

Green Anna Katharine

The Amethyst Box



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Anna Katharine Green

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THE AMETHYST BOX

I

THE FLASK WHICH HELD BUT A DROP

It was the night before the wedding. Though Sinclair, and not myself, was the happy man, I had my own causes for excitement, and, finding the heat of the billiard-room insupportable, I sought the veranda for a solitary smoke in sight of the ocean and a full moon.

I was in a condition of rapturous, if unreasoning, delight. That afternoon a little hand had lingered in mine for just an instant longer than the circumstances of the moment strictly required, and small as the favor may seem to those who do not know Dorothy Camerden, to me, who realized fully both her delicacy and pride, it was a sign that my long, if secret, devotion was about to be rewarded and that at last I was free to cherish hopes whose alternative had once bid fair to wreck the happiness of my life.

I was reveling in the felicity of these anticipations and contrasting this hour of ardent hope with others of whose dissatisfaction and gloom I was yet mindful, when a sudden shadow fell across the broad band of light issuing from the library window, and Sinclair stepped out.

He had the appearance of being disturbed; very much disturbed, I thought, for a man on the point of marrying the woman for whom he professed to entertain the one profound passion of his life; but remembering his frequent causes of annoyance – causes quite apart from his bride and her personal attributes – I kept on placidly smoking till I felt his hand on my shoulder and turned to see that the moment was a serious one.

"I have something to say to you," he whispered. "Come where we shall run less risk of being disturbed."

"What's wrong?" I asked, facing him with curiosity, if not with alarm. "I never saw you look like this before. Has the old lady taken this last minute to –"

"Hush!" he prayed, emphasizing the word with a curt gesture not to be mistaken. "The little room over the west porch is empty just now. Follow me there."

With a sigh for the cigar I had so lately lighted I tossed it into the bushes and sauntered in after him. I thought I understood his trouble. The prospective bride was young – a mere slip of a girl, indeed – bright, beautiful and proud, yet with odd little restraints in her manner and language, due probably to her peculiar bringing up and the surprise, not yet overcome, of finding herself, after an isolated, if not despised, childhood, the idol of society and the recipient of general homage. The fault was not with her. But she had for guardian (alas! my dear girl had the same) an aunt who was a gorgon. This aunt must have been making herself disagreeable to the prospective bridegroom, and he, being quick to take offense, quicker than myself, it was said, had probably retorted in a way to make things unpleasant. As he was a guest in the house, he and all the other members of the bridal party – (Mrs. Armstrong having insisted upon opening her magnificent Newport villa for this wedding and its attendant festivities), the matter might well look black to him. Yet I did not feel disposed to take much interest in it, even though his case might be mine some day, with all its accompanying drawbacks.

But, once confronted with Sinclair in the well-lighted room above, I perceived that I had better drop all selfish regrets and give my full attention to what he had to say. For his eye, which had flashed

with an unusual light at dinner, was clouded now, and his manner, when he strove to speak, betrayed a nervousness I had considered foreign to his nature ever since the day I had seen him rein in his horse so calmly on the extreme edge of a precipice where a fall would have meant certain death not only to himself, but also to the two riders who unwittingly were pressing closely behind him.

"Walter," he faltered, "something has happened, something dreadful, something unprecedented! You may think me a fool – God knows I would be glad to be proved so, but this thing has frightened me. I – " He paused and pulled himself together. "I will tell you about it, then you can judge for yourself. I am in no condition to do so. I wonder if you will be when you hear – "

"Don't beat about the bush. Speak up! What's the matter?"

He gave me an odd look full of gloom, a look I felt the force of, though I could not interpret it; then coming closer, though there was no one within hearing, possibly no one any nearer than the drawing-room below, he whispered in my ear:

"I have lost a little vial of the deadliest drug ever compounded; a Venetian curiosity which I was foolish enough to take out and show the ladies, because the little box which holds it is such an exquisite example of jewelers' work. There's death in its taste, almost in its smell; and it's out of my hands and – "

"Well, I'll tell you how to fix that up," I put in, with my usual frank decision. "Order the music stopped; call everybody into the drawing-room and explain the dangerous nature of this toy. After which, if anything happens, it will not be your fault, but that of the person who has so thoughtlessly appropriated it."

His eyes, which had been resting eagerly on mine, shifted aside in visible embarrassment.

"Impossible! It would only aggravate matters, or rather, would not relieve my fears at all. The person who took it knew its nature very well, and that person – "

"Oh, then you know who took it!" I broke in, in increasing astonishment. "I thought from your manner that – "

"No," he moodily corrected, "I do not know who took it. If I did, I should not be here. That is, I do not know the exact person. Only – " Here he again eyed me with his former singular intentness, and observing that I was nettled, made a fresh beginning. "When I came here, I brought with me a case of rarities chosen from my various collections. In looking over them preparatory to making a present to Gilbertine, I came across the little box I have just mentioned. It is made of a single amethyst and contains – or so I was assured when I bought it – a tiny flask of old but very deadly poison. How it came to be included with the other precious and beautiful articles I had picked out for her *cadeau*, I can not say; but there it was; and conceiving that the sight of it would please the ladies, I carried it down into the library and, in an evil hour, called three or four of those about me to inspect it. This was while you boys were in the billiard-room, so the ladies could give their entire attention to the little box which is certainly worth the most careful scrutiny.

"I was holding it out on the palm of my hand, where it burned with a purple light which made more than one feminine eye glitter, when somebody inquired to what use so small and yet so rich a receptacle could be put. The question was such a natural one I never thought of evading it, besides, I enjoy the fearsome delight which women take in the marvelous. Expecting no greater result than lifted eyebrows or flushed cheeks, I answered by pressing a little spring in the filigree-work surrounding the gem. Instantly, the tiniest of lids flew back, revealing a crystal flask of such minute proportions that the usual astonishment followed its disclosure.

"'You see!' I cried, 'it was made to hold *that!*' And moving my hand to and fro under the gas-jet, I caused to shine in their eyes the single drop of yellow liquid it still held. 'Poison!' I impressively announced. 'This trinket may have adorned the bosom of a Borgia or flashed from the arm of some great Venetian lady as she flourished her fan between her embittered heart and the object of her wrath or jealousy.'

"The first sentence had come naturally, but the last was spoken at random and almost unconsciously. For at the utterance of the word 'poison,' a quickly suppressed cry had escaped the lips of some one behind me, which, while faint enough to elude the attention of any ear less sensitive than my own, contained such an astonishing, if involuntary, note of self-betrayal that my mind grew numb with horror, and I stood staring at the fearful toy which had called up such a revelation of – what? That is what I am here to ask, first of myself, then of you. For the two women pressing behind me were – "

"Who?" I sharply demanded, partaking in some indefinable way of his excitement and alarm.

"Gilbertine Murray and Dorothy Camerden: " – his prospective bride and the woman I loved and whom he knew I loved, though I had kept my secret quite successfully from every one else!

The look we exchanged neither of us will ever forget.

