, he was expected to reap hundreds of votes from the mixed elements that invariably

thronged to hear him, and, ignorant as I necessarily was of the exigencies of such a campaign, I knew that not only his own ambition, but the hopes of his party, depended on the speeches he had been booked to make in all parts of the state. And now, three weeks before election, while every opposing force was coming to the surface, this trouble had come upon him. A mystery in his home and threatened death in his heart! For he loved his wife—that was apparent to me from the first; loved her to idolatry, as such men sometimes do love,—often to their own undoing.

All this, the thought of an instant. Meanwhile he had been studying me well.

“You understand my position,” he commented. “Wednesday night I speak in C—, Thursday, in R—, while she—” With an effort he pulled himself together. “Miss—”

“Saunders,” I put in.

“Miss Saunders, I can not leave her alone in the house. Some one must be there to guard and watch—”

“Has she no mother?” I suggested in the pause he made.

“She has no living relatives, and mine are uncongenial to her.”

This to save another question. I understood him perfectly.

“I can not ask any of them to stay with her,” he pursued decisively. “She would not consent to it. Nor can I ask any of her friends. That she does not wish, either. But I can hire a companion. To that she has already consented. That she will regard as a kindness, if the lady chosen should prove to be one of those rare beings who carry comfort in their looks without

obtruding their services or displaying the extent of their interest. You know there are some situations in which the presence of a stranger may be more grateful than that of a friend. Apparently, my wife feels herself so placed now.”

Here his eyes again read my face, an ordeal out of which I came triumphant; the satisfaction he evinced rightly indicated his mind.

“Will you accept the position?” he asked. “We have one little child. You will have no charge of her save as you may wish to make use of her in reaching the mother.”

The hint conveyed in the last phrase gave me courage to say:

“You wish me to reach her?”

“With comfort,” said he.

“And if in doing so I learn her trouble?”

“You will win my eternal gratitude by telling it to one who would give ten years of his life to assuage it.”

My head rose. I began to feel that my next step must strike solid ground.

“In other words to be quite honest—you wish me to learn her trouble if I can.”

“I believe you can be trusted to do so.”

“And then to reveal it to you?”

“If your sense of duty permits,—which I think it will.”

I might have uttered in reply, “A spy’s duty?” but the high-mindedness of his look forbade. Whatever humiliation his wishes put upon me, there could be no question of the uprightness of his

motives regarding his wife.

I ventured one more question.

“How far shall I feel myself at liberty to go in this attempt?”

“As far as your judgment approves and circumstances seem to warrant. I know that you will come upon nothing dishonorable to her, or detrimental to our relations as husband and wife, in this secret which is destroying our happiness. Her affection for me is undoubted, but something—God knows what—has laid waste her life. To find and annihilate that something is my first and foremost duty. It does not fit well with those other duties pressing upon me from the political field, does it? That is why I have called in help. That is why I have called you in.”

The emphasis was delicately but sincerely given. It struck my heart and entered it. Perhaps he had calculated upon this. If so, it was because he knew that a woman like myself works better when her feelings are roused.

Answering with a smile, I waited patiently while he talked terms and other equally necessary details, then dropping all these considerations, somewhat in his own grand manner, I made this remark:

“If your wife likes me, which very possibly she may fail to do, I shall have a few questions to ask you before I settle down to my duties. Will you see that an opportunity is given me for doing this?”

His assent was as frank as all the rest, and the next moment he left the room.

As he passed out I heard him remark to Miss Davies:

“I expect Miss Saunders at my house before nightfall. I shall reserve some minutes between half-past five and six in which to introduce her to Mrs. Packard.”

CHAPTER II. QUESTIONS

I knew all the current gossip about Mrs. Packard before I had parted with Miss Davies. Her story was a simple one. Bred in the West, she had come, immediately after her mother's death, to live with that mother's brother in Detroit. In doing this she had walked into a fortune. Her uncle was a rich man and when he died, which was about a year after her marriage with Mr. Packard and removal to C—, she found herself the recipient of an enormous legacy. She was therefore a woman of independent means, an advantage which, added to personal attractions of a high order, and manners at once dignified and winning, caused her to be universally regarded as a woman greatly to be envied by all who appreciated a well-founded popularity.

So much for public opinion. It differs materially from that just given me by her husband.

The mayor lived on Franklin Street in a quarter I had seldom visited. As I entered this once aristocratic thoroughfare from Carlton Avenue, I was struck as I had been before by its heterogeneous appearance. Houses of strictly modern type neighbored those of a former period, and it was not uncommon to see mansion and hovel confronting each other from the opposite side of the street. Should I find the number I sought attached to one of the crude, unmeaning dwellings I was constantly passing, or to one of mellower aspect and possibly historic association?

I own that I felt a decided curiosity on this point, and congratulated myself greatly when I had left behind me a peculiarly obnoxious monstrosity in stone, whose imposing proportions might reasonably commend themselves to the necessities, if not to the taste of the city's mayor.

A little shop, one story in height and old enough for its simple wooden walls to cry aloud for paint, stood out from the middle of a row of cheap brick houses. Directly opposite it were two conspicuous dwellings, neither of them new and one of them ancient as the street itself. They stood fairly close together, with an alley running between. From the number I had now reached it was evident that the mayor lived in one of these. Happily it was in the fresher and more inviting one. As I noted this, I paused in admiration of its spacious front and imposing doorway. The latter was in the best style of Colonial architecture, and though raised but one step from the walk, was so distinguished by the fan-tailed light overhead and the flanking casements glazed with antique glass, that I felt myself carried back to the days when such domiciles were few and denoted wealth the most solid, and hospitality the most generous.

A light wall, painted to match the house, extended without break to the adjoining building, a structure equal to the other in age and dimensions, but differing in all other respects as much as neglect and misuse could make it. Gray and forbidding, it towered in its place, a perfect foil to the attractive dwelling whose single step I now amounted with cheerful composure.

What should I have thought if at that moment I had been told that appearances were deceitful, and that there were many persons then living who, if left to their choice, would prefer life in the dismal walls from which I had instinctively turned, to a single night spent in the promising house I was so eager to enter.

An old serving-man, with a countenance which struck me pleasantly enough at the time, opened the door in response to my ring, only to make instant way for Mayor Packard, who advanced from some near-by room to greet me. By this thoughtful attention I was spared the embarrassment from which I might otherwise have suffered.

His few words of greeting set me entirely at my ease, and I was quite ready to follow him when a moment later he invited me to meet Mrs. Packard.

“I can not promise you just the reception you naturally look for,” said he, as he led me around the stairs toward an opening at their rear, “but she’s a kind woman and can not but be struck with your own kind spirit and quiet manner.”

Happily, I was not called upon to answer, for at that moment the door swung open and he ushered me into a room flooded brilliantly with the last rays of the setting sun. The woman who sat in its glow made an instant and permanent impression upon me. No one could look intently upon her without feeling that here was a woman of individuality and power, overshadowed at present by the deepest melancholy. As she rose and faced us I decided instantly that her husband had not exaggerated her state

of mind. Emotion of no ordinary nature disturbed the lines of her countenance and robbed her naturally fine figure of a goodly portion of its dignity and grace; and though she immediately controlled herself and assumed the imposing aspect of a highly trained woman, ready, if not eager, to welcome an intruding guest, I could not easily forget the drawn look about mouth and eyes which, in the first instant of our meeting, had distorted features naturally harmonious and beautifully serene.

I am sure her husband had observed it also, for his voice trembled slightly as he addressed her.

“I have brought you a companion, Olympia, one whose business and pleasure it will be to remain with you while I am making speeches a hundred miles away. Do you not see reason for thanking me?” This last question he pointed with a glance in my direction, which drew her attention and caused her to give me a kindly look.

I met her eyes fairly. They were large and gray and meant for smiling; eyes that, with a happy heart behind them, would illumine her own beauty and create joy in those upon whom they fell. But to-day, nothing but question lived in their dark and uneasy depths, and it was for me to face that question and give no sign of what the moment was to me.

