

Green Anna Katharine

# The House in the Mist



Anna Green

**The House in the Mist**

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## The House in the Mist

### I

#### AN OPEN DOOR

It was a night to drive any man indoors. Not only was the darkness impenetrable, but the raw mist enveloping hill and valley made the open road anything but desirable to a belated wayfarer like myself.

Being young, untrammelled, and naturally indifferent to danger, I was not averse to adventure; and having my fortune to make, was always on the look-out for El Dorado, which, to ardent souls, lies ever beyond the next turning. Consequently, when I saw a light shimmering through the mist at my right, I resolved to make for it and the shelter it so opportunely offered.

But I did not realize then, as I do now, that shelter does not necessarily imply refuge, or I might not have undertaken this adventure with so light a heart. Yet, who knows? The impulses of an unfettered spirit lean toward daring, and youth, as I have said, seeks the strange, the unknown and, sometimes, the terrible.

My path toward this light was by no means an easy one. After confused wanderings through tangled hedges, and a struggle with obstacles of whose nature I received the most curious impression in the surrounding murk, I arrived in front of a long, low building which, to my astonishment, I found standing with doors and windows open to the pervading mist, save for one square casement through which the light shone from a row of candles placed on a long mahogany table.

The quiet and seeming emptiness of this odd and picturesque building made me pause. I am not much affected by visible danger, but this silent room, with its air of sinister expectancy, struck me most unpleasantly, and I was about to reconsider my first impulse and withdraw again to the road, when a second look, thrown back upon the comfortable interior I was leaving, convinced me of my folly and sent me straight toward the door which stood so invitingly open.

But half-way up the path, my progress was again stayed by the sight of a man issuing from the house I had so rashly looked upon as devoid of all human presence. He seemed in haste and, at the moment my eye first fell on him, was engaged in replacing his watch in his pocket.

But he did not shut the door behind him, which I thought odd, especially as his final glance had been a backward one, and seemed to take in all the appointments of the place he was so hurriedly leaving.

As we met, he raised his hat. This likewise struck me as peculiar, for the deference he displayed was more marked than that usually bestowed on strangers, while his lack of surprise at an encounter more or less startling in such a mist was calculated to puzzle an ordinary man like myself. Indeed, he was so little impressed by my presence there that he was for passing me without a word or any other hint of good fellowship, save the bow of which I have spoken. But this did not suit me. I was hungry, cold, and eager for creature comforts, and the house before me gave forth not only heat, but a savory odor which in itself was an invitation hard to ignore. I therefore accosted the man.

"Will bed and supper be provided me here?" I asked. "I am tired out with a long tramp over the hills, and hungry enough to pay anything in reason – "

I stopped, for the man had disappeared. He had not paused at my appeal and the mist had swallowed him. But at the break in my sentence, his voice came back in good-natured tones and I heard:

"Supper will be ready at nine, and there are beds for all. Enter, sir; you are the first to arrive, but the others can not be far behind."

A queer greeting, certainly. But when I strove to question him as to its meaning, his voice returned to me from such a distance that I doubted if my words had reached him with any more distinctness than his answer reached me.

"Well!" thought I, "it isn't as if a lodging had been denied me. He invited me to enter, and enter I will."

The house, to which I now naturally directed a glance of much more careful scrutiny than before, was no ordinary farm-building, but a rambling old mansion, made conspicuously larger here and there by jutting porches and more than one convenient lean-to. Though furnished, warmed and lighted with candles, as I have previously described, it had about it an air of disuse which made me feel myself an intruder, in spite of the welcome I had received. But I was not in a position to stand upon ceremony, and ere long I found myself inside the great room and before the blazing logs whose glow had lighted up the doorway and added its own attraction to the other allurements of the inviting place.