"Describe the sound!" I presently said.

"I can not," he replied. "I can only give you my impression of it. You, like myself, fought in more than one skirmish in the Cuban War. Did you ever hear the cry made by a wounded man when the cup of cool water for which he has long agonized is brought suddenly before his eyes? Such a sound, with all that goes to make it eloquent, did I hear from one of the two girls who leaned over my shoulder. Can you understand this amazing, this unheard-of circumstance? Can you name the woman, can you name the grief capable of making either of these seemingly happy and innocent girls hail the sight of such a doubtful panacea with an unconscious ebullition of joy? You would clear my wedding-eye of a great dread if you could, for if this expression of concealed misery came from Gilbertine – "

"Do you mean," I cried in vehement protest, "that you really are in doubt as to which of these two women uttered the cry which so startled you? That you positively can not tell whether it was Gilbertine or – or – "

"I can not; as God lives, I can not. I was too dazed, too confounded by the unexpected circumstance, to turn at once, and when I did, it was to see both pairs of eyes shining, and both faces dimpling with real or affected gaiety. Indeed, if the matter had stopped there, I should have thought myself the victim of some monstrous delusion; but when a half-hour later I found this box missing from the cabinet where I had hastily thrust it at the peremptory summons of our hostess, I knew that I had not misunderstood the nature of the cry I had heard; that it was indeed one of secret longing, and that the hand had simply taken what the heart desired. If a death occurs in this house to-night – "

"Sinclair, you are mad!" I exclaimed with great violence. No lesser word would fit either the intensity of my feeling or the confused state of my mind. "Death *here!* where all are so happy! Remember your bride's ingenuous face! Remember the candid expression of Dorothy's eye – her smile – her noble ways! You exaggerate the situation. You neither understand aright the simple expression of surprise you heard, nor the feminine frolic which led these girls to carry off this romantic specimen of Italian deviltry."

"You are losing time," was his simple comment. "Every minute we allow to pass in inaction only brings the danger nearer."

"What! You imagine – "

"I imagine nothing. I simply know that one of these girls has in her possession the means of terminating life in an instant; that the girl so having it is not happy, and that if anything happens to-night it will be because we rested supine in the face of a very real and possible danger. Now, as Gilbertine has never given me reason to doubt either her affection for myself or her satisfaction in our approaching union, I have allowed myself – "

"To think that the object of your fears is Dorothy," I finished with a laugh I vainly strove to make sarcastic.

He did not answer, and I stood battling with a dread I could neither conceal nor avow. For preposterous as his idea was, reason told me that he had some grounds for his doubt.

Dorothy, unlike Gilbertine Murray, was not to be read at a glance, and her trouble – for she certainly had a trouble – was not one she chose to share with any one, even with me. I had flattered

myself in days gone by that I understood it well enough, and that any lack of sincerity I might observe in her could be easily explained by the position of dependence she held toward an irascible aunt. But now that I forced myself to consider the matter carefully I could not but ask if the varying moods by which I had found myself secretly harrowed had not sprung from a very different cause – a cause for which my persistent love was more to blame than the temper of her relative. The aversion she had once shown to my attentions had yielded long ago to a shy, but seemingly sincere appreciation of them, and gleams of what I was fain to call real feeling had shown themselves now and then in her softened manner, culminating to-day in that soft pressure of my hand which had awakened my hopes and made me forget all the doubts and caprices of a disturbing courtship.

But, had I interpreted that strong, nervous pressure aright? Had it necessarily meant love? Might it not have sprung from a sudden desperate resolution to accept a devotion which offered her a way out of difficulties especially galling to one of her gentle but lofty spirit? Her expression when she caught my look of joy had little of the demure tenderness of a maiden blushing at her first involuntary avowal. There was shrinking in it, but it was the shrinking of a frightened woman, not of an abashed girl; and when I strove to follow her, the gesture with which she waved me back had that in it which would have alarmed a more exacting lover. Had I mistaken my darling's feelings? Was her heart still cold, her affection unwon? Or – thought insupportable! – had she secretly yielded to another what she had so long denied me and —

"Ah!" quoth Sinclair at this juncture, "I see that I have roused you at last." And unconsciously his tone grew lighter and his eye lost the strained look which had made it the eye of a stranger. "You begin to see that a question of the most serious import is before us, and that this question must be answered before we separate for the night."

"I do," said I.

His relief was evident.

"Then so much is gained. The next point is, how are we to settle our doubts? We can not approach either of these ladies with questions. A girl wretched enough to contemplate suicide would be especially careful to conceal both her misery and its cause. Neither can we order a search made for an object so small that it can be concealed about the person."

"Yet this jewel must be recovered. Listen, Sinclair. I will have a talk with Dorothy, you with Gilbertine. A kind talk, mind you! one that will soothe, not frighten. If a secret lurks in either breast our tenderness should find it out. Only, as you love me, promise to show me the same frankness I here promise to show you. Dear as Dorothy is to me, I swear to communicate to you the full result of my conversation with her, whatever the cost to myself or even to her."

"And I will be equally fair as regards Gilbertine. But, before we proceed to such extreme measures, let us make sure that there is no shorter road to the truth. Some one may have seen which of our two dear girls went back to the library after we all came out of it. That would narrow down our inquiry and save one of them, at least, from unnecessary disturbance."

It was a happy thought, and I told him so, but at the same time bade him look in the glass and see how impossible it would be for him to venture below without creating an alarm which might precipitate the dread event we both feared.

He replied by drawing me to his side before the mirror and pointing to my own face. It was as pale as his own.

Most disagreeably impressed by this self-betrayal, I colored deeply under Sinclair's eye and was but little, if any, relieved when I noticed that he colored under mine. For his feelings were no enigma to me. Naturally he was glad to discover that I shared his apprehensions, since it gave him leave to hope that the blow he so dreaded was not necessarily directed toward his own affections. Yet, being a generous fellow, he blushed to be detected in his egotism, while I – well, I own that at that moment I should have felt a very unmixed joy at being assured that the foundations of my own

love were secure, and that the tiny flask Sinclair had missed had not been taken by the hand of the one to whom I looked for all my earthly happiness.

And my wedding-day was as yet a vague and distant hope, while his was set for the morrow.

"We must carry down stairs very different faces from these," he remarked, "or we shall be stopped before we reach the library."

I made an effort at composure, so did he; and both being determined men, we soon found ourselves in a condition to descend among our friends without attracting any closer attention than was naturally due him as prospective bridegroom and myself as best man.

II BEATON'S DREAM

Mrs. Armstrong, our hostess, was fond of gaiety, and amusements were never lacking. As we stepped down into the great hall we heard music in the drawing-room and saw that a dance was in progress.

"That is good," observed Sinclair. "We shall run less risk of finding the library occupied."

"Shall I not look and see where the girls are? It would be a great relief to find them both among the dancers."

"Yes," said he, "but don't allow yourself to be inveigled into joining them. I could not stand the suspense."