“I think—I am sure, that my thanks are due you,” she courteously replied, with a quick turn toward her husband, expressive of confidence, and, as I thought, of love. “I dreaded being left alone.”

He drew a deep breath of relief; we both did; then we talked a little, after which Mayor Packard found some excuse for taking me from the room.

“Now for the few words you requested,” said he; and, preceding me down the hall, he led me into what he called his study.

I noted one thing, and only one thing, on entering this place. That was the presence of a young man who sat at a distant table reading and making notes. But as Mayor Packard took no notice of him, knowing and expecting him to be there, no doubt, I, with a pardonable confusion, withdrew my eyes from the handsomest face I had ever seen, and, noting that my employer had stopped before a type-writer’s table, I took my place at his side, without knowing very well what this move meant or what he expected me to do there.

I was not long left in doubt. With a gesture toward the type-writer, he asked me if I was accustomed to its use; and when I acknowledged some sort of acquaintance with it, he drew an unanswered letter from a pile on the table and requested me to copy it as a sample.

I immediately sat down before the type-writer. I was in something of a maze, but felt that I must follow his lead. As I proceeded to insert the paper and lay out the copy to hand, he crossed over to the young man at the other end of the room and began a short conversation which ended in some trivial demand that sent the young man from the room. As the door closed

behind him Mayor Packard returned to my side.

“Keep on with your work and never mind mistakes,” said he. “What I want is to hear the questions you told me to expect from you if you stayed.”

Seemingly Mayor Packard did not wish this young man to know my position in the house. Was it possible he did not wholly trust him? My hands trembled from the machine and I was about to turn and give my full thought to what I had to say. But pride checked the impulse. “No,” I muttered in quick dissuasion, to myself. “He must see that I can do two things at once and do both well.” And so I went on with the letter.

“When,” I asked, “did you first see the change in Mrs. Packard?”

“On Tuesday afternoon at about this time.”

“What had happened on that day? Had she been out?”

“Yes, I think she told me later that she had been out.”

“Do you know where?”

“To some concert, I believe. I did not press her with questions, Miss Saunders; I am a poor inquisitor.”

Click, click; the machine was working admirably.

“Have you reason to think,” I now demanded, “that she brought her unhappiness in with her, when she returned from that concert?”

“No; for when I returned home myself, as I did earlier than usual that night, I heard her laughing with the child in the nursery. It was afterward, some few minutes afterward, that I came upon

her sitting in such a daze of misery, that she did not recognize me when I spoke to her. I thought it was a passing mood at the time; she is a sensitive woman and she had been reading—I saw the book lying on the floor at her side; but when, having recovered from her dejection—a dejection, mind you, which she would neither acknowledge nor explain—she accompanied me out to dinner, she showed even more feeling on our return, shrinking unaccountably from leaving the carriage and showing, not only in this way but in others, a very evident distaste to reenter her own house. Now, whatever hold I still retain upon her is of so slight a nature that I am afraid every day she will leave me.”

“Leave you!”

My fingers paused; my astonishment had got the better of me.

“Yes; it is as bad as that. I don’t know what day you will send me a telegram of three words, ‘She has gone.’ Yet she loves me, really and truly loves me. That is the mystery of it. More than this, her very heart-strings are knit up with those of our child.”

“Mayor Packard,”—I had resumed work,—“was any letter delivered to her that day?”

“That I can not say.”

Fact one for me to establish.

“The wives of men like you—men much before the world, men in the thick of strife, social and political—often receive letters of a very threatening character.”

“She would have shown me any such, if only to put me on my guard. She is physically a very brave woman and not at all

nervous.”

“Those letters sometimes assume the shape of calumny. Your character may have been attacked.”

“She believes in my character and would have given me an opportunity to vindicate myself. I have every confidence in my wife’s sense of justice.”

I experienced a thrill of admiration for the appreciation he evinced in those words. Yet I pursued the subject resolutely.

“Have you an enemy, Mayor Packard? Any real and downright enemy capable of a deep and serious attempt at destroying your happiness?”

“None that I know of, Miss Saunders. I have political enemies, of course men, who, influenced by party feeling, are not above attacking methods and possibly my official reputation; but personal ones—wretches willing to stab me in my home-life and affections, that I can not believe. My life has been as an open book. I have harmed no man knowingly and, as far as I know, no man has ever cherished a wish to injure me.”

“Who constitute your household? How many servants do you keep and how long have they been with you?”

“Now you exact details with which only Mrs. Packard is conversant. I don’t know anything about the servants. I do not interest myself much in matters purely domestic, and Mrs. Packard spares me. You will have to observe the servants yourself.”

I made another note in my mind while inquiring:

“Who is the young man who was here just now? He has an uncommon face.”

“A handsome one, do you mean?”

“Yes, and—well, what I should call distinctly clever.”

“He is clever. My secretary, Miss Saunders. He helps me in my increased duties; has, in a way, charge of my campaign; reads, sorts and sometimes answers my letters. Just now he is arranging my speeches—fitting them to the local requirements of the several audiences I shall be called upon to address. He knows mankind like a book. I shall never give the wrong speech to the wrong people while he is with me.”

“Do you like him?—the man, I mean, not his work.”

“Well—yes. He is very good company, or would have been if, in the week he has been in the house, I had been in better mood to enjoy him. He’s a capital story-teller.”

“He has been here a week?”

“Yes, or almost.”

“Came on last Tuesday, didn’t he?”

“Yes, I believe that was the day.”

“Toward afternoon?”

“No; he came early; soon after breakfast, in fact.”

“Does your wife like him?”

His Honor gave a start, flushed [I can sometimes see a great deal even while very busily occupied] and answered without anger, but with a good deal of pride:

“I doubt if Mrs. Packard more than knows of his presence.

She does not come to this room.”

“And he does not sit at your table?”

“No; I must have some few minutes in the day free from the suggestion of politics. Mr. Steele can safely be left out of our discussion. He does not even sleep in the house.”

The note I made at this was very emphatic. “You should know,” said I; then quickly “Tuesday was the day Mrs. Packard first showed the change you observed in her.”

“Yes, I think so; but that is a coincidence only. She takes no interest in this young man; scarcely noticed him when I introduced him; just bowed to him over her shoulder; she was fastening on our little one’s cap. Usually she is extremely, courteous to strangers, but she was abstracted, positively abstracted at that moment. I wondered at it, for he usually makes a stir wherever he goes. But my wife cares little for beauty in a man; I doubt if she noticed his looks at all. She did not catch his name, I remember.”

“Pardon me, what is that you say?”

“She did not catch his name, for later she asked me what it was.”

“Tell me about that, Mr. Packard.”

“It is immaterial; but I am ready to answer all your questions. It was while we were out dining. Chance threw us together, and to fill up the moment she asked the name of the young man I had brought into the library that morning. I told her and explained his position and the long training he had had in local politics. She

listened, but not as closely as she did to the music. Oh, she takes no interest in him. I wish she did; his stories might amuse her.”

I did not pursue the subject. Taking out the letter I had been writing, I held it out for his inspection, with the remark:

“More copy, please, Mayor Packard.”

CHAPTER III. IN THE GABLE WINDOW

A few minutes later I was tripping up-stairs in the wake of a smart young maid whom Mayor Packard had addressed as Ellen. I liked this girl at first sight and, as I followed her up first one flight, then another, to the room which had been chosen for me, the hurried glimpses I had of her bright and candid face suggested that in this especial member of the household I might hope to find a friend and helper in case friendship and help were needed in the blind task to which I stood committed. But I soon saw cause—or thought I did—to change this opinion. When she turned on me at the door of my room, a small one at the extreme end of the third floor, I had an opportunity of meeting her eyes. The interest in her look was not the simple one to be expected. In another person in other circumstances I should have characterized her glance as one of inquiry and wonder. But neither inquiry nor wonder described the present situation, and I put myself upon my guard.

Seeing me look her way, she flushed, and, throwing wide the door, remarked in the pleasantest of tones:

“This is your room. Mrs. Packard says that if it is not large enough or does not seem pleasant to you, she will find you another one to-morrow.”