Though the open door made a draft which was anything but pleasant, I did not feel like closing it, and was astonished to observe the effect of the mist through the square thus left open to the night. It was not an agreeable one, and, instinctively turning my back upon that quarter of the room, I let my eyes roam over the wainscoted walls and the odd pieces of furniture which gave such an air of old-fashioned richness to the place. As nothing of the kind had ever fallen under my eyes before, I should have thoroughly enjoyed this opportunity of gratifying my taste for the curious and the beautiful, if the quaint old chairs I saw standing about me on every side had not all been empty. But the solitude of the place, so much more oppressive than the solitude of the road I had left, struck cold to my heart, and I missed the cheer rightfully belonging to such attractive surroundings. Suddenly I bethought me of the many other apartments likely to be found in so spacious a dwelling, and going to the nearest door, I opened it and called out for the master of the house. But only an echo came back, and, returning to the fire, I sat down before the cheering blaze, in quiet acceptance of a situation too lonely for comfort, yet not without a certain piquant interest for a man of free mind and adventurous disposition like myself.

After all, if supper was to be served at nine, someone must be expected to eat it: I should surely not be left much longer without companions.

Meanwhile ample amusement awaited me in the contemplation of a picture which, next to the large fireplace, was the most prominent object in the room. This picture was a portrait, and a remarkable one. The countenance it portrayed was both characteristic and forcible, and so interested me that in studying it I quite forgot both hunger and weariness. Indeed its effect upon me was such that, after gazing at it uninterruptedly for a few minutes, I discovered that its various features – the narrow eyes in which a hint of craft gave a strange gleam to their native intelligence; the steadfast chin, strong as the rock of the hills I had wearily tramped all day; the cunning wrinkles which yet did not interfere with a latent great-heartedness that made the face as attractive as it was puzzling – had so established themselves in my mind that I continued to see them before me whichever way I turned, and found it impossible to shake off their influence even after I had resolutely set my mind in another direction by endeavoring to recall what I knew of the town into which I had strayed.

I had come from Scranton and was now, according to my best judgment, in one of those rural districts of western Pennsylvania which breed such strange and sturdy characters. But of this special neighborhood, its inhabitants and its industries, I knew nothing nor was likely to, so long as I remained in the solitude I have endeavored to describe.

But these impressions and these thoughts – if thoughts they were – presently received a check. A loud "Halloo" rose from somewhere in the mist, followed by a string of muttered imprecations, which convinced me that the person now attempting to approach the house was encountering some of the many difficulties which had beset me in the same undertaking a few minutes before.

I therefore raised my voice and shouted out, "Here! this way!" after which I sat still and awaited developments.

There was a huge clock in one of the corners, whose loud tick filled up every interval of silence. By this clock it was just ten minutes to eight when two gentlemen (I should say men, and coarse men at that) crossed the open threshold and entered the house.

Their appearance was more or less noteworthy – unpleasantly so, I am obliged to add. One was red-faced and obese, the other was tall, thin and wiry and showed as many seams in his face as a blighted apple. Neither of the two had anything to recommend him either in appearance or address, save a certain veneer of polite assumption as transparent as it was offensive. As I listened to the forced sallies of the one and the hollow laugh of the other, I was glad that I was large of frame and strong of arm and used to all kinds of men and – brutes.

As these two new-comers seemed no more astonished at my presence than the man I had met at the gate, I checked the question which instinctively rose to my lips and with a simple bow, – responded to by a more or less familiar nod from either, – accepted the situation with all the *sang-froid* the occasion seemed to demand. Perhaps this was wise, perhaps it was not; there was little opportunity to judge, for the start they both gave as they encountered the eyes of the picture before mentioned drew my attention to a consideration of the different ways in which men, however similar in other respects, express sudden and unlooked-for emotion. The big man simply allowed his astonishment, dread, or whatever the feeling was which moved him, to ooze forth in a cold and deathly perspiration which robbed his cheeks of color and cast a bluish shadow over his narrow and retreating temples; while the thin and waspish man, caught in the same trap (for trap I saw it was), shouted aloud in his ill-timed mirth, the false and cruel character of which would have made me shudder, if all expression of feeling on my part had not been held in check by the interest I immediately experienced in the display of open bravado with which, in another moment, these two tried to carry off their mutual embarrassment.