I nodded and slipped toward the drawing-room. He remained in the bay-window overlooking the terrace.

A rush of young people greeted me as soon as I showed myself. But I was able to elude them and catch the one full glimpse I wanted of the great room beyond. It was a magnificent apartment, and so brilliantly lighted that every nook stood revealed. On a divan near the center was a lady conversing with two gentlemen. Her back was toward me, but I had no difficulty in recognizing Miss Murray. Some distance from her, but with her face also turned away, stood Dorothy. She was talking with an unmarried friend and appeared quite at ease and more than usually cheerful.

Relieved, yet sorry that I had not succeeded in catching a glimpse of their faces, I hastened back to Sinclair, who was watching me with furtive eyes from between the curtains of the window in which he had secreted himself. As I joined him a young man, who was to act as usher, sauntered from behind one of the great pillars forming a colonnade down the hall, and, crossing to where the music-room door stood invitingly open, disappeared behind it with the air of a man perfectly contented with his surroundings.

With a nervous grip Sinclair seized me by the arm.

"Was that Beaton?" he asked.

"Certainly; didn't you recognize him?"

He gave me a very strange look.

"Does the sight of him recall anything?"

"No."

"You were at the breakfast-table yesterday morning?"

"I was."

"Do you remember the dream he related for the delectation of such as would listen?"

Then it was my turn to go white.

"You don't mean – " I began.

"I thought at the time that it sounded more like a veritable adventure than a dream; now I am sure that it was such."

"Sinclair! You do not mean that the young girl he professed himself to have surprised one moonlit night standing on the verge of the cliff, with arms upstretched and a distracted air, was a real person?"

"I do. We laughed at the time; he made it seem so tragic and preposterous. I do not feel like laughing now."

I gazed at Sinclair in horror. The music was throbbing in our ears, and the murmur of gay voices and swiftly moving feet suggested nothing but joy and hilarity. Which was the dream? This scene of seeming mirth and happy promise, or the fancies he had conjured up to rob us both of peace?

"Beaton mentioned no names," I stubbornly protested. "He did not even call the vision he encountered a woman. It was a wraith, you remember, a dream-maiden, a creature of his own imagination, born of some tragedy he had read."

"Beaton is a gentleman," was Sinclair's cold reply. "He did not wish to injure, but to warn the woman for whose benefit he told his tale."

"Warn?"

"He doubtless reasoned in this way. If he could make this young and probably sensitive girl realize that she had been seen and her intentions recognized, she would beware of such attempts in the future. He is a kind-hearted fellow. Did you notice which end of the table he ignored when relating this dramatic episode?"

"No."

"If you had we might be better able to judge where his thoughts were. Probably you can not even tell how the ladies took it?"

"No, I never thought of looking. Good God! Sinclair, don't let us harrow up ourselves unnecessarily! I saw them both a moment ago, and nothing in their manner showed that anything was amiss with either of them."

For answer he drew me toward the library.

This room was not frequented by the young people at night. There were two or three elderly people in the party, notably the husband and the brother of the lady of the house, and to their use the room was more or less given up after nightfall. Sinclair wished to show me the cabinet where the box had been.

There was a fire in the grate, for the evenings were now more or less chilly. When the door had closed behind us we found that this same fire made all the light there was in the room. Both gas-jets had been put out and the rich yet home-like room glowed with ruddy hues, interspersed with great shadows. A solitary scene, yet an enticing one.

Sinclair drew a deep breath. "Mr. Armstrong must have gone elsewhere to read the evening papers," he remarked.

I replied by casting a scrutinizing look into the corners. I dreaded finding a pair of lovers hid somewhere in the many nooks made by the jutting book-cases. But I saw no one. However, at the other end of the large room there stood a screen near one of the many lounges, and I was on the point of approaching this place of concealment when Sinclair drew me toward a tall cabinet upon whose glass doors the firelight was shimmering, and, pointing to a shelf far above our heads, cried:

"No woman could reach that unaided. Gilbertine is tall, but not tall enough for that. I purposely put it high."

I looked about for a stool. There was one just behind Sinclair. I drew his attention to it.

He flushed and gave it a kick, then shivered slightly and sat down in a near-by chair. I knew what he was thinking. Gilbertine was taller than Dorothy. This stool might have served Gilbertine if not Dorothy.

I felt a great sympathy for him. After all, his case was more serious than mine. The bishop was coming to marry him the next day.

"Sinclair," said I, "the stool means nothing. Dorothy has more inches than you think. With this under her feet, she could reach the shelf by standing tiptoe. Besides, there are the chairs."

"True, true!" and he started up; "there are the chairs! I forgot the chairs. I fear my wits have gone wool-gathering. We shall have to take others into our confidence." Here his voice fell to a whisper. "Somehow or by some means we must find out if either of them was seen to come into this room."

"Leave that to me," said I. "Remember that a word might raise suspicion, and that in a case like this – Halloo, what's that?"

A gentle snore had come from behind the screen.

"We are not alone," I whispered. "Some one is over there on the lounge."

Sinclair had already bounded across the room. I pressed hurriedly behind him, and together we rounded the screen and came upon the recumbent figure of Mr. Armstrong, asleep on the lounge, with his paper fallen from his hand.

"That accounts for the lights being turned out," grumbled Sinclair. "Dutton must have done it."

Dutton was the butler.

I stood contemplating the sleeping figure before me.

"He must have been lying here for some time," I muttered.

Sinclair started.

"Probably some little while before he slept," I pursued. "I have often heard that he dotes on the firelight."

"I have a notion to wake him," suggested Sinclair.

"It will not be necessary," said I, drawing back, as the heavy figure stirred, breathed heavily and finally sat up.

"I beg pardon," I now entreated, backing politely away. "We thought the room empty."

Mr. Armstrong, who, if slow to receive impressions, is far from lacking intelligence, eyed us with sleepy indifference for a moment, then rose ponderously to his feet and was, on the instant, the man of manner and unfailing courtesy we had ever found him.

"What can I do to oblige you?" he asked; his smooth, if hesitating tones, sounding strange to our excited ears.

I made haste to forestall Sinclair, who was racking his brains for words with which to propound the question he dared not put too boldly.

"Pardon me, Mr. Armstrong, we were looking about for a small pin dropped by Miss Camerden." (How hard it was for me to use her name in this connection only my own heart knew.) "She was in here just now, was she not?"

The courteous gentleman bowed, hawed, and smiled a very polite but unmeaning smile. Evidently he had not the remotest notion whether she had been in or not.

"I am sorry, but I am afraid I lost myself for a moment on that lounge," he admitted. "The firelight always makes me sleepy. But if I can help you," he cried, starting forward, but almost immediately pausing again and giving us rather a curious look. "Some one was in the room. I remember it now. It was just before the warmth and glow of the fire became too much for me. I can not say that it was Miss Camerden, however. I thought it was some one of quicker movement. She made quite a rattle with the chairs."

I purposely did not look back at Sinclair.

"Miss Murray?" I suggested.