“It’s very pleasant and quite large enough,” I confidently

replied, after a hasty look about me. "I could not be more comfortable."

She smiled, a trifle broadly for the occasion, I thought, and patted a pillow here and twitched a curtain there, as she remarked with a certain emphasis:

"I'm sure you will be comfortable. There's nobody else on this floor but Letty and the baby, but you don't look as if you would be easily frightened." Astonished, not so much by her words as by the furtive look she gave me, I laughed as I repeated "Frightened? What should frighten me?"

"Oh, nothing." Her back was to me now, but I felt that I knew her very look. "Nothing, of course. If you're not timid you won't mind sleeping so far away from every one. Then, we are always within call. The attic door is just a few steps off. We'll leave it unlocked and you can come up if—if you feel like it at any time. We'll understand."

Understand! I eyed her as she again looked my way, with some of her own curiosity if not wonder.

"Mrs. Packard must have had some very timorous guests," I observed. "Or, perhaps, you have had experiences here which have tended to alarm you. The house is so large and imposing for the quarter it is in I can readily imagine it to attract burglars."

"Burglars! It would be a brave burglar who would try to get in here. I guess you never heard about this house."

"No," I admitted, unpleasantly divided between a wish to draw her out and the fear of betraying Mayor Packard's trust in me by

showing the extent of my interest.

“Well, it’s only gossip,” she laughingly assured me. “You needn’t think of it, Miss. I’m sure you’ll be all right. We girls have been, so far, and Mrs. Packard—”

Here she doubtless heard a voice outside or some summons from below, for she made a quick start toward the door, remarking in a different and very pleasant tone of voice:

“Dinner at seven, Miss. There’ll be no extra company to-night. I’m coming.” This to some one in the hall as she hastily passed through the door.

Dropping the bag I had lifted to unpack, I stared at the door which had softly closed under her hand, then, with an odd impulse, turned to look at my own face in the glass before which I chanced to be standing. Did I expect to find there some evidence of the excitement which this strange conversation might naturally produce in one already keyed up to an expectation of the mysterious and unusual? If so, I was not disappointed. My features certainly betrayed the effect of this unexpected attack upon my professional equanimity. What did the girl mean? What was she hinting at? What underlay—what could underlie her surprising remark, “I guess you never heard about this house?” Something worth my knowing; something which might explain Mayor Packard’s fears and Mrs. Packard’s—

There I stopped. It was where the girl had stopped. She and not I must round out this uncompleted sentence.

Meanwhile I occupied myself in unpacking my two bags and

making acquaintance with the room which, I felt, was destined to be the scene of many, anxious thoughts. Its first effect had been a cheerful one, owing to its two large windows, one looking out on a stretch of clear sky above a mass of low, huddled buildings, and the other on the wall of the adjacent house which, though near enough to obstruct the view, was not near enough to exclude all light. Another and closer scrutiny of the room did not alter the first impression. To the advantages of light were added those of dainty furnishing and an exceptionally pleasing color scheme. There was no richness anywhere, but an attractive harmony which gave one an instantaneous feeling of home. From the little brass bedstead curtained with cretonne, to the tiny desk filled with everything needful for immediate use, I saw evidences of the most careful housekeeping, and was vainly asking myself what could have come into Mrs. Packard's life to disturb so wholesome a nature, when my attention was arrested by a picture hanging at the right of the window overlooking the next house.

It gave promise of being a most interesting sketch, and I crossed over to examine it; but instead of doing so, found my eyes drawn toward something more vital than any picture and twice as enchaining.

It was a face, the face of an old woman staring down at me from a semicircular opening in the gable of the adjoining house. An ordinary circumstance in itself, but made extraordinary by the fixity of her gaze, which was leveled straight on mine, and the uncommon expression of breathless eagerness which gave force

to her otherwise commonplace features. So remarkable was this expression and so apparently was it directed against myself, that I felt like throwing up my window and asking the poor old creature what I could do for her. But her extreme immobility deterred me. For all the intentness of her look there was no invitation in it warranting such an advance on my part. She simply stared down at me in unbroken anxiety, nor, though I watched her for some minutes with an intensity equal to her own, did I detect any change either in her attitude or expression.

“Odd,” thought I, and tested her with a friendly bow. The demonstration failed to produce the least impression. “A most uncanny neighbor,” was my mental comment on finally turning away. Truly I was surrounded by mysteries, but fortunately this was one with which I had no immediate concern. It did not take me long to put away my few belongings and prepare for dinner. When quite ready, I sat down to write a letter. This completed, I turned to go downstairs. But before leaving the room I cast another look up at my neighbor’s attic window. The old woman was still there. As our glances met I experienced a thrill which was hardly one of sympathy, yet was not exactly one of fear. My impulse was to pull down the shade between us, but I had not the heart. She was so old, so feeble and so, evidently the prey of some strange and fixed idea. What idea? It was not for me to say, but I found it impossible to make any move which would seem to shut her out; so I left the shade up; but her image followed me and I forgot it only when confronted once again with Mrs. Packard.

That lady was awaiting me at the dining-room door. She had succeeded in throwing off her secret depression and smiled quite naturally as I approached. Her easy, courteous manners became her wonderfully. I immediately recognized how much there was to admire in our mayor's wife, and quite understood his relief when, a few minutes later, we sat at table and conversation began. Mrs. Packard, when free and light-hearted, was a delightful companion and the meal passed off cheerily. When we rose and the mayor left us for some necessary business it was with a look of satisfaction in my direction which was the best possible preparation for my approaching tete-a-tete with his moody and incomprehensible wife.

But I was not destined to undergo the contemplated ordeal this evening. Guests were announced whom Mrs. Packard kindly invited me to meet, but I begged to be allowed to enjoy the library. I had too much to consider just now, to find any pleasure in society. Three questions filled my mind.

What was Mrs. Packard's secret trouble?

Why were people afraid to remain in this house?

Why did the old woman next door show such interest in the new member of her neighbor's household?

Would a single answer cover all? Was there but one cause for each and every one of these peculiarities? Probably, and it was my duty to ferret out this cause. But how should I begin? I remembered what I had read about detectives and their methods, but the help I thus received was small. Subtler methods were

demanded here and subtler methods I must find. Meantime, I would hope for another talk with Mayor Packard. He might clear up some of this fog. At least, I should like to give him the opportunity. But I saw no way of reaching him at present. Even Mrs. Packard did not feel at liberty to disturb him in his study. I must wait for his reappearance, and in the meantime divert myself as best I could. I caught up a magazine, but speedily dropped it to cast a quick glance around the room. Had I heard anything? No. The house was perfectly still, save for the sound of conversation in the drawing-room. Yet I found it hard to keep my eyes upon the page. Quite without my volition they flew, first to one corner, then to another. The room was light, there were no shadowy nooks in it, yet I felt an irresistible desire to peer into every place not directly under my eye. I knew it to be folly, and, after succumbing to the temptation of taking a sly look behind a certain tall screen, I resolutely set myself to curb my restlessness and to peruse in good earnest the article I had begun. To make sure of myself, I articulated each word aloud, and to my exceeding satisfaction had reached the second column when I found my voice trailing off into silence, and every sense alarmingly alert. Yet there was nothing, absolutely nothing in this well-lighted, cozy family-room to awaken fear. I was sure of this the next minute, and felt correspondingly irritated with myself and deeply humiliated. That my nerves should play me such a trick at the very outset of my business in this house! That I could not be left alone, with life in every part of the house,

and the sound of the piano and cheerful talking just across the hall, without the sense of the morbid and unearthly entering my matter-of-fact brain!

Uttering an ejaculation of contempt, I reseated myself. The impulse came again to look behind me, but I mastered it this time without too great an effort. I already knew every feature of the room: its old-fashioned mantel, large round center-table, its couches and chairs, and why should I waste my attention again upon them?

“Is there anything you wish, Miss?” asked a voice directly over my shoulder.

I wheeled about with a start. I had heard no one approach; it was not sound which had disturbed me.

“The library bell rang,” continued the voice. “Is it ice-water you want?”