"Good likeness, eh?" laughed the seamy-faced man. "Quite an idea, that! Makes him one of us again! Well, he's welcome – in oils. Can't say much to us from canvas, eh?" And the rafters above him vibrated, as his violent efforts at joviality went up in loud and louder assertion from his thin throat.

A nudge from the other's elbow stopped him and I saw them both cast half-lowering, half-inquisitive glances in my direction.

"One of the Witherspoon boys?" queried one.

"Perhaps," snarled the other. "I never saw but one of them. There are five, aren't there? Eustace believed in marrying off his gals young."

"Damn him, yes. And he'd have married them off younger if he had known how numbers were going to count some day among the Westonhaughs." And he laughed again in a way I should certainly have felt it my business to resent, if my indignation as well as the ill-timed allusions which had called it forth had not been put to an end by a fresh arrival through the veiling mist which hung like a shroud at the doorway.

This time it was for me to experience a shock of something like fear. Yet the personage who called up this unlooked-for sensation in my naturally hardy nature was old and, to all appearance, harmless from disability, if not from good will. His form was bent over upon itself like a bow; and only from the glances he shot from his upturned eyes was the fact made evident that a redoubtable nature, full of force and malignity, had just brought its quota of evil into a room already overflowing with dangerous and menacing passions.

As this old wretch, either from the feebleness of age or from the infirmity I have mentioned, had great difficulty in walking, he had brought with him a small boy, whose business it was to direct his tottering steps as best he could.

But once settled in his chair, he drove away this boy with his pointed oak stick, and with some harsh words about caring for the horse and being on time in the morning, he sent him out into the mist. As this little shivering and pathetic figure vanished, the old man drew, with gasp and haw, a

number of deep breaths which shook his bent back and did their share, no doubt, in restoring his own disturbed circulation. Then, with a sinister twist which brought his pointed chin and twinkling eyes again into view, he remarked:

"Haven't ye a word for kinsman Luke, you two? It isn't often I get out among ye. Shakee, nephew! Shakee, Hector! And now who's the boy in the window? My eyes aren't what they used to be, but he don't seem to favor the Westonhaughs over-much. One of Salmon's four grandchildren, think 'e? Or a shoot from Eustace's gnarled old trunk? His gals all married Americans, and one of them, I've been told, was a yellow-haired giant like this fellow."

As this description pointed directly toward me, I was about to venture a response on my own account, when my attention, as well as theirs, was freshly attracted by a loud "Whoa!" at the gate, followed by the hasty but assured entrance of a dapper, wizen, but perfectly preserved little old gentleman with a bag in his hand. Looking askance with eyes that were like two beads, first at the two men who were now elbowing each other for the best place before the fire, and then at the revolting figure in the chair, he bestowed his greeting, which consisted of an elaborate bow, not on them, but upon the picture hanging so conspicuously on the open wall before him; and then, taking me within the scope of his quick, circling glance, cried out with an assumption of great cordiality:

"Good evening, gentlemen; good evening one, good evening all. Nothing like being on the tick. I'm sorry the night has turned out so badly. Some may find it too thick for travel. That would be bad, eh? very bad – for *them*."

As none of the men he openly addressed saw fit to answer, save by the hitch of a shoulder or a leer quickly suppressed, I kept silent also. But this reticence, marked as it was, did not seem to offend the new-comer. Shaking the wet from the umbrella he held, he stood the dripping article up in a corner and then came and placed his feet on the fender. To do this he had to crowd between the two men already occupying the best part of the hearth. But he showed no concern at incommoding them, and bore their cross looks and threatening gestures with professional equanimity.

"You know me?" he now unexpectedly snapped, bestowing another look over his shoulder at that oppressive figure in the chair. (Did I say that I had risen when the latter sat?) "I'm no Westonhaugh, I; nor yet a Witherspoon nor a Clapsaddle. I'm only Smead, the lawyer. Mr. Anthony Westonhaugh's lawyer," he repeated, with another glance of recognition in the direction of the picture. "I drew up his last will and testament, and, until all of his wishes have been duly carried out, am entitled by the terms of that will to be regarded both legally and socially as his representative. This you all know, but it is my way to make everything clear as I proceed. A lawyer's trick, no doubt. I do not pretend to be entirely exempt from such."