Mr. Armstrong made one of his low, old-fashioned bows. This, I doubt not, was out of deference to the bride-to-be.

"Does Miss Murray wear white to-night?"

"Yes," muttered Sinclair, coming hastily forward.

"Then it may have been she, for as I lay there deciding whether or not to yield to the agreeable somnolence I felt creeping over me, I caught a glimpse of her skirt as she passed out of the room. And that skirt was white – white silk, I suppose you call it. It looked very pretty in the firelight."

Sinclair, turning on his heel, stalked in a dazed way toward the door. To cover this show of abruptness which was quite unusual on his part, I made the effort of my life, and, remarking lightly, "She must have been here looking for the pin her friend has lost," I launched forth into an impromptu dissertation on one of the subjects I knew to be dear to the heart of the bookworm before me, and kept it up, too, till I saw by his brightening eye and suddenly freed manner that he had forgotten the insignificant episode of a minute ago, never in all probability to recall it again. Then I made another effort and released myself with something like deftness from the long-drawn-out argument I saw

impending, and, making for the door in my turn, glanced about for Sinclair. So far as I was concerned the question as to who had taken the box from the library was settled.

It was now half-past eight. I made my way from room to room and from group to group, looking for Sinclair. At last I returned to my old post near the library door, and was instantly rewarded by the sight of his figure approaching from a small side passage in company with the butler, Dutton. His face, as he stepped into the full light of the open hall, showed discomposure, but not the extreme distress I had anticipated. Somehow, at sight of it, I found myself seeking the shadow just as he had done a short time before, and it was in one of the recesses made by a row of bay trees that we came face to face.

He gave me one look, then his eyes dropped.

"Miss Camerden has lost a pin from her hair," he impressively explained to me. Then turning to Dutton he nonchalantly remarked. "It must be somewhere in this hall; perhaps you will be good enough to look for it."

"Certainly," replied the man. "I thought she had lost something when I saw her come out of the library a little while ago holding her hand to her hair."

My heart gave a leap, then sank cold and almost pulseless in my breast. In the hum to which all sounds had sunk, I heard Sinclair's voice rise again in the question with which my own mind was full.

"When was that? After Mr. Armstrong went into the room, or before?"

"Oh, after he fell asleep. I had just come from putting out the gas when I saw Miss Camerden slip in and almost immediately come out again. I will search for the pin very carefully, sir."

So Mr. Armstrong had made a mistake! It was Dorothy and not Gilbertine whom he had seen leaving the room. I braced myself up and met Sinclair's eye.

"Dorothy's dress is gray to-night; but Mr. Armstrong's eye may not be very good for colors."

"It is possible that both were in the room," was Sinclair's reply. But I could see that he advanced this theory solely out of consideration for me; that he did not really believe it. "At all events," he went on, "we can not prove anything this way; we must revert to our original idea. I wonder if Gilbertine will give me the chance to speak to her."

"You will have an easier task than I," was my half-sullen retort. "If Dorothy perceives that I wish to approach her she has but to lift her eyes to any of the half-dozen fellows here, and the thing becomes impossible."

"There is to be a rehearsal of the ceremony at half-past ten. I might get a word in then; only, this matter must be settled first. I could never go through the farce of standing up before you all at Gilbertine's side, with such a doubt as this in my mind."

"You will see her before then. Insist on a moment's talk. If she refuses –"

"Hush!" he here put in. "We part now to meet in this same place again at ten. Do I look fit to enter among the dancers? I see a whole group of them coming for me."

"You will in another moment. Approaching matrimony has made you sober, that's all."

It was some time before I had the opportunity, even if I had the courage, to look Dorothy in the face. When the moment came she was flushed with dancing and looked beautiful. Ordinarily she was a little pale, but not even Gilbertine, with her sumptuous coloring, showed a warmer cheek than she, as, resting from the waltz, she leaned against the rose-tinted wall and let her eyes for the first time rise slowly to where I stood talking mechanically to my partner.

Gentle eyes they were, made for appeal, and eloquent with a subdued heart language. But they were held in check by an infinite discretion. Never have I caught them quite off their guard, and to-night they were wholly unreadable. Yet she was trembling with something more than the fervor of the dance, and the little hand which had touched mine in lingering pressure a few hours before was not quiet for a moment. I could not see it fluttering in and out of the folds of her smoke-colored dress without a sickening wonder if the little purple box which was the cause of my horror lay somewhere concealed amid the airy puffs and ruffles that rose and fell so rapidly over her heaving breast. Could

her eye rest on mine, even in this cold and perfunctory manner, if the drop which could separate us for ever lay concealed over her heart? She knew that I loved her. From the first hour we met in her aunt's forbidding parlor in Thirty-sixth Street, she had recognized my passion, however perfectly I had succeeded in concealing it from others. Inexperienced as she was in those days, she had noted as quickly as any society belle the effect produced upon me by her chill prettiness and her air of meek reserve under which one felt the heart-break; and though she would never openly acknowledge my homage and frowned down every attempt on my part at lover-like speech or attention, I was as sure that she rated my feelings at their real value, as that she was the dearest, yet most incomprehensible, mortal my narrow world contained. When, therefore, I encountered her eyes at the end of the dance I said to myself:

"She may not love me, but she knows that I love her, and, being a woman of sympathetic instincts, would never meet my eyes with so calm a look if she were meditating an act which must infallibly plunge me into misery." Yet I was not satisfied to go away without a word. So, taking the bull by the horns, I excused myself to my partner, and crossed to Dorothy's side.

"Will you dance the next waltz with me?" I asked.

Her eyes fell from mine directly and she drew back in a way that suggested flight.

"I shall dance no more to-night," said she, her hand rising in its nervous fashion to her hair.

I made no appeal. I just watched that hand, whereupon she flushed vividly and seemed more than ever anxious to escape. At which I spoke again.

"Give me a chance, Dorothy. If you will not dance come out on the veranda and look at the ocean. It is glorious to-night. I will not keep you long. The lights here trouble my eyes; besides, I am most anxious to ask you – "

"No, no," she vehemently objected, very much as if frightened. "I can not leave the drawing-room – do not ask me – seek some other partner – do, to-night."

"You wish it?"

"Very much."

She was panting, eager. I felt my heart sink and dreaded lest I should betray my feelings.

"You do not honor me then with your regard," I retorted, bowing ceremoniously as I became assured that we were attracting more attention than I considered desirable.

She was silent. Her hand went again to her hair.

I changed my tone. Quietly, but with an emphasis which moved her in spite of herself, I whispered: "If I leave you now will you tell me to-morrow why you are so peremptory with me to-night?"

With an eagerness which was anything but encouraging, she answered with suddenly recovered gaiety:

"Yes, yes, after all this excitement is over." And, slipping her hand into that of a friend who was passing, she was soon in the whirl again and dancing – she who had just assured me that she did not mean to dance again that night.

