Green Anna Katharine

One of My Sons

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Green A.

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Содержание

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BOOK I

THE SHADOW

I
THE CHILD, AND WHAT SHE LED ME INTO

Iwas walking at a rapid pace up the avenue one raw, fall evening, when somewhere near the corner of Fifty – Street I was brought to a sudden stand-still by the sound of a child's voice accosting me from the stoop of one of the handsome houses I was then passing.

"O sir!" it cried, "please come in. Please come to grandpa. He's sick and wants you."

Surprised, for I knew no one on the block, I glanced up and saw bending from the open doorway the trembling figure of a little girl, with a wealth of curly hair blowing about her sweet, excited face.

"You have made a mistake," I called up to her. "I am not the person you suppose. I am a stranger. Tell me whom you know about here and I will see that someone comes to your grandpa."

But this did not satisfy her. Running down the stoop, she seized me by the arm with childish impetuosity, crying: "No, no. There isn't time. Grandpa told me to bring in the first man I saw going by. You are the first man. Come!"

There was urgency in her tones, and unconsciously I began to yield to her insistence, and allow myself to be drawn towards the stoop.

"Who is your grandpa?" I asked, satisfied from the imposing look of the house that he must be a man of some prominence. "If he is sick there are the servants" – But here her little foot came down in infantile impatience.

"Grandpa never waits!" she cried, dragging me with her small hands up the stoop and into the open door. "If you don't hurry he'll think I didn't do as he told me."

What man would not have yielded? The hall, as seen from the entrance, was wide and unusually rich. Indeed, an air of the highest respectability, as well as of unbounded wealth, characterised the whole establishment; and however odd the adventure appeared, it certainly offered nothing calculated to awaken distrust. Entering with her, I shut the door behind me. In an instant she was half-way down the hall.

"Here! here!" she cried, pausing before a door near its end.

The confidence with which she summoned me (I sometimes wonder if my countenance conveys more than the ordinary amount of good nature) and the pretty picture she made, standing in the flood of light which poured from the unseen apartment toward which she beckoned me, lured me on till I reached her side, and stood in full view of a scene which certainly justified her fear if not the demand she made upon a passing stranger.

In the midst of a small room, plain as any office, I saw an elderly gentleman standing who, even to my unaccustomed eyes, seemed to be not simply ill, but in the throes of actual dissolution.

Greatly disturbed, for I had anticipated nothing so serious, I turned to fly for assistance, when the little child, rushing by me, caught her grandfather by the knees and gave me such a look, I had not the heart to leave her.

Indeed it would have been cruel to do so. The appearance and attitude of the sick man were startling even to me. Though in a state bordering on death, he was, as I have said, standing, not lying, and his tall figure swaying against the large table to which he clung, formed a picture of mental and physical suffering such as I had never before seen, and can never in all my life to come, forget. One hand was pressed against his heart, but the other, outspread in a desperate attempt to support his weight, had fallen on some half-dozen sheets or so of typewritten paper, which, slipping under the pressure put upon them, kept him tottering, though he did not fall. He was looking my way, and as I advanced into the room, his collapsing frame shook with sudden feeling, and the hand which he held clenched over his heart opened slightly, revealing a scrap of paper crushed between his fingers.

Struck with compassion, for the contrast was pitiful between his naturally imposing appearance and his present helplessness, I murmured some words of sympathy and encouragement, and then supposing him to be alone in the house with his grandchild, inquired what I could do to serve him.

He cast a meaning glance down at his hand, then seeing that I did not understand him, made a super-human effort and held that member out, uttering some inarticulate words which I was able to construe into a prayer to take from him the paper which his stiffening clutch made it difficult for him to release.

Touched by his extremity, and anxious to afford him all the solace his desperate case demanded, I drew the paper from between his fingers. As I did so I noted, first, that it was a portion of one of the sheets I saw scattered about on every side, and, secondly, that it was folded together as if intended for someone's private perusal.

"What shall I do with this?" I asked, consulting his eye over which a glaze was fast forming.

He let his own glance wander eagerly till it fell upon some envelopes, then it became fixed, and I understood.

Drawing out one, I placed the slip in it, and fastening the envelope, consulted his face with a smile.

He answered with a look so full of thanks, appreciation, and confidence that I felt abashed. Something of more than ordinary significance was conveyed by that look, and I was about to ask what name I should write on the envelope, when the faint sounds with which he had been trying to express his secret wishes became articulate, and I heard these words:

"To no one – no one else! To – to – "

Alas! at this critical moment and just as the name was faltering on his lips, his utterance failed. He strove for expression, but no words would come.

In a desperation, which was but the faint reflection of his own, I tried to help him.

"Is it for your lawyer?" I suggested; then, as he made no sign, I hastily added: "For your doctor? For your wife? For anyone in the house?"

He gave me one supreme look, raised his eyes, and for an instant stood in an attitude so expressive of joy and indefinable expectancy that I was astonished beyond words and forgot that I was in the presence of death. But only for a moment. While I was still marvelling at this sudden change in him, the child who was clinging to him uttered a terrified scream and unloosed her arms. Then I saw him sink, gasp, and fall forward, and, springing, caught him in my arms before his head could touch the floor. Alas! it was the last service I could render him. By the time I had laid him down he had expired, and I found myself, in no other company than that of a trembling child, bending above the dead body of a man who with his last breath had charged me with a commission of whose purport I understood nothing, save that under no circumstances and upon no pretext was I to deliver the letter he had entrusted to me, to anyone but the person for whom it was intended.

But who was this person? Ah, that was the question! Certainly my position in this house of strangers was a most extraordinary one.

II
THE YOUNG DOCTOR AND THE OLD

Meanwhile the child had started down the hall, and up the stairs, calling:

"Papa! Papa!"

Startled by this intimation of another person's presence in a house I had supposed to hold no one but ourselves, I hastily followed her till she reached the floor above and paused before a shut door. Here something seemed to restrain her.

"Papa's inside," she whispered.

If this was so, he was not alone. Laughter, quick exclamations, and the clink of glasses could plainly be heard through the door; and shocked at the contrast offered by this scene of mirth to the solemn occurrence which had just taken place below, I hesitated to enter, and looked about for some means of communicating with the servants who I now felt must be below. But here the terrified child, who was clinging to my knee, interposed:

"I do not think papa is there. Papa does not like cards. Uncle George does. Come, let's look for papa."

She dragged me toward the front of the house, entered another room, and seemed surprised to find the light turned down and her papa gone.

"Perhaps he is with Uncle Alph," she faltered, and, bounding up another flight of stairs, turned around to see if I was behind her.

There seemed no alternative left but to follow her till I came upon someone; so I hastened up this second staircase. She had already entered a room.

"O Uncle Alph!" I heard her cry. "Grandpa's lying on the floor downstairs. I cannot find papa. I'm so frightened," and she ran sobbing towards the young man, who rose to receive her in an abstraction which even these startling words failed to break.

For this and other reasons I noticed him particularly notwithstanding the embarrassment of my own position. He was a handsome man of the luxury-loving type, whose characteristics it would be useless to describe, since they were of a nature to suggest, rather than explain the extent of his attractions. I afterwards heard from such of my friends as were in the habit of walking the avenue with him, that he never failed to draw the attention of passers-by; something in his features, his carriage, or the turn of his head and shoulders stamping him as a man worth looking at, not only once, but twice. At this moment, however, I was not so much impressed by his good looks, as by his uneasy and feverish expression.

He had caught up a letter which he had been engaged in writing at our entrance, and as the child's appeal rang out, he crumpled it nervously in his hand, and dropped it into the waste-paper basket. As a certain furtive haste characterised this action, my attention was caught by it, and I found myself wondering whether it was a letter or memorandum he thus sacrificed to his surprise.

Meanwhile he seemed to be trying to take in what the little one wanted. Evidently he had not as yet noticed me standing in the doorway, and I thought it best to introduce myself.

"I beg your pardon," said I, "I am Arthur Outhwaite of the firm of Robinson & Outhwaite, lawyers. I was passing by the house when this child called me in to the assistance of her grandfather whom, I am sorry to say, I found in a very precarious condition in his study downstairs. If he is your father, you have my sympathy for his sudden demise. He died in my arms a moment ago; and having been the witness of his last moments, I could not leave the house without explaining my position to his relatives."

"Dead! Father?"

It was not grief, it was hardly astonishment which gave force to this brief and involuntary exclamation. It was something quite different, something which it shocked me to hear in his tones and

see sparkle in his eye. But this expression, whatever it betokened, lasted but a moment. Catching up the child in his arms, he hid his face behind her and rushed towards the door. Me he hardly noticed.

"Where is he?" he asked, ignoring or forgetting what I had told him.

It was the child who answered.

"In the den, Uncle Alph. Don't take me there; I'm afraid. Set me down; I want to find Hope."

He hastily obeyed her, and the child ran away. Then, and only then, he seemed to take in my presence.

"You were called in from the street?" he wonderingly observed; "I don't understand it. Where were my brothers? They were near enough to render him assistance. Why should a stranger be called in?"

This was a question for which I had no answer, so I made none. He did not seem to be struck by the omission.

"Let us go down," said he.

I opened the door which the little one had closed behind her, and proceeded toward the stair-head. From certain indistinct noises which I had heard during the foregoing short interchange of words, I expected to find the house in a state of alarm and everyone alert. But the card-players were still at their game on the floor below, and I was not surprised to see my companion pause and give an admonitory kick to the door through which such incongruous noises issued.

"Father's ill!" he shouted in a voice hoarse with many passions; and waiting for no reply, he rushed ahead of me downstairs, followed by some half-dozen partially sobered men.

Among these latter I noticed one whom I took to be the elder brother of him whom the little one had addressed as Uncle Alph. He had the same commanding appearance, the same abstracted air, and woke, when he did wake, to the same curious condition of conflicting emotions. But I did not have time to dwell long upon this feature of the extraordinary affair in which I had become thus curiously involved.

The alarm which had been so slow in spreading above, had passed like wildfire through the lower part of the house, and we found some half-dozen servants standing in and about the small room where the master of the house lay stretched. Some were wringing their hands, some were crying, and some, rigid with terror, stared at the face they had so lately seen with the hue of health upon it.

At our approach they naturally withdrew to the hall, and I presently found myself standing between the group thus formed and the three or four young gentlemen visitors who had not followed the brothers into the room. Amongst the latter I saw one whose face was not altogether unfamiliar, and it was from him that I gained my first information concerning the man to whose dying passion I had been witness, and from whom I had received the strange commission which, unknown to those about me, made my continued presence in this house a necessity from which the embarrassment of the occasion could not release me.

The dead man was Archibald Gillespie, the well-known stockbroker and railroad magnate, whose name, as well as those of his three spendthrift sons, was in every man's mouth since that big deal by which he had made two millions in less than two months.

Meanwhile one of the gentlemen who had accompanied the two Gillespies into the room where their father lay, came out looking very pale. He was a doctor, though to all appearance not the family physician.