A grumble from the large man, who seemed to have been disturbed in some absorbing calculation he was carrying on, mingled with a few muttered words of forced acknowledgment from the restless old sinner in the chair, made it unnecessary for me to reply, even if the last comer had given me the opportunity.

"It's getting late!" he cried, with an easy garrulity rather amusing, under the circumstances. "Two more trains came in as I left the depot. If old Phil was on hand with his wagon, several more members of this interesting family may be here before the clock strikes; if not, the assemblage is like to be small. Too small," I heard him grumble a minute after, under his breath.

"I wish it were a matter of one," spoke up the big man, striking his breast in a way to make it perfectly apparent whom he meant by that word one. And having (if I may judge by the mingled laugh and growl of his companions) thus shown his hand both figuratively and literally, he relapsed into the calculation which seemed to absorb all of his unoccupied moments.

"Generous, very!" commented the lawyer in a murmur which was more than audible. "Pity that sentiments of such broad benevolence should go unrewarded."

This, because at that very instant wheels were heard in front, also a jangle of voices, in some controversy about fares, which promised anything but a pleasing addition to the already none too desirable company.

"I suppose that's sister Janet," snarled out the one addressed as Hector. There was no love in his voice, despite the relationship hinted at, and I awaited the entrance of this woman with some curiosity.

But her appearance, heralded by many a puff and pant which the damp air exaggerated in a prodigious way, did not seem to warrant the interest I had shown in it. As she stepped into the room, I saw only a big frowsy woman, who had attempted to make a show with a new silk dress and a hat in the latest fashion, but who had lamentably failed, owing to the slouchiness of her figure and some misadventure by which her hat had been set awry on her head and her usual complacency destroyed. Later, I noted that her down-looking eyes had a false twinkle in them, and that, commonplace as she looked, she was one to steer clear of in times of necessity and distress.

She, too, evidently expected to find the door open and people assembled, but she had not anticipated being confronted by the portrait on the wall, and cringed in an unpleasant way as she stumbled by it into one of the ill-lighted corners.

The old man, who had doubtless caught the rustle of her dress as she passed him, emitted one short sentence.

"Almost late," said he.

Her answer was a sputter of words.

"It's the fault of that driver," she complained. "If he had taken one drop more at the half-way house, I might really not have got here at all. That would not have inconvenienced you. But oh! what a grudge I would have owed that skinflint brother of ours" – here she shook her fist at the picture "for making our good luck depend upon our arrival within two short strokes of the clock!"

"There are several to come yet," blandly observed the lawyer. But before the words were well out of his mouth, we all became aware of a new presence – a woman, whose somber grace and quiet bearing gave distinction to her unobtrusive entrance, and caused a feeling of something like awe to follow the first sight of her cold features and deep, heavily-fringed eyes. But this soon passed in the more human sentiment awakened by the soft pleading which infused her gaze with a touching femininity. She wore a long loose garment which fell without a fold from chin to foot, and in her arms she seemed to carry something.

Never before had I seen so beautiful a woman. As I was contemplating her, with respect but yet with a masculine intentness I could not quite suppress, two or three other persons came in. And now I began to notice that the eyes of all these people turned mainly one way, and that was toward the clock. Another small circumstance likewise drew my attention. Whenever any one entered, – and there were one or two additional arrivals during the five minutes preceding the striking of the hour, – a frown settled for an instant on every brow, giving to each and all a similar look, for the interpretation of which I lacked the key. Yet not on every brow either. There was one which remained undisturbed and showed only a grand patience.

As the hands of the big clock neared the point of eight, a furtive smile appeared on more than one face; and when the hour rang out, a sigh of satisfaction swept through the room, to which the little old lawyer responded with a worldly-wise grunt, as he moved from his place and proceeded to the door.

This he had scarcely shut when a chorus of voices rose from without. Three or four lingerers had pushed their way as far as the gate, only to see the door of the house shut in their faces.