Then I saw that it was Nixon, the butler, and shook my head in mingled anger and perplexity; for not only had he advanced quite noiselessly, but he was looking at me with that curious concentrated gaze which I had met twice before since coming into this house.

“I need nothing,” said I, with all the mildness I could summon into my voice; and did not know whether to like or not like the quiet manner in which he sidled out of the room.

“Why do they all look at me so closely?” I queried, in genuine confusion. “The man had no business here. I did not ring, and I don’t believe he thought I did. He merely wanted to see what I was

doing and whether I was enjoying myself. Why this curiosity? I have never roused it anywhere else. It is not myself they are interested in, but the cause and purpose of my presence under this roof." I paused to wonder over the fact that the one member of the family who might be supposed to resent my intrusion most was the one who took it most kindly and with least token of surprise—Mrs. Packard.

"She accepts me easily enough," thought I. "To her I am a welcome companion. What am I to these?"

The answer, or rather a possible answer, came speedily. At nine o'clock Mayor Packard entered the room from his study across the hall, and, seeing me alone, came forward briskly. "Mrs. Packard has company and I am on my way to the drawing-room, but I am happy to have the opportunity of assuring you that already she looks better, and that I begin to hope that your encouraging presence may stimulate her to throw aside her gloom and needless apprehensions. I shall be eternally grateful to you if it will. It is the first time in a week that she has consented to receive visitors." I failed to feel the same elation over this possibly temporary improvement in his wife's condition, but I carefully refrained from betraying my doubts. On the contrary, I took advantage of the moment to clear my mind of one of the many perplexities disturbing it.

"And I am glad of this opportunity to ask you what may seem a foolish, if not impertinent question. The maid, Ellen, in showing me my room, was very careful to assure me that she slept near me

and would let me into her room in case I experienced any alarm in the night; and when I showed surprise at her expecting me to feel alarm of any kind in a house full of people, made the remark, 'I guess you do not know about this house.' Will you pardon me if I ask if there is anything I don't know, and should know, about the home your suffering wife inhabits? A problem such as you have given me to solve demands a thorough understanding of every cause capable of creating disturbance in a sensitive mind."

The mayor's short laugh failed to hide his annoyance. "You will find nothing in this direction," said he, "to account for the condition I have mentioned to you. Mrs. Packard is utterly devoid of superstition. That I made sure of before signing the lease of this old house. But I forgot; you are doubtless ignorant of its reputation. It has, or rather has had, the name of being haunted. Ridiculous, of course, but a fact with which Mrs. Packard has had to contend in"—he gave me a quick glance—"in hiring servants."

It was now my turn to smile, but somehow I did not. A vision had risen in my mind of that blank and staring face in the attic window next door, and I felt—well, I don't know how I felt, but I did not smile.

Another short laugh escaped him.

"We have not been favored by any manifestations from the spiritual world. This has proved a very matter-of-fact sort of home for us. I had almost forgotten that it was burdened with such an uncanny reputation, and I'm sure that Mrs. Packard would have shared my indifference if it had not been for the

domestic difficulty I have mentioned. It took us two weeks to secure help of any kind.”

“Indeed! and how long have you been in the house? I judge that you rent it?”

“Yes, we rent it and we have been here two months. It was the only house I could get in a locality convenient for me; besides, the old place suits me. It would take more than an obsolete ghost or so to scare me away from what I like.”

“But Mrs. Packard? She may not be a superstitious woman, yet—”

“Don’t be fanciful, Miss Saunders. You will have to look deeper than that for the spell which has been cast over my wife. Olympia afraid of creaks and groans? Olympia seeing sights? She’s much too practical by nature, Miss Saunders, to say nothing of the fact that she would certainly have confided her trouble to me, had her imagination been stirred in this way. Little things have invariably been discussed between us. I repeat that this possibility should not give you a moment’s thought.”

A burst of sweet singing came from the drawing-room.

“That’s her voice,” he cried. “Whatever her trouble may be she has forgotten it for the moment. Excuse me if I join her. It is such pleasure to have her at all like herself again.”

I longed to detain him, longed to put some of the numberless questions my awakened curiosity demanded, but his impatience was too marked and I let him depart without another word.

But I was not satisfied. Inwardly I determined to see him

again as soon as possible and gain a more definite insight into the mysteries of his home.

CHAPTER IV. LIGHTS—SOUNDS

I am by nature a thoroughly practical woman. If I had not been, the many misfortunes of my life would have made me so. Yet, when the library door closed behind the mayor and I found myself again alone in a spot where I had not felt comfortable from the first, I experienced an odd sensation not unlike fear. It left me almost immediately and my full reasoning powers reasserted themselves; but the experience had been mine and I could not smile it away.

The result was a conviction, which even reason could not dispel, that whatever secret tragedy or wrong had signalized this house, its perpetration had taken place in this very room. It was a fancy, but it held, and under its compelling if irrational influence, I made a second and still more minute survey of the room to which this conviction had imparted so definite an interest.

I found it just as ordinary and unsuggestive as before; an old-fashioned, square apartment renovated and redecorated to suit modern tastes. Its furnishings I have already described; they were such as may be seen in any comfortable abode. I did not linger over them a moment; besides, they were the property of the present tenant, and wholly disconnected with the past I was insensibly considering. Only the four walls and what they held, doors, windows and mantel-piece, remained to speak of those old days. Of the doors there were two, one opening into the main

hall under the stairs, the other into a cross corridor separating the library from the dining-room. It was through the dining-room door Nixon had come when he so startled me by speaking unexpectedly over my shoulder! The two windows faced the main door, as did the ancient, heavily carved mantel. I could easily imagine the old-fashioned shutters hidden behind the modern curtains, and, being anxious to test the truth of my imaginings, rose and pulled aside one of these curtains only to see, just as I expected, the blank surface of a series of unslatted shutters, tightly fitting one to another with old-time exactitude. A flat hook and staple fastened them. Gently raising the window, and lifting one, I pulled the shutter open and looked out. The prospect was just what I had been led to expect from the location of the room—the long, bare wall of the neighboring house. I was curious about that house, more curious at this moment than ever before; for though it stood a good ten feet away from the one I was now in, great pains had been taken by its occupants to close every opening which might invite the glances of a prying eye. A door which had once opened on the alley running between the two houses had been removed and its place boarded up. So with a window higher up; the half-circle window near the roof, I could not see from my present point of view.

Drawing back, I reclosed the shutter, lowered the window and started for my own room. As I passed the first stair-head, I heard a baby's laugh, followed by a merry shout, which, ringing through the house, seemed to dispel all its shadows.

I had touched reality again. Remembering Mayor Packard's suggestion that I might through the child find a means of reaching the mother, I paid a short visit to the nursery where I found a baby whose sweetness must certainly have won its mother's deepest love. Letty, the nurse, was of a useful but commonplace type, a conscientious nurse, that was all.

But I was to have a further taste of the unusual that night and to experience another thrill before I slept. My room was dark when I entered it, and, recognizing a condition favorable to the gratification of my growing curiosity in regard to the neighboring house, I approached the window and stole a quick look at the gable-end where, earlier in the evening I had seen peering out at me an old woman's face. Conceive my astonishment at finding the spot still lighted and a face looking out, but not the same face, a countenance as old, one as intent, but of different conformation and of a much more intellectual type. I considered myself the victim of an illusion; I tried to persuade myself that it was the same woman, only in another garb and under a different state of feeling; but the features were much too dissimilar for such an hypothesis to hold. The eagerness, the unswerving attitude were the same, but the first woman had had a weak round face with pinched features, while this one showed a virile head and long heavy cheeks and chin, which once must have been full of character, though they now showed only heaviness of heart and the dull apathy of a fixed idea.

Two women, total strangers to me, united in an unceasing

watch upon me in my room! I own that the sense of mystery which this discovery brought struck me at the moment as being fully as uncanny and as unsettling to contemplate as the idea of a spirit haunting walls in which I was destined for a while to live, breathe and sleep. However, as soon as I had drawn the shade and lighted the gas, I forgot the whole thing, and not till I was quite ready for bed, and my light again turned low, did I feel the least desire to take another peep at that mysterious window. The face was still there, peering at me through a flood of moonlight. The effect was ghastly, and for hours I could not sleep, imagining that face still staring down upon me, illuminated with the unnatural light and worn with a profitless and unmeaning vigil.