"Will one of you go for Dr. Bennett?" he asked. "Bring him at once and at any cost; Mr. Gillespie cannot be moved till he comes."

Dr. Bennett evidently was the family physician.

"Why can't he be moved?" called out a voice near me. "Is there anything wrong? Mr. Gillespie was violently sick a month ago. I suppose he got around too quickly."

But the young doctor, without replying, stepped back into the room, leaving us all agog, though few of us ventured upon open remonstrance.

In another minute one of the men near me slipped out in obedience to the request just made.

"Is Mrs. Gillespie living?" I asked, after a moment spent in more or less indecision.

"Where have you come from?" was the answer given, seasoned by a stare I bore with what equanimity I could. "Mrs. Gillespie has been dead these fifteen years."

So! the letter was not meant for his wife.

Here I caught an eye fixed on mine. It was that of one of the servants who stood huddled about the doorway of what appeared to be a large dining-room on the opposite side of the hall. When this man, for it was a male servant, saw that he had attracted my attention, he made me an imperceptible sign. As he was old and grey-haired, I heeded the sign he made and stepped towards him. Instantly he greeted me with the whisper:

"You seem to be the only sober man here. Don't let them do anything till Mr. Leighton comes in. He is the saint of the family, sir."

"Is he the little girl's father?" I asked.

The man nodded. "And a good man, too," he insisted. "A very good man."

Was this honest judgment or sarcasm? I had heard that each of Mr. Gillespie's sons had given his father no end of trouble.

Meantime a silence deeper than that of awe had spread throughout the house. Feeling myself out of place and yet strangely in place, I drew aside into as inconspicuous a corner as I could find, and waited as all the others did, for the family physician.

While doing so I caught stray glimpses of my first acquaintance, Alfred Gillespie, who, fretted by some anxiety he could not altogether conceal, came more than once into the hall and threw furtive glances up the stairway. Was it the little girl he was concerned about? If so, I shared his anxiety.

At last the bell rang. Instantly, so great was the strain upon us, we all moved, and one or two bounded towards the door. But it was opened by the butler with that mechanical habitude such old servants acquire, and, though nothing could shake the calm deference of this trained domestic, there was something in the bow with which he greeted the newcomer which assured us that the man we so anxiously expected had arrived.

I had seen Dr. Bennett more than once, but never before showing so much anxiety. Whether from shock or some secret cause not to be communicated to us, this old and capable physician seemed to be in a condition of as much agitation as ourselves, and obeyed the summons of the young doctor who stood beckoning to him from the threshold of the little den, with an appearance of alacrity that nevertheless had an odd element of hesitation in it. I might not have noticed this under other circumstances, and am quite sure that no one else detected any peculiarity in his manner, but to me, everything was important which offered anything like a clue to the proper understanding of a situation in which I found myself so deeply, yet so secretly involved.

Mr. Gillespie's physician remained for some minutes closeted with the sons of the deceased and their young medical friend; then he came out. Instantly I saw from his expression that our fears or rather, those of the young doctor, were not without foundation. Yet he was careful not to raise an alarm, and in addressing us, spoke in strictly professional tones:

"A sad case, gentlemen! Mr. Gillespie has taken an overdose of chloral. We will have to leave him where he is till the coroner can be called."

A gasp followed by the clink of breaking glass came from the dining-room behind me. The old butler had dropped a glass he had just lifted off the mantel-shelf of the dining-room.

The doctor was at his side in a moment.

"What is that?" he demanded.

The butler stooped for the pieces.

"Only the glass Mr. Gillespie drank out of. He asked for wine a half hour ago. Your words frightened me, sir."

He did not look frightened; but old servants of his stamp possess a strange immobility.

"I will pick up these pieces," said the doctor, stooping beside the man.

The butler drew back. Dr. Bennett picked up the pieces. They were all dry. Evidently the glass had been drained.

As he came out he cast a keen but not unkindly glance at the group of young men drawn up in the doorway.

"Which of you was the witness of Mr. Gillespie's death?" he asked.

I bowed. I dreaded his questions, yet saw no way of evading them. If only Mr. Gillespie had been able to articulate the one word which would have relieved me of all further responsibility in this matter!

"You are the person who was called into the house by Mr. Gillespie's grandchild?" the doctor now asked, meeting my eye with the same expression of instantaneous and complete confidence I had seen on the features of his unhappy patient.

"I am," I replied; and proceeded to relate the circumstances with all the simplicity the occasion required. Only I said nothing about the letter which had been entrusted to me for delivery to some unknown person. How could I? There had been no encouragement in Mr. Gillespie's expression when I asked him if the note I had taken from him was meant for his doctor.

The account I was able to give of the deceased broker's last moments seemed to deepen the impression which had been made upon the physician by the condition in which he found him. Taking up the pieces of glass he had collected from the dining-room hearth, he sniffed them carefully, during which act the two sons of Mr. Gillespie watched him with starting eyes. When he laid them down again, we could none of us conceal our curiosity.

"You have something dreadful to communicate," murmured the elder son.

The doctor hesitated; then he glanced from one to the other of the two handsome faces before him, and remarked:

"Your brother is not here. Do you know if he is likely to return soon?"

"Where is Mr. Leighton?" inquired Alfred, turning towards the servants. "I thought he meant to remain home to-night."

The butler respectfully advanced.

"Mr. Leighton went out an hour ago," said he. "He and Mr. Gillespie had a few words in the den, sir, after which he put on his hat and coat and went out."

"Did you see your master at that time?"

"No, sir, I only heard his voice."

"Did that sound natural?"

The old servant seemed loath to reply, but feeling the doctor's eye resting imperatively upon him, he hesitatingly admitted:

"It wasn't quiet, sir, if you mean that. Mr. Gillespie seemed to be angry or very much displeased. He spoke quite loud."

"Where were you?"

"In the dining-room, sir, putting away the last of the dinner dishes."

"Did you hear what your master said?"

"No, sir; it was something about religion; too much religion."

"My brother attends too many mission services to please my father," explained Alfred in a low tone.

The doctor heard, but did not take his eye from the old servant.

"Was this before he took the glass of wine you have just told us he asked for?"

"Yes, sir, just before. It was Mr. Leighton who came for it. He said his father looked tired."

"Ah, and how came the glass to be back then on the dining-room mantel-shelf?"

"I don't know, sir. Perhaps Mr. Gillespie put it there himself. He never liked any litter on his study table, sir."

At this statement the older brother opened his lips, but I noticed he did not speak. There were no traces of intoxication about him now.

"I wish you would show me the bottle from which you poured the wine."

The butler, whose name I afterwards learned to be Hewson, led the way to a large buffet extending half across the dining-room wall. From where I stood in the hall-way I could see him pointing out a bottle of what looked like sherry. Suddenly he gave a start.

"That isn't the one," he cried, loud enough for me to hear. "The bottle I took out for Mr. Leighton was half-empty. This is quite full."

Again I saw the lips of the elder brother move, and again he refrained from speaking.

"I should like to have that bottle found," said the physician; "but no one need look for it now. Indeed, it would be better for us to wait for Leighton's return before making any further movement. George, Alfred, may I ask you to leave me alone with your father for a few minutes. And let the dining-room be cleared. I don't want to have to make any excuses to the coroner when he arrives. Your father has not died a natural death."

It was an announcement for which we had been in a measure prepared by the serious manner of the young doctor, yet it seemed to me it ought to have occasioned a greater, or at least a different display of feeling on the part of the two most intimately concerned. I looked for an exchange of glances between them or at least some hurried words of sorrow or dismay. But though all evinced strong emotion, no looks passed between them, nor did they make the least attempt at mutual sympathy or encouragement. Were they not on confidential terms? The moment certainly was one to call out whatever brotherly feeling they possessed.

"I shall have to make use of the telephone," Dr. Bennett now announced. "You must pardon my seeming disrespect to the dead. The occasion demands it."

And with one hurried look to see that his commands had been obeyed, and that the dining-room had been cleared of the huddling servants, he stepped back into the so-called den and closed the door behind him.

Next moment we heard his voice rise in the inevitable "Hallo!"

"I don't understand Dr. Bennett's strange demeanour," I now heard uttered in remark near me. It was George speaking in a low tone to his brother.

But that brother, with one of his anxious looks up the stairs, failed to answer.

"Father was in the habit of taking chloral, but I thought he always waited until he got to his own room. I never knew him to take it downstairs before," George went on in a low tone between a whisper and a grumble.

This time Alfred answered.

"He made an exception to-night," said he. "When I ran down to your door at half-past eight, I met Claire coming out of father's room with a bottle in her hand. She had been sent up after the chloral, and was taking it down to him."

George gave his brother a suspicious look.

"Did she say so?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Poor child! She will miss her grandfather. I wonder if she knows?"

I felt that I had no right to listen. But I was standing where the doctor had left me, and hardly knew how to withdraw till I had received my dismissal from someone in authority. Yet I was thinking of going farther front when the doctor came out again and, approaching me, remarked:

"This delay is probably causing you great inconvenience. But I must ask you to remain a short time longer. I presume you can find a seat in the drawing-room."

With a glance at the young gentlemen, I expressed my obligations for his courtesy, but did not make a move towards the room he had indicated.

Instantly, and with an understanding of my feelings which surprised me, George took the hint I had given him, and stepping forward, raised a heavy plush curtain at the left and begged me to be seated in the richly appointed room within. But I had hardly taken a step towards it when a diversion was created by the entrance into the house of a gentleman whom I at once took to be the third brother for whose presence all waited with more or less suspense.

He was sufficiently prepossessing in appearance to awaken admiration, but he bore no resemblance to his brothers. He seemed to have more character and less – well, I find it difficult to say just what impression he made upon me at this moment. Enough that with my first glimpse of him I felt confident that no ordinary person had entered upon the scene, though just what special characteristic of his personality or disposition would prove the emphatic one it was not easy to judge, at a moment's notice.

He had a downcast air, and to my eyes looked weary to the point of collapse, but he roused at the sight of a stranger, and cast an inquiring look at the doctor and then at the servants crowding in the passage beyond.

He evidently took me for one of his brothers' boon companions.

"What's amiss?" he demanded in some irritation – an irritation I was fain to construe into a total lack of preparation for the fatal news awaiting him. "What's the matter, George? What's the matter, Alph?"

"The worst!" came in simultaneous reply.

"Father is dead!" cried George.

"Took too much chloral," added Alfred.

Leighton Gillespie stood stock-still for a moment, then threw off his hat and rushed down the hall. But at the door of what now might be called the chamber of death, he found the doctor standing in an attitude which compelled him to come to a sudden stop.

"Wait a moment," said that gentleman. "I have to correct an impression. Your father has not died from an overdose of chloral as I had at first supposed, but from a deadly dose of prussic acid. You have only to smell his lips to be certain of this fact. Now, Leighton, you may enter."

III
WHAT A DOOR HID

It was a startling declaration, and the horror it called up was visible on every face. But the surprise which should have accompanied it was lacking, and however quickly the three nearest the deceased man's heart strove to cover up their first instinctive acceptance of a fact so suggestive of hidden troubles, I could not but see that the prosperous stockbroker had had griefs, anxieties, or hopes to which this sudden end seemed to those who knew him best, a natural sequence.