"Too late!" growled old man Luke from between the locks of his long beard.

"Too late!" shrieked the woman who had come so near being late herself.

"Too late!" smoothly acquiesced the lawyer, locking and bolting the door with a deft and assured hand.

But the four or five persons who thus found themselves barred out did not accept without a struggle the decision of the more fortunate ones assembled within. More than one hand began pounding on the door, and we could hear cries of, "The train was behind time!" "Your clock is fast!" "You are cheating us; you want it all for yourselves!" "We will have the law on you!" and other bitter adjurations unintelligible to me from my ignorance of the circumstances which called them forth.

But the wary old lawyer simply shook his head and answered nothing; whereat a murmur of gratification rose from within, and a howl of almost frenzied dismay from without, which latter presently received point from a startling vision which now appeared at the casement where the lights burned. A man's face looked in, and behind it, that of a woman, so wild and maddened by some sort of heart-break that I found my sympathies aroused in spite of the glare of evil passions which made both of these countenances something less than human.

But the lawyer met the stare of these four eyes with a quiet chuckle, which found its echo in the ill-advised mirth of those about him; and moving over to the window where they still peered in, he drew together the two heavy shutters which hitherto had stood back against the wall, and, fastening them with a bar, shut out the sight of this despair, if he could not shut out the protests which ever and anon were shouted through the key-hole.

Meanwhile, one form had sat through this whole incident without a gesture; and on the quiet brow, from which I could not keep my eyes, no shadows appeared save the perpetual one of native melancholy, which was at once the source of its attraction and the secret of its power.

Into what sort of gathering had I stumbled? And why did I prefer to await developments rather than ask the simplest question of any one about me?

Meantime the lawyer had proceeded to make certain preparations. With the help of one or two willing hands, he had drawn the great table into the middle of the room and, having seen the candles restored to their places, began to open his small bag and take from it a roll of paper and several flat documents. Laying the latter in the center of the table and slowly unrolling the former, he consulted, with his foxy eyes, the faces surrounding him, and smiled with secret malevolence, as he noted that every chair and every form were turned away from the picture before which he had bent with such obvious courtesy, on entering. I alone stood erect, and this possibly was why a gleam of curiosity was noticeable in his glance, as he ended his scrutiny of my countenance and bent his gaze again upon the paper he held.

"Heavens!" thought I. "What shall I answer this man if he asks me why I continued to remain in a spot where I have so little business." The impulse came to go. But such was the effect of this strange convocation of persons, at night and in a mist which was itself a nightmare, that I failed to take action and remained riveted to my place, while Mr. Smead consulted his roll and finally asked in a business-like tone, quite unlike his previous sarcastic speech, the names of those whom he had the pleasure of seeing before him.

The old man in the chair spoke up first.

"Luke Westonhaugh," he announced.

"Very good!" responded the lawyer.

"Hector Westonhaugh," came from the thin man.

A nod and a look toward the next.

"John Westonhaugh."

"Nephew?" asked the lawyer.

"Yes."

"Go on, and be quick; supper will be ready at nine."

"Eunice Westonhaugh," spoke up a soft voice.

I felt my heart bound as if some inner echo responded to that name.

"Daughter of whom?"

"Hudson Westonhaugh," she gently faltered. "My father is dead – died last night; – I am his only heir."

A grumble of dissatisfaction and a glint of unrelieved hate came from the doubled-up figure, whose malevolence had so revolted me.

But the lawyer was not to be shaken.

"Very good! It is fortunate you trusted your feet rather than the train. And now you! What is your name?"

He was looking, not at me as I had at first feared, but at the man next to me, a slim but slippery youth, whose small red eyes made me shudder.

"William Witherspoon."

"Barbara's son?"

"Yes."

"Where are your brothers?"

"One of them, I think, is outside" – here he laughed; – "the other is —*sick*."

The way he uttered this word made me set him down as one to be especially wary of when he smiled. But then I had already passed judgment on him at my first view.

"And you, madam?" – this to the large, dowdy woman with the uncertain eye, a contrast to the young and melancholy Eunice.