That there was something to fear in this house was evident from the halting step with which the servants, one and all, passed my door on their way up to their own beds. I now knew, or thought I knew, what was in their minds; but the comfort brought by this understanding was scarcely sufficient to act as antidote to the keen strain to which my faculties had been brought. Yet nothing happened, and when a clock somewhere in the house had assured me by its own clear stroke that the dreaded midnight hour had passed I rose and stole again to the window. This time both moonlight and face were gone. Contentment came with the discovery. I crept back to bed with lightened heart and soon was asleep.

Next morning, however, the first face was again at the window, as I at once saw on raising the blind. I breakfasted alone.

Mrs. Packard was not yet down and the mayor had already left to fulfil an early appointment down-town. Old Nixon waited on me. As he, like every other member of the family, with the possible exception of the mayor, was still an unknown quantity in the problem given me to solve, I allowed a few stray glances to follow him as he moved decorously about the board anticipating my wants and showing himself an adept in his appointed task. Once I caught his eye and I half expected him to speak, but he was too well-trained for that, and the meal proceeded in the same silence in which it had begun. But this short interchange of looks had given me an idea. He showed an eager interest in me quite apart from his duty to me as waiter. He was nearer sixty, than fifty, but it was not his age which made his hand tremble as he laid down a plate before me or served me with coffee and bread. Whether this interest was malevolent or kindly I found it impossible to judge. He had a stoic's face with but one eloquent feature—his eyes; and these he kept studiously lowered after that one quick glance. Would it help matters for me to address him? Possibly, but I decided not to risk it. Whatever my immediate loss I must on no account rouse the least distrust in this evidently watchful household. If knowledge came naturally, well and good; I must not seem to seek it.

The result proved my discretion. As I was rising from the table Nixon himself made this remark:

“Mrs. Packard will be glad to see you in her room up-stairs any time after ten o'clock. Ellen will show you where.” Then, as

I was framing a reply, he added in a less formal tone: "I hope you were not disturbed last night. I told the girls not to be so noisy."

Now they had been very quiet, so I perceived that he simply wanted to open conversation.

"I slept beautifully," I assured him. "Indeed, I'm not easily kept awake. I don't believe I could keep awake if I knew that a ghost would stalk through my room at midnight."

His eyes opened, and he did just what I had intended him to do,—met my glance directly.

"Ghosts!" he repeated, edging uneasily forward, perhaps with the intention of making audible his whisper: "Do you believe in ghosts?"

I laughed easily and with a ringing merriment, like the light-hearted girl I should be and am not.

"No," said I, "why should I? But I should like to. I really should enjoy the experience of coming face to face with a wholly shadowless being."

He stared and now his eyes told nothing. Mechanically I moved to go, mechanically he stepped aside to give me place. But his curiosity or his interest would not allow him to see me pass out without making another attempt to understand me. Stammering in his effort to seem indifferent, he dropped this quiet observation just as I reached the door.

"Some people say, or at least I have heard it whispered in the neighborhood, that this house is haunted. I've never seen anything, myself."

I forced myself to give a tragic start [I was half ashamed of my arts], and, coming back, turned a purposely excited countenance toward him.

“This house!” I cried. “Oh, how lovely! I never thought I should have the good fortune of passing the night in a house that is really haunted. What are folks supposed to see? I don’t know much about ghosts out of books.”

This nonplussed him. He was entirely out of his element. He glanced nervously at the door and tried to seem at his ease; perhaps tried to copy my own manner as he mumbled these words:

“I’ve not given much attention to the matter, Miss. It’s not long since we came here and Mrs. Packard don’t approve of our gossiping with the neighbors. But I think the people have mostly been driven away by strange noises and by lights which no one could explain, flickering up over the ceilings from the halls below. I don’t want to scare you, Miss—”

“Oh, you won’t scare me.”

“Mrs. Packard wouldn’t like me to do that. She never listens to a word from us about these things, and we don’t believe the half of it ourselves; but the house does have a bad name, and it’s the wonder of everybody that the mayor will live in it.”

“Sounds?” I repeated. “Lights?”—and laughed again. “I don’t think I shall bother myself about them!” I went gaily out.

It did seem very puerile to me, save as it might possibly account in some remote way for Mrs. Packard’s peculiar mental

condition.

Up-stairs I found Ellen. She was in a talkative mood, and this time I humored her till she had told me all she knew about the house and its ghostly traditions. This all had come from a servant, a nurse who had lived in the house before. Ellen herself, like the butler, Nixon, had had no personal experiences to relate, though the amount of extra wages she received had quite prepared her for them. Her story, or rather the nurse's story, was to the following effect.

The house had been built and afterward inhabited for a term of years by one of the city fathers, a well-known and still widely remembered merchant. No unusual manifestations had marked it during his occupancy. Not till it had run to seed and been the home of decaying gentility, and later of actual poverty, did it acquire a name which made it difficult to rent, though the neighborhood was a growing one and the house itself well-enough built to make it a desirable residence. Those who had been induced to try living within its spacious walls invariably left at the end of the month. Why, they hesitated to say; yet if pressed would acknowledge that the rooms were full of terrible sights and sounds which they could not account for; that a presence other than their own was felt in the house; and that once [every tenant seemed to be able to cite one instance] a hand had touched them or a breath had brushed their cheek which had no visible human source, and could be traced to no mortal presence. Not much in all this, but it served after a while to keep the house

empty, while its reputation for mystery did not lie idle. Sounds were heard to issue from it. At times lights were seen glimmering through this or that chink or rift in the window curtain, but by the time the door was unlocked and people were able to rush in, the interior was still and dark and seemingly untouched. Finally the police took a hand in the matter. They were on the scent just then of a party of counterfeiters and were suspicious of the sounds and lights in this apparently unoccupied dwelling. But they watched and waited in vain. One of them got a scare and that was all. The mystery went unsolved and the sign "To Let" remained indefinitely on the house-front.

At last a family from the West decided to risk the terrors of this domicile. The nurse, whose story I was listening to, came with them and entered upon her duties without prejudice or any sort of belief in ghosts, general or particular. She held this belief just two weeks. Then her incredulity began to waver. In fact, she saw the light; almost saw the ghost, certainly saw the ghost's penumbra. It was one night, or rather very early, one morning. She had been sitting up with the baby, who had been suffering from a severe attack of croup. Hot water was wanted, and she started for the kitchen for the purpose of making a fire and putting on the kettle. The gas had not been lit in the hall—they had all been too busy, and she was feeling her way down the front stairs with a box of matches in her hand, when suddenly she heard from somewhere below a sound which she could never describe, and at the same moment saw a light which spread itself

through all the lower hall so that every object stood out distinctly.

She did not think of the ghost at first, her thoughts were so full of the child; but when a board creaked in the hall floor, a board that always creaked when stepped on, she remembered the reputation and what had been told her about a creaking board and a light that came and went without human agency. Frightened for a minute, she stood stock-still, then she rushed down. Whatever it was, natural or supernatural, she went to see it; but the light vanished before she passed the lower stair, and only a long-drawn sigh not far from her ear warned her that the space between her and the real hall was not the solitude she was anxious to consider it. A sigh! That meant a person. Striking a match, she looked eagerly down the hall. Something was moving between the two walls. But when she tried to determine its character, it was swallowed up in darkness,—the match had gone out. Anxious for the child and determined to go her way to the kitchen, she now felt about for the gas-fixture and succeeded in lighting up. The whole hall again burst into view but the thing was no longer there; the space was absolutely empty. And so were the other rooms, for she went into every one, lighting the gas as she went; and so was the cellar when she reached it. For she had to go to its extreme length for wood and wait about the kitchen till the water boiled, during which time she searched every nook and cranny. Oh, she was a brave woman, but she did have this thought as she went upstairs: If the child died she would know that she had seen a spirit; if the child got well, that she had been the victim of her

own excitement.