I began to regret the chance which had brought me into such close relations with this family, and felt the closed envelope in my pocket weighing on my breast like lead.

Meanwhile, he whom they called Leighton was saying in a highly strained tone, which he vainly endeavoured to make natural:

"May not Dr. Bennett be mistaken? There is the chloral bottle on the shelf over the fireplace. We are not in the habit of seeing it here. Does not its presence in this room argue that father felt the need of it. Prussic acid can only be obtained through a doctor, and I am confident you never prescribed him such a dangerous drug, Dr. Bennett."

"No, for it is totally inapplicable to his case. But you will find that he died from taking it, Leighton; all his symptoms show it, and we have only to determine now whether he took it in the chloral, in the glass of wine he drank, or by means of some other agency not yet discovered. I regret to speak so unequivocally, but I never mince matters where my profession is concerned. And, besides, the coroner would not show you this consideration even if I did. The fact is too patent."

They were now inside the study and I did not hear Leighton's reply, but when they all came out again, I saw that the latter had not only accepted the situation, but that he had been informed of the part I had been called upon to play in this matter. This was apparent from the way he greeted me, and the questions he put concerning his child's conduct during the last terrible moments of her grandfather's life.

As he did this I had a fuller opportunity for studying his face. It was the most melancholy one I had ever seen, and what struck me as being worthy of remark was that this melancholy seemed a settled one and quite apart from the present grief and disturbance. Yet he had been heavily shaken by his father's sudden if not inexplicable death, or appeared to be, which possibly is not quite the same thing.

"I do not understand why my father should have called anyone in from the street to witness his sufferings while he had sons in the house," he courteously remarked; "but having felt this necessity and having succeeded in obtaining such help, I am glad that chance favoured him and us with a person of such apparent good feeling as yourself."

I scarcely heeded him. I was pondering over the letter and whether I should pass it over to this man. But instinct withheld me, or rather my lawyer-like habits which happily acted as a restraint upon my natural impulse. I had received no intimation as yet that it was intended for any of Mr. Gillespie's sons.

"You will oblige us by waiting for the coroner?" he now went on. "He has telephoned that he will be here immediately."

"I shall wait," I said. And it was by his invitation I now stepped into the parlour.

A quarter of an hour, a half-hour, passed before the front door bell rang again. From the hubbub which ensued, I knew that the man we wished for had arrived, but it was a long while before he entered the room in which I sat, during which tedious interim I had to possess my soul in patience. But at last I heard his step on the threshold, and looking up, I beheld a spare, earnest man who approached me with great seriousness, and sat down near enough to indulge in confidential talk without running the risk of being heard by anyone.

"You are Mr. Outhwaite," he began. "I have heard of your firm and have more than once seen Mr. Robinson. Had you any acquaintance with Mr. Gillespie or his family before to-night?"

"No, sir; Mr. Gillespie was known to me only by reputation."

"Then it was pure chance which led you to be a witness of his final moments?"

"Pure chance, if we do not believe in Providence," I returned.

He surveyed me quite intently.

"Relate what passed."

Now here was a dilemma. Did my duty exact a revelation of the facts which I had hitherto felt obliged to keep even from the deceased man's sons? It was a question not to be decided in a moment, so I made up my mind to be guided by developments, and confined my narration to a recapitulation of my former plain account of Mr. Gillespie's last moments. This narrative I made as simple as I could. When I had finished he asked if Mr. Gillespie's grandchild had been present at the moment her grandfather expired.

I answered that she had been clinging to him all the time he remained erect, but shrank back and ran out of the room the moment he gave signs of falling to the floor.

"Did he speak to her?"

"Not that I heard."

"Did he say anything?"

"A few inarticulate words, no names."

"He did not ask for his sons?"

"No."

"For none of them?"

"No."

"How came the alarm to be spread?"

"I went up with the child and called the young men down."

Coroner Frisbie stroked his chin, still looking at me intently.

"Was there an empty phial or a piece of paper lying about on the study-table or on the floor when you went in?"

I started.

"Paper?" I repeated. "What kind of paper?"

"Such as is used by druggists and physicians in rolling up their prescriptions. The prussic acid which Mr. Gillespie has evidently taken must have been bought in liquid form. The bottle which held it should be lying about and possibly the paper in which it was wrapped. That is, if this poison was swallowed intentionally by Mr. Gillespie."

I recalled the exact look of the scrap of paper I had put into an envelope at this gentleman's request. It was not such a one as is used by druggists in wrapping up parcels, and I felt my breast grow lighter by a degree.

"I did not see any such paper."

"Where is the little girl?" he now queried. "I must see her."

I had made up my mind to one thing. If the child said that I had been given a paper by her grandfather I would acknowledge it and produce the envelope. But if she had forgotten the fact or had been too frightened to notice it, I would preserve silence in regard to it a little longer, in the hope of being shown a way out of my difficulty.

I was therefore not sorry to hear him ask for the little girl.

"I take it that you are not anxious to remain here," he now remarked. "If you will give me your address and hold yourself in readiness to obey my summons, I can excuse you for the night."

For answer I held out my card, and seeing that I had no further excuse for lingering, was moving toward the door, when Dr. Bennett came hurriedly in.

"I have found something – " he began, and then paused with a quick glance in my direction, as if questioning the propriety of proceeding further with his discovery in my presence.

The coroner showed no such hesitation. Hastening to meet the old family physician, he said:

"You have found the bottle or only the paper in which the bottle was wrapped?"

Dr. Bennett drew him aside, and I saw what looked like a small cork pass between them.

"Was it in Mr. Gillespie's study you found this?" queried the coroner. "I thought I had thoroughly searched the study."

The answer was uttered in the lowest of low tones, but I had no difficulty in catching the gist of what he said.

"It was on the dining-room floor, under the edge of the rug. A very suspicious fact, don't you think so? Mr. Gillespie would never have thrust it there. Some other person – don't know who – not say anything yet – shrink from seeing the police in this house."

The two doctors interchanged a look which I surprised in the large mirror opposite. But I gave no sign of having seen anything extraordinary. I felt too keenly the delicacy of my own position. Next minute we were all walking towards the hall.

"Silence!" came in admonitory tones from the coroner as we paused for a moment on the threshold. "Let us not disturb the young men any further than is necessary to-night."

At that moment we heard the cry:

"Where is Miss Meredith? Has anyone seen Miss Meredith? I cannot find her in any of the rooms upstairs."

"Hope! Hope! Where are you, Hope?" called out another voice, charged with feeling.

Hope! Did my heart beat faster as this name, destined to play such a part in my future life, was sounded in my ears? I cannot say. That heart has beat often enough since at the utterance of this

sweet monosyllable, but at that time – well, I think I was too interested in the alarm which this cry instantly raised, to note my personal sensations. From one end of the house to the other, men and women rushed from room to room, and I heard not only this name called out, but that of the child, which it seems was Claire.

"Cannot the child be found either?" I inquired impetuously of the coroner who still lingered in the lower hall.

"It seems not. Who is Miss Meredith?"

It was the old butler who answered him.

"She is the young gentlemen's cousin," said he. "She was a great favourite with Mr. Gillespie, and lived here like a daughter. They will find her somewhere upstairs."

But the prophecy proved to be a false one. Slowly the servants came creeping down whispering among themselves and looking very much frightened. Then we saw George descend shaking his head impatiently, and then Leighton, wild with an anxiety for which he had no name.

"She must be here!" he cried, thinking only of his child. "Claire! Claire!" And he began running through the great drawing-room where we knew she could not be.

Alfred had remained above.

Suddenly I recalled a fact connected with my own visit upstairs.

"Have they been up to the fourth floor?" I inquired of Dr. Bennett. "When I was in Mr. Alfred Gillespie's room on the third floor, I remember hearing someone rush through the hall. I supposed at that time it was someone going below. But it may have been someone going higher up."

"Let us go see!" the doctor suggested.

I followed him without a thought. As we passed Alfred's door, we could see him standing in the middle of the room in a state of rage which made him oblivious of our approach. He was tearing into morsels a piece of paper which had the same appearance as the one he had formerly thrust into the waste-paper basket, and as he tore, he muttered words amongst which I caught the following:

"Why should I write? If she loved me she would wait. She would not run away now, unless he – "

Dr. Bennett, with his finger on his lip, slid by. I hastened after him, and together we mounted the last flight.

We were now in a portion of the building as new to the doctor as to myself. When we reached the top of the stairs we found the whole place dark save for a little glimmer towards the front which proved to be a gas-jet burning low in one of the attic rooms.

Turning this up we looked around, opened a closet-door or two, then walked into the back, where the doctor struck a match. Two closed doors met our eyes. One of these upon being opened disclosed a well-furnished room, similar in appearance to those in front, the other an unfinished garret half filled with trunks and boxes.

"Well!" he ejaculated, as the match went out upon this scene. "This is a mystery."

"Hark!" I urged; "our ears rather than our eyes must do service in this emergency."

He took the hint, and together we listened till some sound – was it the breathing of a person concealed near us? – caused us both to start and the doctor to light another match.

This time we saw something, but the match went out before we could determine what.

Annoyed by these momentary flashes of light, I dashed back into one of the rooms we had left, and catching up a candle I had previously noted there, lit it at the gas-jet, and proceeded back with it to this garret room.

Instantly a sight full of the strangest interest revealed itself.

Crouched against the farther wall, with wide-extended eyes fixed full upon us, we perceived a woman, upon whose pallid face and risen locks terror or some other equally emphatic passion had so fixed its impress that she looked like some affrighted creature balked in flight by some dreadful, some unprecedented sight which held her spell-bound. That she was beautiful, in that touching, feminine

way which goes to the heart, did not lessen the effect of her appearance, nor were we unmoved by the fact that the child for whom the house had just been ransacked lay curled up and asleep at her feet.

"Who is it?" I asked. "Miss Meredith?"

The doctor pressed my hand. "We must be careful," he whispered. "She seems on the verge of delirium."

"The child shows no fear," I murmured.

Meanwhile the doctor was approaching the new object of his care.

"Why choose so cold a place?" he asked, smiling on the young girl who still clung, as if fastened, to the wall against which she had drawn herself. "Claire will catch cold; had you not better come downstairs?"

With a start she looked down at the little one resting at her feet, and her eyes showed a sudden intelligence.

"How did she come here?" she asked. "I did not call her."

"And how came you to be here?" he smiled. "Your white dress looks out of place in this garret."

She lifted herself straight up, with her back to the wall. Claire, who was thus dislodged from the place at her feet woke, and began to cry.

"I heard that Mr. Gillespie was dead," came from lips so stiff with fright or some other deep emotion that I wondered they could form the words. "I loved Mr. Gillespie, and I brought my grief here."

She was still standing pressed against the wall, her hands behind her; and disguise the fact as I would, I could see that her teeth were chattering with something more than cold, or even such fear as might follow the sudden death of a near friend and benefactor.