III

A SCREAM IN THE NIGHT

I turned and, hardly conscious of my actions, stumbled from the room. A bevy of young people at once surrounded me. What I said to them I hardly know. I only remember that it was several minutes before I found myself again alone and making for the little room into which Beaton had vanished a half-hour before. It was the one given up to card-playing. Did I expect to find him seated at one of the tables? Possibly; at all events I approached the doorway and was about to enter when a heavy step shook the threshold before me and I found myself confronted by the advancing figure of an elderly lady whose portrait it is now time for me to draw. It is no pleasurable task, but one I can not escape.

Imagine, then, a broad, weighty woman of not much height, with a face whose features were usually forgotten in the impression made by her great cheeks and falling jowls. If the small eyes rested on you, you found them sinister and strange, but if they were turned elsewhere, you asked in what lay the power of the face, and sought in vain amid its long wrinkles and indeterminate lines for the secret of that spiritual and bodily repulsion which the least look into this impassive countenance was calculated to produce. She was a woman of immense means, and an oppressive consciousness of this spoke in every movement of her heavy frame, which always seemed to take up three times as much space as rightfully belonged to any human creature. Add to this that she was seldom seen without a display of diamonds which made her broad bust look like the bejeweled breast of some Eastern idol, and some idea may be formed of this redoubtable woman whom I have hitherto confined myself to speaking of as *the gorgon*.

The stare she gave me had something venomous and threatening in it. Evidently for the moment I was out of her books, and while I did not understand in what way I had displeased her, for we always had met amicably before, I seized upon this sign of displeasure on her part as explanatory, perhaps, of the curtness and show of contradictory feelings on the part of her dependent niece. Yet why should the old woman frown on me? I had been told more than once that she regarded me with great favor. Had I unwittingly done something to displease her, or had the game of cards she had just left gone against her, ruffling her temper and making it imperative for her to choose some object on which to vent her spite? I entered the room to see. Two men and one woman stood in rather an embarrassed silence about a table on which lay some cards, which had every appearance of having been thrown down by an impatient hand. One of the men was Will Beaton, and it was he who now remarked:

"She has just found out that the young people are enjoying themselves. I wonder upon which of her two unfortunate nieces she will expend her ill-temper to-night?"

"Oh, there's no question about that," remarked the lady who stood near him. "Ever since she has had a reasonable prospect of working Gilbertine off her hands, she has devoted herself quite exclusively to her remaining burden. I hear," she impulsively continued, craning her neck to be sure that the object of her remarks was quite out of earshot, "that the south hall was blue to-day with the talk she gave Dorothy Camerden. No one knows what about, for the girl evidently tries to please her. But some women have more than their own proper share of bile; they must expend it on some one." And she in turn threw down her cards, which up till now she had held in her hand.

I gave Beaton a look and stepped out on the veranda. In a minute he followed me, and in the corner facing the ocean, where the vines cluster the thickest, we held our conversation.

I began it, with a directness born of my desperation.

"Beaton," said I, "we have not known each other long, but I recognize a man when I see him, and I am disposed to be frank with you. I am in trouble. My affections are engaged, deeply engaged, in a quarter where I find some mystery. You have helped make it." (Here a gesture escaped him.) "I allude to the story you related the other morning of the young girl you had seen hanging over the verge of the cliff, with every appearance of intending to throw herself over."

"It was as a dream I related that," he gravely remarked.

"That I am aware of. But it was no dream to me, Beaton. I fear I know that young girl; I also fear that I know what drove her into contemplating so rash an act. The conversation just held in the card-room should enlighten you. Beaton, am I wrong?"

The feeling I could not suppress trembled in my tones. He may have been sensitive to it or he may have been simply good-natured. Whatever the cause, this is what he said in reply:

"It was a dream. Remember that I insist upon its being a dream. But some of its details are very clear in my mind. When I stumbled upon this dream-maiden in the moonlight her face was turned from me toward the ocean, and I did not see her features then or afterwards. Startled by some sound I made, she crouched, drew back and fled to cover. That cover, I have good reason to believe, was this very house."

I reached out my hand and touched him on the arm.

"This dream-maiden was a woman?" I inquired. "One of the women now in this house."

He replied reluctantly.

"She was a young woman and she wore a long cloak. My dream ends there. I can not even say whether she was fair or dark."

I recognized that he had reached the limit of his explanations, and, wringing his hand, I started for the nearest window, which proved to be that of the music-room. I was about to enter when I saw two women crossing to the opposite doorway, and paused with a full heart to note them, for one was Mrs. Lansing and the other Dorothy. The aunt had evidently come for the niece and they were leaving the room together. Not amicably, however. Harsh words had passed, or I am no judge of the human countenance. Dorothy especially bore herself like one who finds difficulty in restraining herself from some unhappy outburst, and as she disappeared from my sight in the wake of her formidable companion my attention was again called to her hands, which she held clenched at her sides.

I was stepping into the room when my impulse was again checked. Another person was sitting there, a person I had been most anxious to see ever since my last interview with Sinclair. It was Gilbertine Murray, sitting alone in an attitude of deep, and possibly not altogether happy thought.

I paused to study the sweet face. Truly she was a beautiful woman. I had never before realized how beautiful. Her rich coloring, her noble traits and the spirited air, which gave her such marked distinction, bespoke at once an ardent nature and a pure soul.

I did not wonder that Sinclair had succumbed to charms so pronounced and uncommon, and as I gazed longer and noted the tremulous droop of her ripe lips and the faraway look of eyes which had created a great stir in the social world when they first flashed upon it. I felt that if Sinclair could see her now he would never doubt her again, despite the fact that the attitude into which she had fallen was one of great fatigue, if not despondency.

She held a fan in her hand, and as I stood looking at her she dropped it. As she stooped to pick it up, her eyes met mine, and a startling change passed over her. Springing up, she held out her hands in wordless appeal – then let them drop again as if conscious that I would not be likely to understand either herself or her mood. She was very beautiful.

Entering the room, I approached her. Had Sinclair managed to have his little conversation with her? Something must have happened, for never had I seen her in such a state of suppressed excitement, and I had seen her many times, both here and in her aunt's house when I was visiting Dorothy. Her eyes were shining, not with a brilliant, but a soft light, and the smile with which she met my advance had something in it strangely tremulous and expectant.

"I am glad to have a moment in which to speak to you alone," I said. "As Sinclair's oldest and closest friend, I wish to tell you how truly you can rely both on his affection and esteem. He has an infinitely good heart."

She did not answer as brightly and as quickly as I expected. Something seemed to choke her, something which she finally mastered, though only by an effort which left her pale, but self-contained and even more lovely, if that is possible, than before.

"Thank you," she then said, "my prospects are very happy. No one but myself knows how happy." And she smiled again, but with an expression which recalled to my mind Sinclair's fears.

I bowed; some one was calling her name; evidently our interview was to be short.

"I am obliged," she murmured. Then quickly, "I have not seen the moon to-night. Is it beautiful? Can you see it from this veranda?"

But before I could answer, she was surrounded and dragged off by a knot of young people, and I was left free to keep my engagement with Sinclair.