And did the child die?

“No, it got well, but the family moved out as soon as it was safe to leave the house. Her employees did not feel as easy about the matter as she did.”

CHAPTER V. THE STRANGE NEIGHBORS NEXT DOOR

When I joined Mrs. Packard I found her cheerful and in all respects quite unlike the brooding woman she had seemed when I first met her. From the toys scattered about her feet I judged that the child had been with her, and certainly the light in her eyes had the beaming quality we associate with the happy mother. She was beautiful thus and my hopes of her restoration to happiness rose.

“I have had a good night,” were her first words as she welcomed me to a seat in her own little nook. “I’m feeling very well this morning. That is why I have brought out this big piece of work.” She held up a baby’s coat she was embroidering. “I can not do it when I am nervous. Are you ever nervous?”

Delighted to enter into conversation with her, I answered in a way to lead her to talk about herself, then, seeing she was in a favorable mood for gossip, was on the point of venturing all in a leading question, when she suddenly forestalled me by putting one to me.

“Were you ever the prey of an idea?” she asked; “one which you could not shake off by any ordinary means, one which clung to you night and day till nothing else seemed real or would rouse the slightest interest? I mean a religious idea,” she stammered with anxious attempt of to hide her real thought. “One of those

doubts which come to you in the full swing of life to—to frighten and unsettle you.”

“Yes,” I answered, as naturally and quietly as I knew how; “I have had such ideas—such doubts.”

“And were you able to throw them off?—by your will, I mean.”

She was leaning forward, her eyes fixed eagerly on mine. How unexpected the privilege! I felt that in another moment her secret would be mine.

“In time, yes,” I smiled back. “Everything yields to time and persistent conscientious work.”

“But if you can not wait for time, if you must be relieved at once, can the will be made to suffice, when the day is dark and one is alone and not too busy?”

“The will can do much,” I insisted. “Dark thoughts can be kept down by sheer determination. But it is better to fill the mind so full with what is pleasant that no room is left for gloom. There is so much to enjoy it must take a real sorrow to disturb a heart resolved to be happy.”

“Yes, resolved to be happy. I am resolved to be happy.” And she laughed merrily for a moment. “Nothing else pays. I will not dwell on anything but the pleasures which surround me.” Here she took up her work again. “I will forget—I will—” She stopped and her eyes left her work to flash a rapid and involuntary glance over her shoulder. Had she heard a step? I had not. Or had she felt a draft of which I in my bounding health was unconscious?

“Are you cold?” I asked, as her glance stole back to mine. “You are shivering—”

“Oh, no,” she answered coldly, almost proudly. “I’m perfectly warm. I don’t feel slight changes. I thought some one was behind me. I felt—Is Ellen in the adjoining room?”

I jumped up and moved toward the door she indicated. It was slightly ajar, but Ellen was not behind it.

“There’s no one here,” said I.

She did not answer. She was bending again over her work, and gave no indication of speaking again on that or the more serious topic we had previously been discussing.

Naturally I felt disappointed. I had hoped much from the conversation, and now these hopes bade fair to fail me. How could I restore matters to their former basis? Idly I glanced out of the side window I was passing, and the view of the adjoining house I thus gained acted like an inspiration. I would test her on a new topic, in the hope of reintroducing the old. The glimpse I had gained into Mrs. Packard’s mind must not be lost quite as soon as this.

“You asked me a moment ago if I were ever nervous,” I began, as I regained my seat at her side. “I replied, ‘Sometimes’; but I might have said if I had not feared being too abrupt, ‘Never till I came into this house.’”

Her surprise partook more of curiosity than I expected.

“You are nervous here,” she repeated. “What is the reason of that, pray? Has Ellen been chattering to you? I thought she

knew enough not to do that. There's nothing to fear here, Miss Saunders; absolutely nothing for you to fear. I should not have allowed you to remain here a night if there had been. No ghost will visit you."

"No, I hear they never wander above the second story," I laughed. "If they did I should hardly anticipate the honor of a visit. It is not ghosts I fear; it is something quite different which affects me,—living eyes, living passions, the old ladies next door," I finished falteringly, for Mrs. Packard was looking at me with a show of startling alarm. "They stare into my room night and day. I never look out but I encounter the uncanny glance of one or the other of them. Are they live women or embodied memories of the past? They don't seem to belong to the present. I own that they frighten me."

I had exaggerated my feelings in order to mark their effect upon her. The result disappointed me; she was not afraid of these two poor old women. Far from it.

"Draw your curtains," she laughed. "The poor things are crazy and not really accountable. Their odd ways and manners troubled me at first, but I soon got over it. I have even been in to see them. That was to keep them from coming here. I think if you were to call upon them they would leave you alone after that. They are very fond of being called on. They are persons of the highest gentility, you know. They owned this house a few years ago, as well as the one they are now living in, but misfortunes overtook them and this one was sold for debt. I am very sorry for them

myself. Sometimes I think they have not enough to eat.”

“Tell me about them,” I urged. Lightly as she treated the topic I felt convinced that these strange neighbors of hers were more or less involved in the mystery of her own peculiar moods and unaccountable fears.

“It’s a great secret,” she announced naively. “That is, their personal history. I have never told it to any one. I have never told it to my husband. They confided it to me in a sort of desperation, perhaps because my husband’s name inspired them with confidence. Immediately after, I could see that they regretted the impulse, and so I have remained silent. But I feel like telling you; feel as if it would divert me to do so—keep me from thinking of other things. You won’t want to talk about it and the story will cure your nervousness.”

“Do you want me to promise not to talk about it?” I inquired in some anxiety.

“No. You have a good, true face; a face which immediately inspires confidence. I shall exact no promises. I can rely on your judgment.”

I thanked her. I was glad not to be obliged to promise secrecy. It might become my imperative duty to disregard such a promise.

“You have seen both of their faces?” she asked.

I nodded.

“Then you must have observed the difference between them. There is the same difference in their minds, though both are clouded. One is weak almost to the point of idiocy, though strong

enough where her one settled idea is concerned. The other was once a notable character, but her fine traits have almost vanished under the spell which has been laid upon them by the immense disappointment which has wrecked both their lives. I heard it all from Miss Thankful the day after we entered this house. Miss Thankful is the older and more intellectual one. I had known very little about them before; no more, in fact, than I have already told you. I was consequently much astonished when they called, for I had supposed them to be veritable recluses, but I was still more astonished when I noted their manner and the agitated and strangely penetrating looks they cast about them as I ushered them into the library, which was the only room I had had time to arrange. A few minutes' further observation of them showed me that neither of them was quite right. Instead of entering into conversation with me they continued to cast restless glances at the walls, ceilings, and even at the floor of the room in which we sat, and when, in the hope of attracting their attention to myself, I addressed them on some topic which I thought would be interesting to them, they not only failed to listen, but turned upon each other with slowly wagging heads, which not only revealed their condition but awakened me to its probable cause. They were between walls rendered dear by old associations. Till their first agitation was over I could not hope for their attention.

“But their agitation gave no signs of diminishing and I soon saw that their visit was far from being a ceremonial one; that it was one of definite purpose. Preparing myself for I knew not

what, I regarded them with such open interest that before I knew it, and quite before I was ready for any such exhibition, they were both on their knees before me, holding up their meager arms with beseeching and babbling words which I did not understand till later.

“I was shocked, as you may believe, and quickly raised them, at which Miss Thankful told me their story, which I will now tell you.