"Will you not come below?" urged the doctor, taking up Claire to his fatherly breast.

"Never!" her lips seemed to cry; but I heard no sound, and when the doctor, giving me the child, threw his arm about her and drew her away, she yielded pliantly enough, though with a steady look into his face I did not understand then nor for a long time afterwards.

At the stair-head we met Alfred. Perhaps he had heard us go up, perhaps he had simply thought of searching the attic himself. His recoil and the exclamation he made were simultaneous.

"You have found her!" was his cry, a cry which did not refer to the child. Then in reproachful tones: "Hope, why should you give us such a scare? Had we not enough to face without having our hearts wrung with terror for you?"

Her answer was a murmur. With the first moment of encounter with this man her face had become a mask.

IV
"HE DRANK IT *ALONE* "

In making this statement it is not my wish to create any special prejudice against Alfred. Indeed, I have no right to do so, for when a few minutes later his brother Leighton came running up the stairs at sound of his child's voice, I noticed the same recoil on her part, followed by the same impassibility. Nor did she show a different feeling when in the hall below George came forward with the inquiries her surprising absence had naturally provoked. From one and all she involuntarily shrank, but not without suffering to herself and an obvious attempt to hide this natural impulse under a demeanour more in accordance with her near relationship to these three men. In Alfred this chilling conduct awakened emotions only too easy to read; in Leighton, surprise, and in George, a distrust bordering upon a passion so fierce that he turned from white to red and from red to white in an instant. Evanescent expressions all of them, but important as showing the feelings entertained towards her by these men among whom she had been living for more or less time as a sister.

But of my personal sensations you have already heard too much, especially at this period of my story. Happily, I was able to hide them from other eyes, and simply showed a natural curiosity when Dr. Bennett, with a sly look in her direction, whispered in my ear:

"How came she to know of her uncle's death so soon after its occurrence? You say you heard her rush upstairs while you were in Alfred's room. That was very soon after you laid the old gentleman out of your arms. Is it possible that you had already met Miss Meredith? Did she share that first alarm with you?"

"Not to my knowledge," I returned. "My first view of her was in the attic with you. Yet she may have been somewhere in this great hall, or in some of the many rooms I see about us."

Meanwhile I was taking in her beauty, or what I must call beauty from the lack of any other adequate word. I believe she was not what people call beautiful. She did not need to be; her charm was incontestable without it; too incontestable, I fear, for the peace of mind of more men than Alfred and George Gillespie.

She was standing by the newel-post, in a position startlingly like that she had maintained above; and while I shrank from the doubts thus called up, I could not but perceive in the straightforward look of her eyes, and the fierce clutch of her hands behind her, that some determination was absorbing all her energies; a determination little in accord, I fear, with the attitude of simple grief she made such an effort to maintain. Leighton appeared to see this also, for he set down the child he had been straining to his breast, and approaching his cousin, plied her with a few hurried questions.

But the coroner, who had shown some embarrassment at the appearance on the scene of so young and charming a lady, advanced at this juncture and prevented the answer which was slowly forming on her lips.

"If you are Miss Meredith, Mr. Gillespie's niece and assistant, you are justified in your grief. Mr. Gillespie has passed away under very extraordinary circumstances."

Her hands which had been behind her, came suddenly together in front, but she did not shift her eyes from the point where she had fixed them. Perhaps she dreaded to encounter the gaze of the three young men grouped behind the man addressing her.

"Have those circumstances been related to you?" resumed Dr. Frisbie with the encouragement in his tone which her loveliness and sorrow naturally called forth.

"No."

The answer came quickly, and with a sharp accentuation which showed her to be a woman of force, notwithstanding the condition in which we had first found her.

"Then this little one had said nothing," he continued with a glance at Claire who had nestled again at her cousin's feet.

"Claire?" she exclaimed in evident surprise. "Claire?" and her eyes followed his till they fell inquiringly upon the child whose presence up to this moment she had probably not noticed. "No, she has said nothing; at least nothing that I have heard." And her hand went out as if she would urge the child away. But she did not complete the gesture, and I doubt if anyone understood her movement unless it was myself.

The coroner seemed anxious to spare her feelings. "Dr. Bennett will communicate to you our conclusions in this matter," said he. "I simply want to ask you when you last saw Mr. Gillespie."

"Alive?" she asked, her eyes stealing towards the door of the little den.

"Yes, miss; you surely have not seen him dead."

"I was with him at supper," she returned. "We were all there"; and for the first time she let her gaze fall on each one of her cousins in succession. "My uncle seemed as well then as at any time since his illness. He ate a good meal and drank – "

"And drank," repeated the coroner with a stern look behind him at the young men who had all moved at this.

"His usual glass of wine at dessert. He drank it *alone*!" she suddenly emphasised, her tone rising in sudden excitement. "I can never forget that he drank it alone."

A sigh or a suspicion of a sigh answered her. It came from one of her cousins, but I never knew from which. At its sound she shrank as if heart-pierced, and put up her hands – those tell-tale hands – and covered her ears; then she as quickly dropped them, and regarded the young men before her slowly, separately, and with a heartrending significance.

"I would so gladly have joined him in this attempt at old-time sociability had I but known it would have been his last," she said, and dropped her head again with a sob.

At this look and simple action a burden rolled from my heart. But upon the coroner and the physician lingering near my side, both look and words fell with a weight which made this investigation, if investigation it could be called, halt a moment.

"I do not understand you," observed the former after a momentary interval surcharged with deep emotion. "Was Mr. Gillespie in the habit of sharing his wine with those who sat at his board, that you feel the pathos of that lonely glass so keenly?"

"Yes. I never knew the dinner to close before without some sort of toast from one of his sons. It is the coincidence that affects me. But I should not have mentioned it. No one could have known that this was destined to be our last meal together."

She was looking straight before her now. Though it seems more or less incredible, she was evidently unconscious of having raised the black banner of suspicion over the heads of her three cousins. But the blank silence which followed her words appeared to give her some idea of what she had done, for with a sudden start and a change in her appearance which startled us all, she threw out her arms with the cry:

"You are keeping something from me. How did my uncle die? Tell me! tell me at once!"

Leighton sprang for his child, caught her up and fled with her into a farther room. George tottered, then drew himself proudly erect. Alfred, who had been gnawing his finger-ends in restrained passion, alone stepped forward to her aid, though in a deprecatory way which robbed him of a large part of his natural grace. But she appeared insensible to them all. Her attention was fixed upon the doctor, whom she followed with an agonising gaze, which warned him to be brief if she was to hear his words at all.

"Your uncle is the victim of *poison*," said he. "But we have reason to think he took it some time later than at the evening meal. Prussic acid makes quick work."

The latter explanation fell unheeded. She had fallen at the word *poison*.

V
HOPE

This was the proper moment for me to leave, or rather it would have been had it not been for the communication in my pocket which remained to be delivered. To go without fulfilling my duty in this regard or at least without stating to the coroner that I held in charge a paper of so much importance, seemed an improper if not criminal proceeding, while to speak, and thus give up to public perusal an enclosure upon the right delivery of which the dying man laid such stress, struck me as an equal breach of trust only to be justified by my total inability to carry out the wish of the deceased as expressed to me in his last intelligible appeal.

That this inability was an assured fact I was not yet convinced. An idea had come to me in the last few minutes which, if properly acted upon, might open a way for me out of this dilemma. But before making use of it I felt it necessary to know more of this family and the ties which bound them. To gain this knowledge was, therefore, of not only great but immediate importance; and where could I hope to gain it so soon or so well as here.

I consequently lingered, and the young medical friend of George, having for some reason shown the same disregard as myself to the open hint thrown out by the coroner, we drew together near the front door, and fell immediately into conversation. As he seemed on fire to speak, I left it for him to make the opening remark.

"Fine girl!" he exclaimed. "Very fond of her uncle. Used to help him with his correspondence. I hate to see women faint. Though I have been in practice now two years I have never got used to it."

Anxious as I was to understand the very relationship he hinted at, it was so obnoxious to me to discuss Miss Meredith with this man whom I had first seen in a condition little calculated to prejudice me in his favour, that somewhat inconsistently, I own, I turned the conversation upon Mr. Gillespie.

"Mr. Gillespie was then a very busy man," I observed. "I judged so from the look of his den or study. Overwork often drives men to suicide."

The glance this called out from the now thoroughly sobered young doctor was a sharp one.

"Yes," he acquiesced; but it was an acquiescence which, from the tone in which it was uttered, had a most suspicious ring.

My position had now become an embarrassing one. I looked around for the coroner, and saw him talking earnestly with the old and enfeebled butler, who seemed ready to sink with distress. At the same instant, the rattling of two keys could be heard in their several locks. The dining-room was being closed against intrusion, and it was to the coroner the keys were brought.

Miss Meredith, who had been carried into an adjoining room, was slowly recovering. This was evident from the countenance and attitude of Alfred Gillespie, who stood half in and half out of the room, with his eyes fixed upon her face. This left the hall clear, and, as my companion chose to preserve silence, I presently could hear the story the old butler was endeavouring to relate.

"I was waiting on the table as usual, sir, and it was my hand which uncorked the bottle and set it down before Mr. Gillespie. The young gentlemen had nothing to do with that bottle; they did not even touch it, for none of them seemed inclined to drink. Mr. George said he had a headache, and Mr. Leighton, well, he makes a point of not touching port; while Mr. Alfred gave no excuse; simply waved it away when I passed it, so that the old gentleman drank alone. He didn't seem to feel quite happy, sir, and that was why Miss Meredith got so excited. She never could bear to see her uncle displeased with her cousins."

"And where is that bottle of port and the glass out of which Mr. Gillespie drank at the table?"

"O, sir, you must excuse me, sir, but – but – I drank what was left in that bottle. I often do when there is only a little left. Master didn't mind. He often said, if he was in the mood to remember me, 'You may finish that, Hewson,' and though he did not say it to-night, I made so bold as to remember the times he had. You see I have lived for twenty years in the family. I was a young man when Mr. Gillespie took me into his service first, and we had become used to each other's ways. As for the glass, that was washed, sir, long ago. He was well enough up to nine o'clock, you see, sir."

"Or until after he had taken the sherry?"

"Yes, sir."

"Which you also brought him?"

"No, sir; I took it out of the buffet, sir; but it was Mr. Leighton who carried it into the den. He rang for me from the dining-room, and when I came up he asked for his father's bottle of sherry, and I gave it to him. Then I went downstairs again."

"And *that* bottle has not been found?"

"I have not seen it, sir. Perhaps someone else has. It was not a full one. He had had a glass or two out of it before."

"You have not said where the glass came from, from which Mr. Gillespie drank the sherry?"

"From the buffet also. We always keep a supply in one of the lower cupboards, sir."

"Did you take it out?"

"I think so, sir."

"Did you take the first one you came to and hand it directly to Mr. Leighton?"

"I believe so."

"Was the room light or dark? Could you see plainly where to lay your hand, or did you have to feel about for a glass?"