I did not find him at his post nor could any one tell me where he had vanished.

It was plain that his conduct was looked upon as strange, and I felt some anxiety lest it should appear more so before the evening was over. I found him at last in his room sitting with his head buried in his arms. He started up as I entered.

"Well?" he asked sharply.

"I have learned nothing decisive."

"Nor I."

"I exchanged some words with both ladies and I tackled Beaton; but the matter remains just about where it was. It may have been Dorothy who took the box and it may have been Gilbertine. But there seems to be greater reason for suspecting Dorothy. She lives a hell of a life with that aunt."

"And Gilbertine is on the point of escaping that bondage. I know; I have thought of that. Walter, you are a generous fellow;" and for a moment Sinclair looked relieved. Before I could speak, however, he was sunk again in his old despondency. "But the doubt," he cried, "the doubt! How can I go through this rehearsal with such a doubt in my mind? I can not and will not. Go tell them I am ill and can not come down again to-night. God knows you will tell no untruth."

I saw that he was quite beside himself, but ventured upon one remonstrance.

"It will be unwise to rouse comment," I said. "If that box was taken for the death it holds, the one restraint most likely to act upon the young girl who retains it will be the conventionalities of her position and the requirements of the hour. Any break in the settled order of things – anything which would give her a moment by herself – might precipitate the dreadful event we fear. Remember, one turn of the hand and all is lost. A drop is quickly swallowed."

"Frightful!" he murmured, the perspiration oozing from his forehead. "What a wedding-eve! And they are laughing down there; listen to them. I even imagine I hear Gilbertine's voice. Is there unconsciousness in it or just the hilarity of a distracted mind bent on self-destruction? I can not tell; the sound conveys no meaning to me."

"She has a sweet, true face," I said, "and she wears a very beautiful smile to-night."

He sprang to his feet.

"Yes, yes; a smile that maddens me; a smile that tells me nothing, nothing! Walter, Walter, don't you see that, even if that cursed box remains unopened and nothing ever comes of its theft, the seeds of distrust are sown thick in my breast, and I must always ask: 'Was there a moment when my young bride shrank from me enough to dream of death?' That is why I can not go through the mockery of this rehearsal."

"Can you go through the ceremony of marriage?"

"I must – if nothing happens to-night."

"And then?"

I spoke involuntarily. I was thinking not of him, but of myself. But he evidently found in my words an echo of his own thought.

"Yes, it is the *then*," he murmured. "Well may a man quail before that *then*."

He did go down stairs, however, and later on, went through the rehearsal very much as I had expected him to do, quietly and without any outward show of emotion.

As soon as possible after this the company separated, Sinclair making me an imperceptible gesture as he went up stairs. I knew what it meant, and was in his room as soon as the fellows who accompanied him had left him alone.

"The danger is from now on," he cried, as soon as I had closed the door behind me. "I shall not undress to-night."

"Nor I."

"Happily we both have rooms by ourselves in this great house. I shall put out my light and then open my door as far as need be. Not a move in the house will escape me."

"I will do the same."

"Gilbertine – God be thanked – is not alone in her room. Little Miss Lane shares it with her."

"And Dorothy?"

"Oh, she is under the strictest bondage night and day. She sleeps in a little room off her aunt's. Do you know her door?"

I shook my head.

"I will pass down the hall and stop an instant before the two doors we are most interested in. When I pass Gilbertine's I will throw out my right hand."

I stood on the threshold of his room and watched him. When the two doors were well fixed in my mind, I went to my own room and prepared for my self-imposed watch. When quite ready, I put out my light. It was then eleven o'clock.

The house was very quiet. There had been the usual bustle attending the separation of a party of laughing, chattering girls for the night, but this had not lasted long, for the great doings of the morrow called for bright eyes and fresh cheeks, and these can only be gained by sleep. In this stillness twelve o'clock struck and the first hour of my anxious vigil was at an end. I thought of Sinclair. He had given no token of the watch he was keeping, but I knew he was sitting with his ear to the door, listening for the alarm which must come soon if it came at all.

But would it come at all? Were we not wasting strength and a great deal of emotion on a dread which had no foundation in fact? What were we two sensible and, as a rule, practical men thinking of, that we should ascribe to either of these dainty belles of a conventional and shallow society the wish to commit a deed calling for the vigor and daring of some wilful child of nature? It was not to be thought of in this sober, reasoning hour. We had given ourselves over to a ghastly nightmare and would yet awake.

Why was I on my feet? Had I heard anything?

Yes, a stir, a very faint stir somewhere down the hall – the slow, cautious opening of a door, then a footfall – or had I imagined the latter? I could hear nothing now.

Pushing open my own door, I looked cautiously out. Only the pale face of Sinclair confronted me. He was peering from the corner of an adjacent passageway, the moonlight at his back. Advancing, we met in silence. For the moment we seemed to be the only persons awake in the vast house.

"I thought I heard a step," was my cautious whisper after a moment of intense listening.

"Where?"

I pointed toward that portion of the house where the ladies' rooms were situated.

"That is not what I heard," was his murmured protest, "what I heard was a creak in the small stairway running down at the end of the hall where my room is."

"One of the servants," I ventured, and for a moment we stood irresolute. Then we both turned rigid as some sound arose in one of the far-off rooms, only to quickly relax again as that sound resolved itself into a murmur of muffled voices. Where there was talking there could be no danger of the special event we feared. Our relief was so great we both smiled. Next instant his face and, I have no doubt, my own, turned the color of clay and Sinclair went reeling back against the wall.

A scream had risen in this sleeping house – a piercing and insistent scream such as raises the hair and curdles the blood.

IV WHAT SINCLAIR HAD TO SHOW ME

This scream seemed to come from the room where we had just heard voices. With a common impulse, Sinclair and I both started down the hall, only to find ourselves met by a dozen wild interrogations from behind as many quickly opened doors. Was it fire? Had burglars got in? What was the matter? Who had uttered that dreadful shriek? Alas! that was the question which we of all men were most anxious to hear answered. Who? Gilbertine or Dorothy?

Gilbertine's door was reached first. In it stood a short, slight figure, wrapped in a hastily-donned shawl. The white face looked into ours as we stopped, and we recognized little Miss Lane.

"What has happened?" she gasped. "It must have been an awful cry to waken everybody so!"

We never thought of answering her.

"Where is Gilbertine?" demanded Sinclair, thrusting his hand out as if to put her aside.

She drew herself up with sudden dignity.

"In bed," she replied. "It was she who told me that somebody had shrieked. I didn't wake."

Sinclair uttered a sigh of the greatest relief that ever burst from a man's overcharged breast.

"Tell her we will find out what it means," he replied kindly, drawing me rapidly away.

By this time Mr. and Mrs. Armstrong were aroused, and I could hear the slow and hesitating tones of the former in the passage behind us.

"Let us hasten," whispered Sinclair. "Our eyes must be the first to see what lies behind that partly-opened door."