"Janet Clapsaddle," she replied, waddling hungrily forward and getting unpleasantly near the speaker, for he moved off as she approached, and took his stand in the clear place at the head of the table.

"Very good, Mistress Clapsaddle. You were a Westonhaugh, I believe?"

"You *believe*, sneak-faced hypocrite that you are!" she blurted out. "I don't understand your lawyer ways. I like plain speaking myself. Don't you know me, and Luke and Hector, and – and most of us indeed, except that puny, white-faced girl yonder, whom, having been brought up on the other side of the Ridge, we have none of us seen since she was a screaming baby in Hildegard's arms. And the young gentleman over there," – here she indicated me – "who shows so little likeness to the rest of the family. He will have to make it pretty plain who his father was before we shall feel like acknowledging him, either as the son of one of Eustace's girls, or a chip from brother Salmon's hard old block."

As this caused all eyes to turn upon me, even *hers*, I smiled as I stepped forward. The lawyer did not return that smile.

"What is your name?" he asked shortly and sharply, as if he distrusted me.

"Hugh Austin," was my quiet reply.

"There is no such name on the list," snapped old Smead, with an authoritative gesture toward those who seemed anxious to enter a protest.

"Probably not," I returned, "for I am neither a Witherspoon, a Westonhaugh nor a Clapsaddle. I am merely a chance wayfarer passing through the town on my way west. I thought this house was a tavern, or at least a place I could lodge in. The man I met in the doorway told me as much, and so I am here. If my company is not agreeable, or if you wish this room to yourselves, let me go into the kitchen. I promise not to meddle with the supper, hungry as I am. Or perhaps you wish me to join the crowd outside; it seems to be increasing."

"No, no," came from all parts of the room. "Don't let the door be opened. Nothing could keep Lemuel and his crowd out if they once got foot over the threshold."

The lawyer rubbed his chin. He seemed to be in some sort of quandary. First he scrutinized me from under his shaggy brows with a sharp gleam of suspicion; then his features softened and, with a side glance at the young woman who called herself Eunice, (perhaps, because she was worth looking at, perhaps because she had partly risen at my words), he slipped toward a door I had before

observed in the wainscoting on the left of the mantelpiece, and softly opened it upon what looked like a narrow staircase.

"We can not let you go out," said he; "and we can not let you have a finger in our viands before the hour comes for serving them; so if you will be so good as to follow this staircase to the top, you will find it ends in a room comfortable enough for the wayfarer you call yourself. In that room you can rest till the way is clear for you to continue your travels. Better, we can not do for you. This house is not a tavern, but the somewhat valuable property of – " He turned with a bow and smile, as every one there drew a deep breath; but no one ventured to end that sentence.

I would have given all my future prospects (which, by the way, were not very great) to remain in that room. The oddity of the situation; the mystery of the occurrence; the suspense I saw in every face; the eagerness of the cries I heard redoubled from time to time outside; the malevolence but poorly disguised in the old lawyer's countenance; and, above all, the presence of that noble-looking woman, which was the one off-set to the general tone of villainy with which the room was charged, filled me with curiosity, if I might call it by no other name, that made my acquiescence in the demand thus made upon me positively heroic. But there seemed no other course for me to follow, and with a last lingering glance at the genial fire and a quick look about me, which happily encountered hers, I stooped my head to suit the low and narrow doorway opened for my accommodation, and instantly found myself in darkness. The door had been immediately closed by the lawyer's impatient hand.

## II

### WITH MY EAR TO THE WAINSCOTING

No move more unwise could have been made by the old lawyer, – that is, if his intention had been to rid himself of an unwelcome witness. For, finding myself thrust thus suddenly from the scene, I naturally stood still instead of mounting the stairs, and, by standing still, discovered that though shut from sight I was not from sound. Distinctly through the panel of the door, which was much thinner, no doubt, than the old fox imagined, I heard one of the men present shout out:

"Well, that makes the number less by *one!*"

The murmur which followed this remark came plainly to my ears, and, greatly rejoicing over what I considered my good luck, I settled myself on the lowest step of the stairs in the hope of catching some word which would reveal to me the mystery of this scene.