"I don't remember it as being any too light. There was only one gas-jet turned on, and the room is a big one. But I saw the glasses plainly enough. I know just where to find them, you see, sir."

"Very good. Then you probably noticed whether the one you took out was clean."

"They are always clean. I wear my spectacles when I wash them." The old butler seemed quite indignant.

"Yes, yes; then you have to wear spectacles?"

"When I wipe the glasses? Yes, sir."

The coroner pushed the matter no further. I think he feared it would seem like an attempt to fix the guilt on Leighton. Besides, he had no time to do so, for at this moment Miss Meredith appeared on the threshold of the room into which she had been carried, and, pausing there, stood looking up and down the hall with an ardent and disquieted gaze which Alfred, who had started aside at her approach, tried in vain to draw upon himself.

"Claire? Where is Claire?" she asked. "I want to put her to bed."

"Here she is," answered Leighton, coming from the drawing-room with the child fast asleep on his shoulder. "Take her, Hope, and be careful not to wake her. Better lay her down as she is than have her frightened again."

Hope held out her arms. I was startled at her aspect. "Miss Meredith is not able as yet to carry the child upstairs," spoke up the doctor; but the child was already nestled against her breast.

"I can carry her," she assured him, drawing her head back as the father stooped to kiss the child.

"Are you sure?" asked Alfred.

"Quite." Her arms had closed spasmodically over the child.

"Let me go with you," he prayed. But catching the coroner's eye, he quickly added, "that is, if you feel the need of any assistance."

Apparently she did not, for next minute I saw her faltering figure proceeding up alone, while the scowl which had begun to form on George's forehead had smoothed out, and only Alfred showed discomfiture.

The next minute the coroner had concentrated the attention of us all by saying gravely to the three young men before him:

"You, as sons of Mr. Gillespie, will surely see the justice of my making an immediate attempt to find out how and when your father took the poison, which, to all appearance, has ended his invaluable life." Then, as no one replied, he added quietly:

"A bottle is missing; the bottle of sherry from which he drank a glass since supper. Will you grant me leave to search the house till I find it? So little time has passed, it must assuredly be somewhere within reach."

"I can tell you where it is," rejoined one of the brothers. "I wanted a drink. I had friends upstairs, and I came down and carried off the first bottle I saw. You will find it in my room above. We all drank our share, so there can have been no harm in it."

It was George who spoke, and I now saw why his lips had moved when this bottle was first mentioned.

The coroner showed relief, yet made a movement singularly like a signal towards the rear hall which I had supposed vacant since the servants had been sent out of it. That he was speaking in the meantime did not detract from the suggestiveness of the gesture.

"You and your friends drank of it?" he repeated. "Very good. That settles one doubt." And he waited, or appeared to wait, for some event connected, as I felt sure, with the step we all could now hear moving in that hall.

Suddenly these steps grew louder, and a young man, evidently as much of a stranger to the occupants of the house as to myself, approached from the servants' staircase with a bottle in his hand.

Quietly the coroner took it, quietly he held it up before the last speaker, without attempting to explain or to apologise in any way for the presence of the man of whom he had just made such dramatic use.

"Is this the bottle you mean?"

That young gentleman nodded.

The coroner held the bottle up to the light. Only a few drops remained in it. These he both smelled and tasted.

"You are right," said he, "the contents of this bottle seem pure." And he handed it back to the man, who immediately carried it out of sight.

Leighton looked as if he would like to demand who this fellow was, but he did not. Indeed it seemed hardly necessary. His confident manner, his alert eye which took us all in at a glance, satisfied us that the event we had all dreaded had transpired, and that a detective had entered the house.

Noticing, but not heeding, the effect which this unwelcome intruder had produced upon the proud trio he held under his eye, Dr. Frisbie proceeded with the questions naturally called forth by the acknowledgment made by George.

"You were on this floor, then, previous to your father's death, possibly previous to his taking the draught which has so unfortunately ended his life?"

"I was on this floor an hour or so ago; yes, sir."

"Did you see your father or anyone else at that time?"

"No. To tell you the truth, I was a little ashamed of my errand. It was early in the evening for the social glass, so I just took the bottle off the buffet and went back."

"And the glasses?"

"Oh, I always have enough of them in my room."

The coroner's hand went in characteristic action to his chin. Evidently he found his position difficult.

"No poison in this bottle," he declared. "None in the one your old butler drained, and, so far as we are able to judge, none in the phial of chloral found standing on the study mantelpiece! Yet your father died from taking prussic acid. Cannot one of you assist me in saying how this came about? It will save us unnecessary trouble and the house some scandal."

It was an appeal which the sons of Mr. Gillespie could little afford to ignore. Yet while each and all of them paled under the searching gaze which accompanied it, none of them spoke till the silence becoming unendurable, Leighton made an extraordinary effort and remarked:

"My father was a proud man. If he chose – I say, if he chose to end his troubles in this unfortunate way, he would plan to leave behind him no sign of an act calculated to bring such opprobrium upon his household. He would have acted under the hope that his death would be taken as the result of his late sickness. That is doubtless why you fail to find the phial from which the poison was poured."

"Hum! Yes! I see. Your father had troubles, then?"

The answer was unexpected.

"My father had three sons, none of whom gave him unalloyed comfort. Is not this true, George? Is not this true, Alfred?"

Startled by the sudden appeal which, coming as it did from a man of great personal pride, produced an effect thrilling to the spectators as well as to the men addressed, the brothers flushed deeply, but ventured upon no protest.

"You and father have always been on good enough terms," growled George, with an attempt at fairness which gained point from the dogged air with which it was given.

This brought a shadow over the face which a moment before had shone with something like lofty feeling.

"I cannot forget that we quarrelled an hour before he died," murmured Leighton, moving off with an air of great depression.

Meantime I had taken a resolution. Advancing from the remote end of the hall where I had been standing with their young medical friend, I spoke up firmly, calmly, but with decision:

"Gentlemen, I have been waiting to see what my duty was. I have reason to think, notwithstanding my position as a stranger among you, that the clue to your father's strange act is to be found in my hands. Will you allow me, before explaining myself further, to request your answer to a single question?"

The surprise which this evoked, was shared by the coroner, who probably thought he had exhausted my testimony at our first interview.

"It is a question which will strike you as strange and out of place at a time so serious. But I pray you to show your confidence in me by giving me a straightforward reply. Was Mr. Gillespie a man of dramatic instincts? Had he any special powers of mimicry, or, if I may speak plainly, had he what you might call marked facial expression?"

In the astonishment this called out I saw no dissent.

"Father was a man of talent," Alfred grudgingly allowed. "I have often heard Claire laugh at his stories, which she said were like little plays. But this is a peculiar if not inappropriate question to put to us at a time of such distress, Mr. Outhwaite."

"So I forewarned you," I rejoined, turning to the coroner. "Dr. Frisbie, I must throw myself upon your clemency. When I entered this house in response to an appeal from Mr. Gillespie's grandchild, I found that gentleman labouring under great mental as well as physical distress. He was anxious, more than anxious, to have some special wish carried out; and being tongue-tied, found great difficulty in indicating what this was. But after many efforts, he made me understand that I was to take from him a paper which he held in his clenched hand; and when I had done so, that I was to enclose it, folded as it was, in one of the envelopes lying on the table before us. Not seeing any reason then for non-compliance with his wishes, I accomplished this under his eye, and then asked him for the name and address of the person for whom this communication was intended; but by this time his faculties had failed to such an extent, he could not pronounce the name. He could only ejaculate: 'To no one else – only to – to – ' Alas! he could not finish the sentence. But, gentlemen, while waiting here I have been enabled to complete in my own mind this final attempt at speech on the part of your father. Anxious to make no mistake (for the impression made by his dying adjuration not to deliver this letter into the wrong hands, was no ordinary one), I have not allowed myself to be moved by any hurried or inconsiderate impulse, to part with this communication even to those whose claims upon it might be considered paramount to those of a mere stranger like myself. But since seeing Miss Meredith, above all since hearing you address her by her name of Hope, I cannot help feeling justified in believing that this final communication from Mr. Gillespie's hand was meant for her. For when in my perplexity I pressed him to give me some sign by which I could make out whether it was intended for his doctor, his lawyer, or his household, he roused and his face showed an elevated look which I now feel compelled to regard as a dramatic attempt to express in action the name he could no longer utter. Gentlemen, I have described his action. What name among those you are accustomed to speak best fits it?"

"Hope," was the simultaneous reply.

"So I have presumed to think." And turning to Dr. Frisbie, I added: "I have been told that this young lady was in her uncle's confidence. Will you allow me to deliver this envelope to Miss Meredith, in accordance with the injunction I firmly believe myself to have received from Mr. Gillespie?"

There was a silence during which no movement was made. Then the coroner replied:

"Yes, if it is done in my presence."

I turned again to the young gentlemen.

"Commiserate my position and send for Miss Meredith," I prayed. "I feel bound to place this in her hands myself. If I make a mistake in thus interpreting the look given me by your father, it will at least be made under your eye and from unquestionable motives. With my limited knowledge of the family, I know of no one who has a better claim to this communication than she. Do you?"

None of them attempted a reply.

Dr. Bennett had already gone up for Miss Meredith.

VI
A HAPPY INSPIRATION

While waiting for this young lady, I surveyed the three Gillespies with a more critical attention than I had hitherto had the opportunity of giving them. As a result, George struck me as being the most candid, Leighton the most intellectual, and Alfred the most turbulent and ungovernable in his loves and animosities. All were under the same mental tension and in all I beheld evidence of deep humiliation and distrust, but this similarity of feeling did not draw them together even outwardly, but rather seemed to provoke a self-concentration which kept them widely apart. As I looked longer, Leighton impressed himself upon me as an interesting study – possibly because he was difficult to understand; Alfred as a good lover but dangerous hater; and George as the best of good fellows when his rights were not assailed or his kindly disposition imposed upon. None of them seemed to take any interest in *me*. To them I was simply a connecting link between their dead father and the letter I held in charge for Miss Meredith.

Meanwhile the coroner showed but one anxiety, and that was for the lady's speedy appearance and the consequent reading of the letter upon which all minds were fixed.

She came sooner than we expected. As her soft footfall descended the stairs a visible change took place in us all. Drooping figures started erect and furrowed brows grew smooth. Some of us even assumed that appearance of reserve which men unconsciously take on when their deeper feelings are stirred. Only Leighton acted in a perfectly natural manner; consequently it was in his direction her frightened glances flew when she realised that she had been summoned for some definite purpose.

"I don't know what more you can want of me to-night," she protested in a tone little short of a frightened gasp. "I am hardly fit to talk. But the doctor said I must come down. Why couldn't you have left me with Claire?"

"Because, dear Hope, this gentleman you see here, and who, as you know, was with my father when he died, says he has a letter, or some communication from your uncle, which he is sure was meant for your eye only. Do you think my father would be likely to leave you such a message? Have you any reason for expecting his last thoughts would be for you, rather than for his sons? Answer; we are quite prepared to hear you say Yes."