I shivered. The door he had designated was Dorothy's.

Sinclair reached it first and pushed it open. Pressing up behind him, I cast a fearful look over his shoulder. Only emptiness confronted us. Dorothy was not in the little chamber. With an impulsive gesture Sinclair pointed to the bed – it had not been lain in; then to the gas – it was still burning. The communicating room, in which Mrs. Lansing slept, was also lighted, but silent as the one in which we stood. This last struck us as the most incomprehensible fact of all. Mrs. Lansing was not the woman to sleep through a disturbance. Where was she, then? and why did we not hear her strident and aggressive tones rising in angry remonstrance at our intrusion? Had she followed her niece from the room? Should we in another minute encounter her ponderous figure in the group of people we could now hear hurrying toward us? I was for retreating and hunting the house over for Dorothy. But Sinclair, with truer instinct, drew me across the threshold of this silent room.

Well was it for us that we entered there together, for I do not know how either of us, weakened as we were by our forebodings and all the alarms of this unprecedented night, could have borne alone the sight that awaited us.

On the bed situated at the right of the doorway lay a form – awful, ghastly, and unspeakably repulsive. The head, which lay high but inert upon the pillow, was surrounded with the gray hairs of age, and the eyes, which seemed to stare into ours, were glassy with reflected light and not with inward intelligence. This glassiness told the tale of the room's grim silence. It was death we looked on; not the death we had anticipated and for which we were in a measure prepared, but one fully as awful, and having for its victim not Dorothy Camerden nor even Gilbertine Murray, but the heartless aunt, who had driven them both like slaves, and who now lay facing the reward of her earthly deeds, *alone*.

As a realization of the awful truth came upon me, I stumbled against the bedpost, looking on with almost blind eyes as Sinclair bent over the rapidly whitening face, whose naturally ruddy color no one had ever before seen disturbed. And I was still standing there when Mr. Armstrong and all the others came pouring in. Nor have I any distinct remembrance of what was said or how I came to be in the ante-chamber again. All thought, all consciousness even, seemed to forsake me, and I did not really waken to my surroundings till some one near me whispered:

"Apoplexy!"

Then I began to look about me and peer into the faces crowding up on every side, for the only one which could give me back my self-possession. But though there were many girlish countenances to be seen in the awestruck groups huddled in every corner, I beheld no Dorothy, and was therefore but little astonished when in another moment I heard the cry go up:

"Where is Dorothy? Where was she when her aunt died?"

Alas! there was no one there to answer, and the looks of those about, which hitherto had expressed little save awe and fright, turned to wonder, and more than one person left the room as if to look for her. I did not join them. I was rooted to the place. Nor did Sinclair stir a foot, though his eye, which had been wandering restlessly over the faces about him, now settled inquiringly on the doorway. For whom was he looking? Gilbertine or Dorothy? Gilbertine, no doubt, for he visibly brightened as her figure presently appeared clad in a *negligée*, which emphasized her height and gave to her whole appearance a womanly sobriety unusual to it.

She had evidently been told what had occurred, for she asked no questions, only leaned in still horror against the door-post, with her eyes fixed on the room within. Sinclair, advancing, held out his arm. She gave no sign of seeing it. Then he spoke. This seemed to rouse her, for she gave him a grateful look, though she did not take his arm.

"There will be no wedding to-morrow," fell from her lips in self-communing murmur.

Only a few minutes had passed since they had started to find Dorothy, but it seemed an age to me. My body remained in the room, but my mind was searching the house for the girl I loved. Where was she hidden? Would she be found huddled but alive in some far-off chamber? Or was another and more dreadful tragedy awaiting us? I wondered that I could not join the search. I wondered that even Gilbertine's presence could keep Sinclair from doing so. Didn't he know what, in all probability, this missing girl had with her? Didn't he know what I had suffered, was suffering – ah, what now? She is coming! I can hear them speaking to her. Gilbertine moves from the door, and a young man and woman enter with Dorothy between them.

But what a Dorothy! Years could have made no greater change in her. She looked and she moved like one who is done with life, yet fears the few remaining moments left her. Instinctively we fell back before her; instinctively we followed her with our eyes as, reeling a little at the door, she cast a look of inconceivable shrinking, first at her own bed, then at the group of older people watching her with serious looks from the room beyond. As she did so I noted that she was still clad in her evening dress of gray, and that there was no more color on cheek or lip than in the neutral tints of her gown.

Was it our consciousness of the relief which Mrs. Lansing's death, horrible as it was, must bring to this unhappy girl and of the inappropriateness of any display of grief on her part, which caused the silence with which we saw her pass with forced step and dread anticipation into the room where that image of dead virulence awaited her? Impossible to tell. I could not read my own thoughts. How, then, the thoughts of others!

But thoughts, if we had any, all fled when, after one slow turn of her head toward the bed, this trembling young girl gave a choking shriek and fell, face down, on the floor. Evidently she had not been prepared for the look which made her aunt's still face so horrible. How could she have been? Had it not imprinted itself upon my mind as the one revolting vision of my life? How, then, if this young and tender-hearted girl had been insensible to it! As her form struck the floor Mr. Armstrong rushed forward; I had not the right. But it was not by his arms she was lifted. Sinclair was before him, and it was with a singularly determined look I could not understand and which made us all fall back, that he raised her and carried her in to her own bed, where he laid her gently down. Then, as if not content with this simple attention, he hovered over her for a moment arranging the pillows and smoothing her disheveled hair. When at last he left her, the women rushed forward.

"Not too many of you," was his final adjuration, as, giving me a look, he slipped out into the hall.

I followed him immediately. He had gained the moon-lighted corridor near his own door, where he stood awaiting me with something in his hand. As I approached, he drew me to the window and showed me what it was. It was the amethyst box, open and empty, and beside it, shining with a yellow instead of a purple light, the little vial void of the one drop which used to sparkle within it.

"I found the vial in the bed with the old woman," said he. "The box I saw glittering among Dorothy's locks before she fell. That was why I lifted her."

V THREE O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING

As he spoke, youth with its brilliant hopes, illusions and beliefs passed from me, never to return in the same measure again. I stared at the glimmering amethyst, I stared at the empty vial and, as a full realization of all his words implied seized my benumbed faculties, I felt the icy chill of some grisly horror moving among the roots of my hair, lifting it on my forehead and filling my whole being with shrinking and dismay.

Sinclair, with a quick movement, replaced the tiny flask in its old receptacle, and then thrusting the whole out of sight, seized my hand and wrung it.

"I am your friend," he whispered. "Remember, under all circumstances and in every exigency, your friend."

"What are you going to do with *those*?" I demanded when I regained control of my speech.

"I do not know."

"What are you going to do with – with Dorothy?"

He drooped his head; I could see his fingers working in the moonlight.

"The physicians will soon be here. I heard the telephone going a few minutes ago. When they have pronounced the old woman dead we will give the – the lady you mention an opportunity to explain herself."

Explain herself, she! Simple expectation. Unconsciously I shook my head.