It was not long in coming. Old Smead had now his audience before him in good shape, and his next words were of a character to make evident the purpose of this meeting.

"Heirs of Anthony Westonhaugh, deceased," he began in a sing-song voice strangely unmusical, "I congratulate you upon your good fortune at being at this especial moment on the inner rather than outer side of your amiable relative's front door. His will, which you have assembled to hear read, is well known to you. By it his whole property – (not so large as some of you might wish, but yet a goodly property for farmers like yourselves) – is to be divided this night, share and share alike, among such of his relatives as have found it convenient to be present here between the strokes of half-past seven and eight. If some of our friends have failed us through sloth, sickness or the misfortune of mistaking the road, they have our sympathy, but they can not have *his dollars.*"

"Can not have his dollars!" echoed a rasping voice which, from its smothered sound, probably came from the bearded lips of the old reprobate in the chair.

The lawyer waited for one or two other repetitions of this phrase (a phrase which, for some unimaginable reason, seemed to give him an odd sort of pleasure), then he went on with greater distinctness and a certain sly emphasis, chilling in effect but very professional:

"Ladies and gentlemen: Shall I read this will?"

"No, no! The division! the division! Tell us what we are to have!" rose in a shout about him.

There was a pause. I could imagine the sharp eyes of the lawyer traveling from face to face as each thus gave voice to his cupidity, and the thin curl of his lips as he remarked in a slow tantalizing way:

"There was more in the old man's clutches than you think."

A gasp of greed shook the partition against which my ear was pressed. Some one must have drawn up against the wainscoting since my departure from the room. I found myself wondering which of them it was. Meantime old Smead was having his say, with the smoothness of a man who perfectly understands what is required of him.

"Mr. Westonhaugh would not have put you to so much trouble or had you wait so long if he had not expected to reward you amply. There are shares in this bag which are worth thousands instead of hundreds. Now, now! stop that! hands off! hands off! there are calculations to make first. How many of you are there? Count up, some of you."

"Nine!" called out a voice with such rapacious eagerness that the word was almost unintelligible.

"Nine." How slowly the old knave spoke! What pleasure he seemed to take in the suspense he purposely made as exasperating as possible!

"Well, if each one gets his share, he may count himself richer by two hundred thousand dollars than when he came in here to-night."

Two hundred thousand dollars! They had expected no more than thirty. Surprise made them speechless, – that is, for a moment; then a pandemonium of hurrahs, shrieks and loud-voiced enthusiasm made the room ring, till wonder seized them again, and a sudden silence fell, through which I caught a far-off wail of grief from the disappointed ones without, which, heard in the dark and narrow place in which I was confined, had a peculiarly weird and desolate effect.

Perhaps it likewise was heard by some of the fortunate ones within! Perhaps one head, to mark which, in this moment of universal elation, I would have given a year from my life, turned toward the dark without, in recognition of the despair thus piteously voiced; but if so, no token of the same came to me, and I could but hope that she had shown, by some such movement, the natural sympathy of her sex.

Meanwhile the lawyer was addressing the company in his smoothest and most sarcastic tones.

"Mr. Westonhaugh was a wise man, a very wise man," he droned. "He foresaw what your pleasure would be, and left a letter for you. But before I read it, before I invite you to the board he ordered to be spread for you in honor of this happy occasion, there is one appeal he bade me make to those I should find assembled here. As you know, he was not personally acquainted with all the children and grandchildren of his many brothers and sisters. Salmon's sons, for instance, were perfect strangers to him, and all those boys and girls of the Evans' branch have never been long enough this side of the mountains for him to know their names, much less their temper or their lives. Yet his heirs – or such was his wish, his great wish – must be honest men, righteous in their dealings, and of stainless lives. If therefore, any one among you feels that for reasons he need not state, he has no right to accept his share of Anthony Westonhaugh's bounty, then that person is requested to withdraw before this letter to his heirs is read."

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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