She had been trying to steady herself without laying hold of his arm. But she found this impossible. With an expression of deepest anguish she caught at his wrist, and then facing us, murmured in failing tones:

"He might. I have helped him lately a great deal with his letter-writing. Must I read it *here*?"

In this last question and her manner of uttering it there was an appeal which almost took the form of prayer. But it failed to produce any effect upon the coroner, favourably as he seemed disposed to regard her. With some bluntness, I had almost said harshness, he answered her with a peremptory:

"Yes, miss, *here*."

She was not prepared for this refusal, and her eyes, full of entreaty, flashed from one face to another till they settled again on the coroner.

"I cannot," she protested. "Spare me! I do not seem to have full use of my faculties. My head swims – I cannot see – let me take it to the light over there – I am a nervous girl."

She had gradually drawn herself away from Leighton. The envelope which had been given her was trembling in her hand, and her eyes, wandering from George to Alfred, seemed to pray for some encouragement they were powerless to give. "I ought to be allowed the right to read the last words of one so dearly loved without feeling myself under the eyes of – of strangers," she finally declared with a certain pitiful access of hauteur certainly not natural to one of her manifestly generous temperament.

Was the shaft meant for me? I did not think so, but, in recognition of the hint conveyed, I stepped back and had almost reached the door when I heard the coroner say:

"If the words you find there have reference solely to your own interests, Miss Meredith, you will be allowed to read them in privacy. But if they refer in any way to the interests of the man who wrote it, you will yourself desire to read his words aloud, as the manner and meaning of his death is a mystery which you as well as all the other members of his household must desire to see immediately cleared up."

"Open it!" she cried, thrusting it into the hands of the physician, who by this time had rejoined the group. "And may God – "

She did not finish. The sacred name seemed to act as a restraint upon the passion in whose cause it had been invoked. With her back to them all she waited for the doctor to read the lines to which she seemed to attach so apprehensive an interest.

It was impossible for me to leave at a moment so critical. Watching the doctor, I saw him draw out the paper I had so carefully enclosed in an envelope, and after looking at it, turn it over and over in such astonishment and perplexity that we all caught the alarm and crowded about him for explanation. Alas, it was a simple one! The paper concerning which I had endured so many qualms of conscience, and from the reading of which the young girl had shrunk with every appearance of intolerable dread, proved upon opening it to be an absolutely blank one.

There was not upon its smooth surface so much as the faintest trace of words.

VII
THE ELDERLY GENTLEMAN BY THE NEWEL-POST

This is surprising. Do you understand this, Miss Meredith? There is nothing written here. The sheet is perfectly blank."

She turned, stared, and laughed convulsively.

"Blank, do you say? What a fuss about nothing! No words, no words at all? Let me see. I certainly expected you to find some final message in it."

What a change of manner! The moment before she had confronted us, a silent agonised woman; now her words rattled forth with such feverish volubility we scarcely knew her. The coroner, not noticing, or purposely blind to the relief she showed, handed her the slip without a word. The brothers had all drawn off, and for the first time began to whisper among themselves. As for myself, I did not know what to do or think. My position, if anything, had changed for the worse. I seemed to have played some trick. I wanted to beg her pardon and theirs, and seeing her finally let the paper fall to the floor with an incredulous shake of the head, I began to stammer out some words of explanation, which sounded weak enough under the tension of suppressed excitement called forth in every breast by this unexpected incident.

"I feel – I am persuaded – you will not give me credit either for good sense or for the sincerity of my desire to be of service to you," I made out to say. "I certainly thought from Mr. Gillespie's actions, above all from the expressions which accompanied them, that he had entrusted me with a communication of no little importance, and that this communication was meant for Miss Meredith."

To my chagrin, my plea went unheeded: she was too absorbed in hiding her own satisfaction at the turn affairs had taken, and her cousins in deciding to what extent their position had been improved

by the discovery of a blank sheet of paper where all had expected to find words, and very important words, too. Consequently it fell to Dr. Bennett to answer me.

"No one can doubt your intentions, Mr. Outhwaite. Miss Meredith will be the first to acknowledge her indebtedness to you when she comes to herself. You have fulfilled your commission according to the dictates of your own conscience. That you have failed to effect all you hoped for is not your fault. As a lawyer you will rate the matter at its worth, and as a man of heart excuse the exaggerated effect it has to all appearance produced upon those about you."

It was a palpable dismissal, and I took it for such, or would have if Miss Meredith, whose attention the word lawyer had seemingly caught, had not honoured me with a look which held me rooted to the spot.

"Wait!" she cried, "I want to speak to that young man. Do not let him go yet." And advancing, she stood before me in an attitude at once womanly and confiding.

"Come back, Hope!" I heard uttered in the peremptory tones of him they called Leighton.

But though the spasm which passed over her face denoted what it cost her to disobey the voice of so near a relative, she stood her ground.

"I need a friend," she said to me. "Someone who will stand by me and support me in a task I may find myself too weak to accomplish unaided. I cannot have recourse to my cousins. They are too closely connected with the sorrows brought upon us all by this event. Besides, I find it easier to depend on a stranger, – one who does not care for me, as Dr. Bennett does; a lawyer, too; I may need a lawyer – sir, will you aid me with your counsels? I should find it hard to come upon another man of such evident sincerity as yourself."

"Hope! Hope!"

Entreaty had now become command; Leighton even took a step towards her. She faltered, but managed to murmur:

"You will not go till I have seen you again. You will not!"

"I will not," I rejoined, putting down the hat I had caught up.

The next minute she, as well as myself, perceived why she had been thus peremptorily called back.

The group around the newel-post had changed. A large, elderly man, with a world of experience in his time-worn but kindly visage, was standing in the place occupied by the coroner a moment before. He was bowing in the direction of Miss Meredith, and he held some half-dozen letters in his hand.

As her eyes fell on these letters he regarded her with an encouraging smile, and said:

"I am Detective Gryce, miss. I ask pardon for disturbing you, and I don't want you to lay too much stress upon my presence here or upon the few questions I have to put on behalf of the coroner who has just been called to the telephone. A few explanations are all I want, and some of these you are in a position to give me. You have been in the habit of using the typewriter for your uncle, I am told."

"Yes, sir."

"Did you use it for the writing of these five letters found upon his desk?"

"Yes, sir."

"To-night?"

"Yes, sir."

"At what hour?"

"Between dinner time and half-past eight."

This was the first time she had acknowledged having seen her uncle after dinner.

"So you were with him until half-past eight?"

"Yes, or thereabouts."

"And left him in the enjoyment of his usual health?"

"To all appearance, yes."

"Before or after your cousin Leighton came into the study?"

"Before."

"Why did you leave? Was Mr. Gillespie through with his work for the night?"

"I don't know; I don't think so, but I was tired, and he begged me to go upstairs."

"In his usual manner?"

"Yes."

"Not like a man anxious to have you go?"

"No."

"And when did the child come down?"

"Later."

"Not immediately?"

"No; a quarter of an hour or so later."

"Humph! The child was with him then a quarter of an hour before his death?"

"I suppose so; I do not know."

The detective waited a moment, then his hand closed over the letters.

"Miss, it is very important to know whether Mr. Gillespie anticipated death. This correspondence – you know it – a letter to Simpson & Beals, Attorneys, Dubuque, Iowa; another to Howard MacCartney, St. Augustine, Florida; this to the president of the Santa Fé Railroad; and this to Clarke, Beales & Co., Nassau Street, City. All business letters, I presume?"

"Entirely so, sir."

"And none of them, I judge, such as a man would write who expected to close all accounts with the world in less than an hour?"

"None."

How laconic she was for a girl scarcely out of her teens!

"From this correspondence, then, as you know it, he showed no intention of suicide?"

"On the contrary. In one of those letters, the one to Clarke, Beales & Co., I think, he made an appointment for to-morrow. My uncle was very exact in business matters. He would never have made this appointment if he had not hoped to keep it."

"Are you two in league?" the angry voice of George broke in. "Are you trying to make out that father died from violence?"

"In league?"

Did she say it or only look it? I felt my heart swell at her piteous, her agonised expression. Mr. Gryce, as he called himself, may have seen it, but he appeared to be looking at the slip of paper he now drew from his pocket, and which we all recognised as that which she had shortly before let drop.

"You see this," he said, "it looks like a piece of perfectly blank paper."

"And it is," she declared. "Why he should send it to me I do not know. It was given me in an envelope by the gentleman at the door, who says he got it from my uncle before he died. Everyone here knows that."

"Very good. Now let me ask from what sheet your uncle tore this scrap of paper? You recognise it as paper you have seen before?"

"O, yes, it is part of what is used in the typewriter. At least I suppose it to be. It looks like it."

"Sweetwater, bring me the typewriter!"

Sweetwater was the young man who had before shown himself in attendance on the coroner.

"O, what does this mean?" asked Hope, shrinking back.

An oath answered her. George had reached the end of his patience.

The placidity of the old man remained undisturbed.

Meanwhile the young detective called Sweetwater had returned with the typewriter in his arms. Setting it down on the library table, towards which they all immediately moved, he composedly

strolled my way. We were now grouped as follows: the family and some others in the library, Sweetwater and myself at the front door.

Naturally, from the point I have just indicated, I could not look into the library; but my hearing being good and that of the young detective still better, we both managed to get the drift of what was being said, though we could not note the speakers.

I had seen a slip of paper protruding from the machine when it was carried past me, and it was to this piece of paper Mr. Gryce first called Miss Meredith's attention.

"There's an unfinished letter here, as you see. Did you have a hand in writing it?"

She did not answer very promptly, but when she did, it was with a "No" which was startlingly abrupt.

"Ah! then there's someone else in the house who uses the typewriter."

"Mr. Gillespie. He often used it when he was in a hurry and I not by."

"Mr. Gillespie? Do you think it was he who wrote these lines?"

"I do. There was no one else to do it."

Was my imagination too active, or had her voice a choked sound which spoke of some latent emotion she strove to conceal?

"Then," suavely responded the detective, "we need no other proof of Mr. Gillespie's condition up to the time he worked off this last line. I doubt if you ever made a better copy yourself, Miss Meredith. But why is it torn across in this manner? Half of the sheet is missing, and some portion at least of the letter is gone."

A sudden gasp which could have come from no other lips than hers was followed by certain short exclamations from the others indicative of interest if not surprise.

"Shall I take it out? Or will one of you read it as it lies here? I prefer one of you to read it."

We heard a few stammering sentences uttered by George or Alfred, then Leighton's voice broke in with the calm remark:

"It is about some shares lately purchased in Denver. If you think it necessary to hear what my father had to say concerning them, this is a facsimile of what he wrote a half-hour or so before he died:

New York, N. Y., Oct. 17, 1899.

James C. Taylor, Esq.,
18 State St.,
Boston, Mass.
Dear Sir: —

In regard to the financing of the $10,000,000, mentioned in our conversation on the 12th inst., it is of the utmost importance that I am placed as soon as possible in full possession of the facts regarding the propert

The rest is torn off, as you say. Do you consider this letter important?"