“There were four of them originally, three sisters and one brother. The brother early went West and disappeared out of their lives, and the third sister married. This was years and years ago, when they were all young. From this marriage sprang all their misfortune. The nephew which this marriage introduced to their family became their bane as well as their delight. From being a careless spendthrift boy he became a reckless, scheming man, adding extravagance to extravagance, till, to support him and meet his debts, these poor aunts gave up first their luxuries, then their home and finally their very livelihood. Not that they acknowledged this. The feeling they both cherished for him was more akin to infatuation than to ordinary family love. They did not miss their luxuries, they did not mourn their home, they did not even mourn their privations; but they were broken-hearted and had been so for a long time, because they could no longer do for him as of old. Shabby themselves, and evidently ill-nourished, they grieved not over their own changed lot, but over his. They could not be reconciled to his lack of luxuries, much less to the

difficulties in which he frequently found himself, who was made to ruffle it with the best and be the pride of their lives as he was the darling of their hearts. All this the poor old things made apparent to me, but their story did not become really interesting till they began to speak of this house we are in, and of certain events which followed their removal to the ramshackle dwelling next door. The sale of this portion of the property had relieved them from their debts, but they were otherwise penniless, and were just planning the renting of their rooms at prices which would barely serve to provide them with a scanty living, when there came a letter from their graceless nephew, asking for a large amount of money to save him from complete disgrace. They had no money, and were in the midst of their sorrow and perplexity, when a carriage drove up to the door of this house and from it issued an old and very sick man, their long absent and almost forgotten brother. He had come home to die, and when told his sisters' circumstances, and how soon the house next door would be filled with lodgers, insisted upon having this place of his birth, which was empty at the time, opened for his use. The owner, after long continued entreaties from the poor old sisters, finally consented to the arrangement. A bed was made up in the library, and the old man laid on it."

Mrs. Packard's voice fell, and I cast her a humorous look.

"Were there ghosts in those days?" I lightly asked.

Her answer was calm enough. "Not yet, but the place must have been desolate enough for one. I have sometimes tried to

imagine the scene surrounding that broken-down old man. There was no furniture in the room, save what was indispensable to his bare comfort. Miss Thankful expressly said there was no carpet,—you will presently see why. Even the windows had no other protection than the bare shutters. But he was in his old home, and seemed content till Miss Charity fell sick, and they had to call in a nurse to assist Miss Thankful, who by this time had a dozen lodgers to look after. Then he grew very restless. Miss Thankful said he seemed to be afraid of this nurse, and always had a fever after having been left alone with her; but he gave no reason for his fears, and she herself was too straitened in means and in too much trouble otherwise to be affected by such mere whims, and went on doing her best, sitting with him whenever the opportunity offered, and making every effort to conceal the anxiety she felt for her poor nephew from her equally poor brother. The disease under which the brother labored was a fatal one, and he had not many days to live. She was startled when one day her brother greeted her appearance, with an earnest entreaty for the nurse to be sent out for a little while, as this was his last day, and he had something of great importance to communicate to her before he died.

“She had not dreamed of his being so low as this, but when she came to look at him, she saw, that he had not misstated his case, and that he was really very near death. She was in a flurry and wanted to call in the neighbors and rout her sister up from her own sick bed to care for him. But he wanted nothing and

nobody, only to be left alone with her.

“So she sent the nurse out and sat down on the side of the bed to hear what he had to say to her, for he looked very eager and was smiling in a way to make her heart ache.

“You must remember,” continued Mrs. Packard, “that at the time Miss Thankful was telling this story we were in the very room where it had all happened. As she reached this part of her narration, she pointed to the wall partitioning off the corridor, and explained that this was where the bed stood,—an old wooden one brought down from her own attic.

“‘It creaked when I sat down on it,’ said she, ‘and I remember that I felt ashamed of its shabby mattress and the poor sheets. But we had no better,’ she moaned, ‘and he did not seem to mind.’ I tell you this that you may understand what must have taken place in her heart when, a few minutes later, he seized her hand in his and said that he had a great secret to communicate to her. Though he had seemed the indifferent brother for years, his heart had always been with his home and his people, and he was going to prove it to her now; he had made money, and this money was to be hers and Charity’s. He had saved it for them, brought it to them from the far West; a pile of money all honestly earned, which he hoped would buy back their old house and make them happy again in the old way. He said nothing of his nephew. They had not mentioned him, and possibly he did not even know of his existence. All was to be for them and the old house, this old house. This was perhaps why he was content to lie in the midst

of its desolation. He foresaw better days for those he loved, and warmed his heart at his precious secret.

“But his sister sat aghast. Money! and so little done for his comfort! That was her first thought. The next, oh, the wonder and the hope of it! Now the boy could be saved; now he could have his luxuries. If only it might be enough! Five thousand, ten thousand. But no, it could not be so much. Her brother was daft to think she could restore the old home on what he had been able to save. She said something to show her doubt, at which he laughed; and, peering slowly and painfully about him, drew her hands toward his left side. ‘Feel,’ said he, ‘I have it all here. I would trust nobody. Fifty, thousand dollars.’

“Fifty thousand dollars! Miss Thankful sprang to her feet, then sat again, overcome by her delight. Placing her hand on the wallet he held tied about his body, she whispered, ‘Here?’

“He nodded and bade her look. She told me she did so; that she opened the wallet under his eye and took out five bonds each for ten thousand dollars. She remembers them well; there was no mistake in the figures. She held fifty thousand dollars in her hands for the space of half a minute; then he bade her put them back, with an injunction to watch over him well and not to let that woman nurse come near him till she had taken away the wallet immediately after his death. He could not bear to part with it while alive.

“She promised. She was in a delirium of joy. In one minute her life of poverty had changed to one of ecstatic hope. She

caressed her brother. He smiled contentedly, and sank into coma or heavy sleep. She remained a few minutes watching him. Picture after picture of future contentment passed before her eyes; phantasmagoria of joy which held her enthralled till chance drew her eyes towards the window, and she found herself looking out upon what for the moment seemed the continuation of her dream. This was the figure of her nephew, standing in the doorway of the adjoining house. This entrance into the alley is closed up now, but in those days it was a constant source of communication between the two houses, and, being directly opposite the left-hand library window, would naturally fall under her eye as she looked up from her brother's bedside. Her nephew! the one person of whom she was dreaming, for whom she was planning, older by many years than when she saw him last, but recognizable at once, as the best, the handsomest—but I will spare you her ravings. She was certainly in her dotage as concerned this man.

“He was not alone. At his side stood her sister, eagerly pointing across the alley to herself. It was the appearance of the sister which presently convinced her that what she saw was reality and no dream. Charity had risen from her bed to greet the newcomer, and her hasty toilet was not one which could have been easily imagine, even by her sister. The long-absent one had returned. He was there, and he did not know what these last five minutes had done for them all. The joy of what she had to tell him was too much for her discretion. Noting how profoundly her brother

slept, she slipped out of the room to the side door and ran across the alley to her own house. Her nephew was no longer in the doorway where she had seen him, but he had left the door ajar and she rushed in to find him. He was in the parlor with Miss Charity, and no sooner did her eyes fall on them both than her full heart overflowed, and she blurted out their good fortune. Their wonder was immense and in the conversation which ensued unnoted minutes passed. Not till the clock struck did she realize that she had left her brother alone for a good half-hour: This was not right and she went hurrying back, the happiest woman in town. But it was a short-lived happiness. As she reentered the sick-room she realized that something was amiss. Her brother had moved from where she had left him, and now lay stretched across the foot of the bed, where he had evidently fallen from a standing position. He was still breathing, but in great gasps which shook the bed. When she bent over him in anxious questioning, he answered her with a ghastly stare, and that was all. Otherwise, everything looked the same.