"It is the least we can do," he gently persisted. "Come, we must not be seen with our heads together – not yet. I am sorry that we two were found more or less dressed at the time of the alarm. It may cause comment."

"She was dressed, too," I murmured, as much to myself as to him.

"Unfortunately, yes," was the muttered reply, with which he drew off and hastened into the hall, where the now thoroughly-aroused household stood in a great group about the excited hostess.

Mrs. Armstrong was not the woman for an emergency. With streaming hair and tightly-clutched kimono, she was gesticulating wildly and bemoaning the break in the festivities which this event must necessarily cause. As Sinclair approached, she turned her tirade on him, and as all stood still to listen and add such words of sympathy or disappointment as suggested themselves in the excitement of the moment, I had an opportunity to note that neither of the two girls most interested was within sight. This troubled me. Drawing up to the outside of the circle, I asked Beaton, who was nearest to me, if he knew how Miss Camerden was.

"Better, I hear. Poor girl, it was a great shock to her."

I ventured nothing more. The conventionality of his tone was not to be mistaken. Our conversation on the veranda was to be ignored. I did not know whether to feel relief at this or an added distress. I was in a whirl of emotion which robbed me of all discrimination. As I realized my own condition, I concluded that my wisest move would be to withdraw myself for a time from every eye. Accordingly, and at the risk of offending more than one pretty girl who still had something to say concerning this terrible mischance, I slid away to my room, happy to escape the murmurs and snatches of talk rising on every side. One bitter speech, uttered by I do not know whom, rang in my ears and made all thinking unendurable. It was this:

"Poor woman! she was angry once too often. I heard her scolding Dorothy again after she went to her room. That is why Dorothy is so overcome. She says it was the violence of her aunt's rage which killed her, – a rage of which she unfortunately was the cause."

So there were words again between these two after the door closed upon them for the night! Was this what we heard just before that scream went up? It would seem so. Thereupon, quite against my will, I found myself thinking of Dorothy's changed position before the world. Only yesterday

a dependent slave; to-day, the owner of millions. Gilbertine would have her share, a large one, but there was enough to make them both wealthy. Intolerable thought! Would that no money had been involved! I hated to think of those diamonds and —

Oh, anything was better than this! Dashing from my room I joined one of the groups into which the single large circle had now broken up. The house had been lighted from end to end, and some effort had been made at a more respectable appearance by such persons as I now saw; some even were fully dressed. All were engaged in discussing the one great topic. Listening and not listening, I waited for the front door bell to ring. It sounded while one woman was saying to another:

"The Sinclairs will now be able to take their honeymoon on their own yacht."

I made my way to where I could watch Sinclair while the physicians were in the room. I thought his face looked very noble. The narrowness of his own escape, the sympathy for me which the event, so much worse than either of us anticipated, had awakened in his generous breast, had called out all that was best in his naturally reserved and not-always-to-be-understood nature. A tower of strength he was to me that hour. I knew that mercy and mercy only would influence his conduct. He would be guilty of no rash or inconsiderate act. He would give this young girl a chance.

Therefore when the physicians had pronounced the case one of apoplexy (a conclusion most natural under the circumstances), and the excitement which had held together the various groups of uneasy guests had begun to subside, it was with perfect confidence I saw him approach and address Gilbertine. She was standing fully dressed at the stairhead, where she had stopped to hold some conversation with the retiring physicians; and the look she gave him in return and the way she moved off in obedience to his command or suggestion assured me that he was laying plans for an interview with Dorothy. Consequently I was quite ready to obey him when he finally stepped up to me and said:

"Go below, and if you find the library empty, as I have no doubt you will, light one gas-jet and see that the door to the conservatory is unlocked. I require a place in which to make Gilbertine comfortable while I have some words with her cousin."

"But how will you be able to influence Miss Camerden to come down?" Somehow, the familiar name of Dorothy would not pass my lips. "Do you think she will recognize your right to summon her to an interview?"

"Yes."

I had never seen his lip take that firm line before, yet I had always known him to be a man of great resolution.

"But how can you reach her? She is shut up in her own room, under the care, I am told, of Mrs. Armstrong's maid."

"I know, but she will escape that dreadful place as soon as her feet will carry her. I shall wait in the hall till she is seen to enter it, then I will say 'Come!' and she will come, attended by Gilbertine."

"And I? Do you mean me to be present at an interview so painful, nay, so serious and so threatening? It would cut short every word you hope to hear. I — can not — "

"I have not asked you to. It is imperative that I should see Miss Camerden alone." (He could not call her Dorothy, either.) "I shall ask Gilbertine to accompany us, so that appearances may be preserved. I want you to be able to inform any one who approaches the door that you saw me go in there with Miss Murray."

"Then I am to stay in the hall?"

"If you will be so kind."

The clock struck three.

"It is very late," I exclaimed. "Why not wait till morning?"

"And have the whole house about our ears? No. Besides, some things will not keep an hour, a moment. I must hear what this young girl has to say in response to my questions. Remember, I am the owner of the flask whose contents killed the old woman!"

"You believe she died from swallowing that drop?"

"Absolutely."

I said no more, but hastened down stairs to do his bidding.

I found the lower hall partly lighted, but none of the rooms.

Entering the library, I lit the gas as Sinclair had requested. Then I tried the conservatory door. It was unlocked. Casting a sharp glance around, I made sure that the lounges were all unoccupied and that I could safely leave Sinclair to hold his contemplated interview without fear of interruption. Then, dreading a premature arrival on his part, I slid quickly out and moved down the hall to where the light of the one burning jet failed to penetrate. "I will watch from here," thought I, and entered upon the quick pacing of the floor which my impatience and the overwrought condition of my nerves demanded.

But before I had turned on my steps more than half a dozen times, the single but brilliant ray coming from some half-open door in the rear caught my eye, and I had the curiosity to step back and see if any one was sharing my watch. In doing so I came upon the little spiral staircase which, earlier in the evening, Sinclair had heard creak under some unknown footstep. Had this footstep been Dorothy's, and if so, what had brought her into this remote portion of the house? Fear? Anguish? Remorse? A flying from herself or from *it*? I wished I knew just where she had been found by the two young persons who had brought her back into her aunt's room. No one had volunteered the information, and I had not seen the moment when I felt myself in a position to demand it.

Proceeding further, I stood amazed at my own forgetfulness. The light which had attracted my attention came from the room devoted to the display of Miss Murray's wedding-gifts. This I should have known instantly, having had a hand in their arrangement. But all my faculties were dulled that night, save such as responded to dread and horror. Before going back I paused to look at the detective whose business it was to guard the room. He was sitting very quietly at his post, and if he saw me he did not look up. Strange that I had forgotten this man when keeping my own vigil above. I doubted if Sinclair had remembered him either. Yet he must have been unconsciously sharing our watch from start to finish; must even have heard the cry as only a waking man could hear it. Should I ask him if this was so? No. Perhaps I had not the courage to hear his answer.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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