"Not at all, except as showing the sound condition of your father's mind immediately prior to his collapse at ten o'clock. It is not the letter itself which should engage your attention, but the fact that this portion of it which has been wrenched off cannot be found. I know," he went on, before a rejoinder could be made by anyone in the startled group about him, "that a strip seemingly of this same paper was received by Miss Meredith in an envelope a few minutes ago. Indeed, I have it here. But though it was evidently stripped from this same sheet – from the bottom part of it, as you can see from its one straight edge – it does not fit the portion left in the machine. Some two inches or so of the sheet is lacking. Now where are these two inches? Not in the room from which we brought the typewriter, nor yet on Mr. Gillespie's person, for we have looked."

Silence.

"No one seems to answer," breathed a voice in my ear.

Had this shrewd and seemingly able detective expected a reply? I had not. Silence had too often followed inquiry in this house.

"It is a loss open to explanation," mildly resumed the aged detective. "It is also one which the police deems important. We shall have to search for that connecting slip of paper unless, as I sincerely hope, someone here present can produce it."

"Search!" a commanding voice broke in – that of Leighton. "We know nothing about it."

"It is a pity," rejoined the old man, with a mildness unusual in one of his class. "Such a measure should not be necessary. Someone here ought to be able to direct us where to find this missing portion of a letter interrupted by so stern a fact as the writer's death."

Still no answer.

"Had there been a fire in the room – but there was no fire. Or had Mr. Gillespie left the room – "

"Speak out!" the stern tones again enjoined. "You think some of us took it?"

"I do not say so," was the conciliatory reply. "But this scrap must be found. Its remarkable disappearance shows that it has more or less bearing on the mystery of your father's death."

"Then we must entreat you to use your power and find it if you can." It was still Leighton who was speaking. "George, Alfred, let us accept the situation with good grace; we will gain nothing by antagonising the police."

Two muffled oaths answered him; their natures were more passionate than his, or possibly less under control. But they offered no objections, and the next minute the old detective appeared in the hall.

One look passed between him and the young man loitering at my side. Then the latter turned to me:

"This is to be my task," he whispered. "I don't know the house at all. I hear that you have been up."

From whom could he have heard this? From Dr. Bennett? It was possible. Such fellows worm themselves into the confidence of warier persons than this amiable old physician.

"I have passed through the halls," I admitted, none too encouragingly. "But I don't see how that can help you."

"It's a four-story building, I suppose. All the houses along here are."

"Yes, it's a four-story house."

He rubbed one hand awkwardly against the other; indeed, his whole manner was awkward; then he walked slowly down the hall. When he reached the library door he stopped and looked in with a shy and deprecating air. Suddenly he began to back away. Someone was coming out. It was Miss Meredith. When she was in full sight and he brought to a stand-still by the wall against which he had retreated, he spoke, but not to her, though his eyes were fixed upon her in a sort of blank stare she may have attributed to the power of her beauty, but which I felt was of a character to make her careful.

"Four stories!" he muttered. "Parlour floor, first bedroom floor, second bedroom floor, and the attic! Where shall I begin? Ha! I think I know," he smiled, and passed quickly down the hall.

She had given an involuntary pressure to her hands when he mentioned the word attic.

I thought of the position in which I had found her there; of the doubts expressed by the doctor as to how she could have received an intimation of her uncle's death before an alarm had been raised or her cousins fully aroused, and felt forced to acknowledge that the police were justified in their action, great as was the spell cast over me by her loveliness.

That, justified or not, they meant to do their work, I soon saw. With a steady eye the coroner held us all to our places, while the young detective disappeared above, followed only by Leighton, who had asked the privilege of accompanying him for fear of some alarm being given to his little child who was upstairs alone. From the way Miss Meredith's eyes followed them, I knew there was something to be feared from this quest which she alone had the power of measuring.

What was I to think of this young girl who chose to be reticent on a subject involving questions of life and death! I would not probe my doubts too closely. I steeled myself against her look, resolving to be the lawyer – her lawyer – if required, but nothing more, at least till these shadows were cleared up.

Her two cousins remained in the library, to which Mr. Gryce had returned after making the signal to his man Sweetwater. We were all under great restraint with the exception of the doctor, who was chatting confidentially with the coroner. What he said I could in a measure gather from the expression of Miss Meredith's face, who was nearer him than I. That it served to intensify rather than relieve the situation was apparent from the gravity with which the coroner listened. Later, some stray words reached me.

"Had the greatest dread of poison – " This I distinctly heard – "Never took any medicine without asking – " I could not catch the rest. "Tell him symptoms – all the poisons – like a child – he *never* poisoned himself." This last rung in my ears with persistent iteration. It rang so loud I thought everyone on that floor must have heard it. But I saw no change in Alfred's restless figure hovering on the threshold of the library door a few feet behind Miss Meredith; while George, conversing feverishly with Mr. Gryce, raised his voice rather than dropped it as these fatal words fell from the lips of one who certainly had the best of reasons for believing himself in the confidence of his patient.

Miss Meredith, who was listening to something besides this conversation, fateful as it was, was meanwhile schooling herself for Sweetwater's return. I could discern this by the change that passed over her face just when his steps began to be heard; and was conscious of quite a personal shock when I saw her hand fall involuntarily on her bosom as if the thing he sought was *there* and not in the rooms above.

Cursing myself for the infatuation which would not let my eyes leave her face, I turned with sudden impulse into the reception room opening on my right. But I speedily stepped back again. Miss Meredith, who seemed to have gained some confidence by my presence, had feebly uttered my name. It seemed that the child had been heard to cry above, and that the coroner had refused to let her go up.

I made my way to her side, and, despite Alfred's scowls, entered into conversation with her, urging her to be calm and wait patiently for the detective's return.

"The child has its father," I suggested.

But this did not seem to afford her much comfort. She wrung her hands in her anxiety, and showed no relief till her cousin, followed by the watchful detective, was again seen on the stairs.

Then she took my arm. She needed it, for life and death were in the gaze she fixed upon the latter. And he – well, I had never seen the man before that night; yet I felt as certain from the way his feet fell on the stairs he so slowly descended that he had been successful in his search, and that the piece of paper which rustled so gently in his hand was the one Mr. Gryce had declared to be of such importance, and which she – but what man can complete a thought suggestive of distrust, while the hand of its lovely object presses warmly on his arm, and the eyes whose glance he both fears and loves rest upon his in a confidence which in itself is a rebuke?

I gave up speculation and devoted myself to sustaining Miss Meredith in her present ordeal. As Sweetwater reached the last step she murmured these words:

"I tried; but fate has rebuked me. Now I see my duty."

Her eyes had not followed Leighton's figure as he joined his brothers in the library, but mine did, and it did not make my heart any lighter to see from the glance he tossed her on entering that he was prepared for some event serious enough to warrant all this emotion.

"You have found what you have sought!" she cried, intercepting the young detective in her anxiety to end the suspense it took all her strength to sustain.

His smile was dubious, but it was a smile. Meantime the paper he held had found its way into the coroner's hands.

"Call Gryce!" shouted out that functionary, with a doubtful look at the slip in his hand; "I shall need his experience in deciphering this."

The detective was at his side in an instant, and together they bent over the scrap. The suspense was great, and the moment well-nigh intolerable. Then we saw the detective's finger rest on a certain portion of the paper they were mutually consulting, and remain there. The coroner read the words thus indicated, and his face showed both strong and sudden feeling.

"Ah!" he ejaculated. "What do you make out of that?"

The detective uttered a few low words, and taking the piece which had been in the envelope he fitted it to the one held by the coroner. We could all see that they were part of the same sheet.

"I should like to see if it also fits the portion that was left in the typewriter," suggested the other, ignoring the anxious looks bent upon him from every side. Passing by us all, he laid the three pieces together on the library table with a glance at the young Gillespies which was not without its element of compassion.

"Let us see it. What's on it?" urged Alfred. "Why, this is worse than father's death."

"If Miss Meredith will tell me how this central portion came to be on the attic floor, I will presently oblige you," rejoined the coroner.

She who of all present showed no interest in the completed sheet answered instantly, and without any further attempt at subterfuge or denial:

"I carried it there. I had come upon my uncle lying dead in his study, and thinking, fearing, that he had been struck while at the typewriter, I flew to the latter, and, lifting up the carriage, consulted the letter attached to it for some indication of this, and saw – George, Leighton, Alfred," she vehemently cried, facing them with a look before which each proud and spirited head sank in turn, "I do not know upon which of your three souls the weight of this crime rests. But one of you, one, I say, lies under the ban of your father's denunciation. Read!" And her trembling finger crossed that of the detective and fell upon a line terminating the half-finished letter which they had already partially read.

This was the appearance of that letter as now presented:

New York, N. Y., Oct. 17, 1899.

James C. Taylor, Esq.,
18 State St.,
Boston, Mass.,
Dear Sir: —

In regard to the financing of the $10,000,000, mentioned in our conversation on the 12th inst., it is of the utmost importance that I am placed as soon as possible in full possession of the important facts regarding the property covered by these bonds.

First, the actual cost per mile, and if such cost covers the necessary equipment for same both for freight and passenger service; also if these bonds are the first lien one of my sons he

"Those last words were written after he felt himself sinking under the poison," rang out in instinctive emphasis from her lips. "Contradict me, George! Contradict me, Leighton! or you, Alfred, if you can! It would give me new life. It would restore me – "

She was sinking, fainting, almost at the point of death herself, but not a voice was lifted, not a hand raised. This suggestion of crime had robbed them, one and all, of breath, almost of life.

VIII
THE MAN BEHIND THE SCREEN

Suddenly one voice rang out in passionate protest. "Hope! Hope! It was not I! It was not I!" And Alfred, leaving his brothers, stood before his young cousin, with self-forgetful gestures expressing a denial which was half-prayer.

George flushed, and his fist rose; Leighton drooped his head in shame – or was it sorrow; but the next minute he had that rebellious fist in his own clutch. Miss Meredith kept her eyes turned sedulously away from them all.

"I only want one of you to speak; the man who can exonerate his brothers by confessing his own guilt. Do not touch me!"

This to Alfred, whose hand had caught hold of her dress.

With an air of pride, the first I had seen in him, the youngest son of Mr. Gillespie withdrew from her side and took up his stand on the farther side of the hall.

"You are quick with your suspicions," he flashed out. "What sort of men do you think us, that you should allow an incoherent phrase like this at the end of a letter begun in health but finished in agony, prejudice you to the death against persons of your own blood? It would take more than that to make me think evil of you, Hope."

It was a natural reproach, and it told not only upon her, but upon us all. The words which had precipitated this situation might mean much and might mean little. Had the reputation of these young men been of a more stable character, or had no attempt been made to suppress this portion of the letter, suspicion would never have followed the discovery of this incongruous addition to the half-finished business letter found in the typewriter; "one of my sons he" – was that an accusation of crime? George and Leighton were on the point of asserting not, and Alfred had just begun to swagger with an air of injured pride, when Miss Meredith, recovering herself, laid her hand upon her bosom in repetition of her former action, and slowly drew forth a letter, the appearance of which evidently produced a new and still greater shock in the breasts of the three young men.