“What has happened? What have you done?” she persisted, trying to draw him up on the pillow. He made a motion. It was in the direction of the front door. ‘Don’t let her in,’ he muttered. ‘I don’t trust her, I don’t trust her. Let me die in peace.’ Then, as Miss Thankful became conscious of a stir at the front door, and caught the sound of a key turning in the lock, which could only betoken the return of the nurse, he raised himself a little and she saw the wallet hanging out of his dressing gown. ‘I have hidden it,’

he whispered, with a nervous look toward the door: 'I was afraid she might come and take it from me, so I put it in—' He never said where. His eyes, open and staring straight before him, took on a look of horror, then slowly glazed under the terrified glance of Miss Thankful. Death had cut short that vital sentence, and simultaneously with the entrance of the nurse, whose return he had so much feared, he uttered his last gasp and sank back lifeless on his pillow. With a cry Miss Thankful pounced on the wallet. It opened out flat in her hand, as empty as her life seemed at that minute. But she was a brave woman and in another instant her courage had revived. The money could not be far away; she would find it at the first search. Turning on the nurse, she looked her full in the face. The woman was gazing at the empty wallet. 'You know what was in that?' queried Miss Thankful. A fierce look answered her. 'A thousand dollars!' announced Miss Thankful. The nurse's lip curled. 'Oh, you knew that it was five,' was Miss Thankful's next outburst. Still no answer, but a look which seemed to devour the empty wallet. This look had its effect. Miss Thankful dropped her accusatory tone, and attempted cajolery. 'It was his legacy to us,' she explained. 'He gave it to me just before he died. You shall be paid out of it. Now will you call my sister? She's up and with my nephew, who came an hour ago. Call them both; I am not afraid to remain here for a few moments with my brother's body.' This appeal, or perhaps the promise, had its effect. The nurse disappeared, after another careful look at her patient, and Miss Thankful bounded to her feet and began a

hurried search for the missing bonds. They could not be far away. They must be in the room, and the room was so nearly empty that it would take but a moment to penetrate every hiding-place. But alas! the matter was not so simple as she thought. She looked here, she looked there; in the bed, in the washstand drawer, under the cushions of the only chair, even in the grate and up the chimney; but she found nothing—nothing! She was standing stark and open-mouthed in the middle of the floor, when the others entered, but recovered herself at sight of their surprise, and, explaining what had happened, set them all to search, sister, nephew, even the nurse, though she was careful to keep close by the latter with a watchfulness that let no movement escape her. But it was all fruitless. The bonds were not to be found, either in that room or in any place near. They ransacked, they rummaged; they went upstairs, they went down; they searched every likely and every unlikely place of concealment, but without avail. They failed to come upon the place where he had hidden them; nor did Miss Thankful or her sister ever see them again from that day to this.”

“Oh!” I exclaimed; “and the nephew? the nurse?”

“Both went away disappointed; he to face his disgrace about which his aunts were very reticent, and she to seek work which was all the more necessary to her, since she had lost her pay, with the disappearance of these bonds, whose value I have no doubt she knew and calculated on.”

“And the aunts, the two poor old creatures who stare all day

out of their upper window at these walls, still believe that money to be here,” I cried.

“Yes, that is their mania. Several tenants have occupied these premises—tenants who have not stayed long, but who certainly filled all the rooms, and must have penetrated every secret spot the house contains, but it has made no difference to them. They believe the bonds to be still lying in some out-of-the-way place in these old walls, and are jealous of any one who comes in here. This you can understand better when I tell you that one feature of their mania is this: they have lost all sense of time. It is two years since their brother died, yet to them it is an affair of yesterday. They showed this when they talked to me. What they wanted was for me to give up these bonds to them as soon as I found them. They seemed to think that I might run across them in settling, and made me promise to wake them day or night if I came across them unexpectedly.”

“How pathetic!” I exclaimed. “Do you suppose they have appealed in the same way to every one who has come in here?”

“No, or some whisper of this lost money would have become current in the neighborhood. And it never has. The traditions associated with the house,” here her manner changed a little, “are of quite another nature. I suppose the old gentleman has walked—looking, possibly, for his lost bonds.”

“That would be only natural,” I smiled, for her mood was far from serious. “But,” I quietly pursued, “how much of this old woman’s story do you believe? Can not she have been deceived as

to what she saw? You say she is more or less demented. Perhaps there never was any old wallet, and possibly never any money.”

“I have seen the wallet. They brought it in to show me. Not that that proves anything; but somehow I do believe in the money, and, what is more, that it is still in this house. You will think me as demented as they.”

“No, no,” I smiled, “for I am inclined to think the same; it lends such an interest to the place. I wouldn’t disbelieve it now for anything.”

“Nor I,” she cried, taking up her work. “But we shall never find it. The house was all redecorated when we came in. Not one of the workmen has become suddenly wealthy.”

“I shall no longer begrudge these poor old souls their silent watch over these walls that hold their treasure,” I now remarked.

“Then you have lost your nervousness?”

“Quite.”

“So have I,” laughed Mrs. Packard, showing me for the first time a face of complete complacency and contentment.

CHAPTER VI. AT THE STAIR-HEAD

I spent the evening alone. Mrs. Packard went to the theater with friends and Mayor Packard attended a conference of politicians. I felt my loneliness, but busied myself trying to sift the impressions made upon me by the different members of the household.

It consisted, as far as my present observation went, of seven persons, the three principals and four servants. Of the servants I had seen three, the old butler, the nurse, and the housemaid, Ellen. I now liked Ellen; she appeared equally alive and trustworthy; of the butler I could not say as much. He struck me as secretive. Also, he had begun to manifest a certain antagonism to myself. Whence sprang this antagonism? Did it have its source in my temperament, or in his? A question possibly not worth answering and yet it very well might be. Who could know?

Pondering this and other subjects, I remained in my cozy little room up-stairs, till the clock verging on to twelve told me that it was nearly time for Mrs. Packard's return.

Hardly knowing my duties as yet, or what she might expect of me, I kept my door open, meaning to speak to her when she came in. The thought had crossed my mind that she might not return

at all, but remain away with her friends. Some fear of this kind had been in Mr. Packard's mind and naturally found lodgment in mine. I was therefore much relieved when, sharp on the stroke of midnight, I heard the front door-bell ring, followed by the sound of her voice speaking to the old butler. I thought its tone more cheerful than before she went out. At all events, her face had a natural look when, after a few minutes' delay, she came upstairs and stepped into the nursery—a room on the same floor as mine, but nearer the stair-head.

From what impulse did I put out my light? I think now, on looking back, that I hoped to catch a better glimpse of her face when she came out again, and so be in a position to judge whether her anxiety or secret distress was in any special way connected with her child. But I forgot the child and any motive of this kind which I may have had; for when Mrs. Packard did reappear in the hall, there rang up from some place below a laugh, so loud and derisive and of so raucous and threatening a tone that Mrs. Packard reeled with the shock and I myself was surprised in spite of my pride and usual impassibility. This, had it been all, would not be worth the comment. But it was not all. Mrs. Packard did not recover from the shock as I expected her to. Her fine figure straightened itself, it is true, but only to sink again lower and lower, till she clung crouching to the stair-rail at which she had caught for support, while her eyes, turning slowly in her head, moved till they met mine with that unseeing and glassy stare which speaks of a soul-piercing terror—not fear in any ordinary

sense, but terror which lays bare the soul and allows one to see into depths which—

But here my compassion drove me to action. Advancing quietly, I caught at her wrap which was falling from her shoulders. She grasped my hand as I did so.

“Did you hear that laugh?” she panted. “Whose was it? Who is down-stairs?”

I thought, “Is this one of the unaccountable occurrences which have given the house its blighted reputation?” but I said: “Nixon let you in. I don’t know whether any one else is below. Mayor Packard has not yet come home.”

“I know; Nixon told me. Would you—would you mind,”—how hard she strove to show only the indignant curiosity natural to the situation—“do you object, I mean, to going down and seeing?”

“Not at all,” I cheerfully answered, glad enough of this chance to settle my own doubts. And with a last glance at her face, which was far too white and drawn to please me, I hastened below.

The lights had not yet been put out in the halls, though I saw none in the drawing-room or library. Indeed, I ran upon Nixon coming from the library, where he had evidently been attending to his final duties of fastening windows and extinguishing lights. Alive to the advantage of this opportune meeting, I addressed him with as little aggressiveness as possible.

“Mrs. Packard has sent me down to see who laughed just now so loudly. Was it you?”

Strong and unmistakable dislike showed in his eyes, but his voice was restrained and apparently respectful as he replied: "No, Miss. I didn't laugh. There was nothing to laugh at."

"You heard the laugh? It seemed to come from somewhere here. I was on the third floor and I heard it plainly."

His face twitched—a habit of his when under excitement, as I have since learned—as with a shrug of his old shoulders he curtly answered:

"You were listening; I was not. If any one laughed down here I didn't hear 'em."

Confident that he was lying, I turned quietly away and proceeded down the hall toward Mayor Packard's study.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.