"I shall not try to vindicate myself," said she. "I have lived like a sister in this house, and you would have a right to reproach me if it were not for what I hold here. Alfred, you have complained that the few words left in the typewriter by your dying father were incoherent and unsatisfactory. Will you regard as equally meaningless this letter written four weeks ago? Sir," – here she turned to the coroner, – "my uncle was ill a month ago. It was not a dangerous illness, but the remedies given – Oh! Dr. Bennett help me to say it – were remedies we all knew to be dangerous if taken in too great quantities. One night – I cannot go on – he had reason to think his glass was tampered with, and after that, he wrote this letter, and charged me with its delivery in case he – he – Ah! I need not say in case of what. You have seen his dear head lying low in the room over there. Only, – as this letter is addressed to my cousins conjointly, will you allow them to read it without witnesses if they will swear to respect it and restore it in an un-mutilated condition to your hands? It is the only favour I ask you to show them, and this I humbly entreat you to grant, if only in recognition of what I have suffered at having precipitated this horror when I only meant to – to – "

She was sinking – falling – nay, almost at the point of death herself. But she reached out the letter, and the coroner, giving it one glance, handed it over to Leighton as the one least shaken by the calamity which had just overwhelmed the house.

"God forbid that I should deny to sons the privilege of being the first to read the last letter addressed them by their father."

But he made no move towards drawing the curtain between himself and the room from which he was retreating, nor could he be said to have really taken his eye off any of them during the reading of this long letter.

"You see I had need of a friend," murmured Miss Meredith, swaying towards me.

I gave her a commiserating look. Was ever a girl more unfortunately situated? Two at least of the men against whom she had felt forced to utter this denunciation of crime, loved her (or so I believed), Alfred passionately, George with less show of feeling, but possibly with fully as much depth and fervour.

"You might have held the letter back," I whispered.

But she met me with a noble look.

"You mean if I have not drawn suspicion upon them by my first subterfuge. But with so much in their disfavour, how could I calculate upon another opportunity of seeing them all together. And they must read it together. So my uncle told me. But he never thought it would be with police-officers in the house."

Here the coroner advanced to question her, and I am happy to say that my presence gave her courage to bear up under the ordeal. This was what he elicited from her.

She did not know what was in the letter. It had been written by her uncle while still on his sick bed and after an experience which I will not relate here, as it will be found more fully stated in the letter itself. This letter I will reproduce for you at once, though it was weeks before I knew its whole contents:

> GEORGE, LEIGHTON, AND ALFRED:
>
> I may not have been a good father, but I have at least been a just one. Though each and all of you since coming to man's estate have given me great cause for complaint, I have never been harsh towards you, nor have I ever denied you anything from mere caprice or from an egotistic desire to save myself trouble. Yet to one of you my life is of so little value that he is willing to resort to crime to rid himself of me. Does this shock you, Leighton, George, Alfred? We are a Christian family, members of an honourable community, trained each and all in religious principles, you, by the best, the sweetest of mothers – does it move you to think that one of you could contemplate parricide and even attempt it? It moves me; and in two of you must awaken a horror, the anticipation of which affords me the sole comfort now remaining to my doomed and miserable life. For nothing will ever make me believe that this act was a concerted one or that the attempt which has just been made upon my life had its birth in more than one dark breast. One guilty soul there is among you, but only one; and lest to the remaining two the accusation I have just made may seem fanciful, unreal, the result of nightmare or the effect of fever, I will relate what happened in this room last night, just as I related it to Hope when she asked me this morning why I seemed so loath to see you before you went out to your several lounging places.
>
> I was dozing. The lamp which since my illness has never been turned out in my room, threw great shadows on wall and ceiling. I seemed conscious of these shadows, though I was half asleep, but not so conscious that I was not aware of the light shining through the transom from the gas jet near the top of the stairs. This light has always been company for me, especially in wakeful nights or when I found myself troubled by dreams or any physical distress. It seemed to connect me with the rest of the house, and simple as it may seem to you, accounts for the cheerfulness with which I have declined the offers of my sons to sit with me during these last painful nights. I had no need of their company while this light shone; and as for pain – why, that is an evil which all men are called upon sooner or later to endure.
>
> I was resting then, in this mild reflected light, when suddenly it went out. This woke me, for the orders are strict that this jet be left burning till the servants come downstairs in the morning. But I did not stir in my bed; I simply listened. Though

aroused and somewhat disturbed by this palpable disregard of my wishes, I exerted all of my faculties to detect the step I now heard loitering about my door. But it was studiously cautious and made no distinct sound in my ear. I did not like this, and listened still more intently, whereupon I heard the door open and someone come in, softly, and with long pauses such as were not wont to accompany the entrance of any member of my household. I was deciding whether to raise an alarm or lie still and let myself be robbed of the money which I had just received from the bank, when I heard the whispered "Father" with which one and all of you approach me at night when you wish to ascertain if I am asleep or awake.

Why did I hear myself called and yet make no reply? What was in my heart, or what have I seen of late in your natures or conduct, that I should remain quiet under this appeal and lie there shut-eyed and watchful? I had no definite reason for doubting any of you. I knew you were in debt and that two of you at least were in crying need of money, but I hardly think I dreaded the rifling of my desk by the hands of one of my sons. Yet that approach so gentle and so measured! the drawn-in breath! the shadow that grew and grew upon the wall! – all these spoke of something quite different from the anxiety of a son keeping watch over a sick father's slumbers.

The desk was near the window towards which my eyes were turned in open watchfulness, and I hoped by lying still to catch sight of the intruder's figure at the moment of his passing between me and the faint illumination made on the curtains by the street lamp opposite. But the intruder did not advance in that direction. He passed instead to the little cupboard over the wash-stand, where, as you all know, my medicines are kept. This I was made aware of by the faint click made by one bottle striking another. "George has come home ill, or Leighton has one of his terrible headaches," was the soothing thought which then came to me, and I found it difficult not to speak out and ask who was sick and what bottle was wanted. But the something which from the first had acted in the way of restraint upon me, held me still, and I remained dumb while that sneaking hand continued to fumble among the phials and glasses. Suddenly a fear struck me, a fear so far removed from any which I had ever before known, that my whole attitude of thought towards my sons must have undergone an instantaneous change – a gulf opening where an instant before was confidence and love. The medicine was kept there from which my nightly dose was prepared; a medicine which you have all heard declared by my physician to be a deadly poison, which must be measured most carefully and given in only such doses as he had prescribed. Could it be that my son was feeling about for this? Had George bet once too often on that mare which will be his ruin, or Leighton found his religion an insufficient cloak for indiscretions which ever shunned the light of day; or Alfred – the child of my heart, he whom his dying mother placed as a last trust in my arms – confounded the *ennui* of inaction with that weariness of life which is the bane of rich men's sons? I know the despairs that come in youth, and I quaked where I lay; but it was not upon self-destruction that this man at the cupboard was bent. I felt my whole frame tremble and my heart sink in unutterable despair as he advanced, still quietly and with great pauses, up to the foot-board of my bed, then around to the side, protected, as you know, by a screen, till he crouched out of sight, but within reach of the small table where my glass stands with the spoon beside it, ready for my use if I grow restless and weary.

To have turned, to have intercepted the creeping figure in its work, and thus have known definitely and forever which one of you had thus furtively visited my medicine cabinet before proceeding to my bedside, might have been the natural

course with some; but it was not my course. I was not content just to interrupt. I wanted to know the full extent of what I had to fear. A remark which Dr. Bennett had once let fall recurred to me, transfixing me to my bed. "If you were not a careful man," he had said in diagnosing my present illness, "I should say that you had taken something foreign into your system; something which has no business there; something which under other circumstances and in another man's case I should denominate *poison*." It had seemed nonsense to me at the time, and I laughed at what I considered a fatuous remark, uttered with unnecessary gravity; but now that there was really poison in the house, and one of my own blood stood hiding behind the screen within a foot of my medicine glass, I could not but choke down the cry which this thought caused to rise in my throat and listen for what might come. Alas! I was destined to behold with my eyes as well as hear with my ears the next move made by my unknown visitant. By the grace of God or through some coincidence equally providential, the gas at this momentous instant was relit in the hall, and I perceived, amid the old shadows thus called out upon the wall, a new one – that of a hand holding a bottle, which, projecting itself beyond the straight line cast by the screen, was now stealing slowly but surely in the direction of the table on which stood my glass of medicine. I did not gasp or cry. Thought, feeling, consciousness even of my own unfathomable misery seemed lost in the one instinct – to watch that hand. Would it falter? Should I see it tremble or hesitate in its short passage across the faintly illumined space upon which my eyes were fixed? Yes, some monition of conscience, some secret fear or filial remembrance made it pause for an instant; but even as my heart bounded in glad relief and human feelings began to re-awake in my frozen breast, it steadied and passed on, and though I could no longer see aught but a shadowy arm, I could hear one – two – three – a dozen drops falling into my drink – a sound which, faint as it was, made the guilty heart behind the screen quake; for the hand shook as it retreated, and I beheld distinctly outlined on the illumined space before me the end of the semi-detached label which marked the special bottle on which the word *poison* is printed in large letters.

No further doubt was possible. The medicine in my glass had been strengthened and by the hand of one of my sons.

Which one?

In the misery of the moment I felt as if I did not care. That any of you should seek my death was an overwhelming grief to me. But as thought and reason returned, the wild desire to know just what and whom I had to fear seized me in the midst of my horror, mixed with another sentiment harder to explain, and which I can best characterise as a feeling of dread lest I should betray my suspicions and so raise between my children and myself an insurmountable barrier.

Subduing my emotion and summoning to my aid all the powers of acting with which I have been by nature endowed, I moved restlessly under the clothes, calling out in a sort of sleepy alarm:

"Who's there? Is it you, George? If so, reach me my medicine."

But no George stepped forth.

"Leighton?" I cried petulantly. "Surely I hear one of you in the room." But my son Leighton did not reply.

I did not call for Alfred. I could not! He was the last son of his mother.

Did I wrong the others in not uttering his name also?

Meantime all was quiet behind the screen. Then I heard a quick movement, followed by the shutting of a door, and I realised that an escape had been effected

from the room in a way I had not calculated on – that is, by means of the dressing-room opening out of the alcove in which my bed stands.

I had thought myself a weak man up to that hour; but when I heard that door close, I bounded to my feet and attempted to reach the hall before the man who had thus escaped me could find refuge in any of the adjoining rooms. But I must have fallen insensible almost immediately, for when I came to myself I found the foot-board of the bed within reach of my hand, and the clock on the point of striking two.

I dragged myself up and staggered back to bed. I had neither the courage nor the strength to push the matter further at that time. Indeed, I felt a sort of physical fear, probably the result of illness, which made it quite impossible for me to traverse the halls and creep from room to room seeking for guilt in eyes whose expression up to this unhallowed hour had betrayed nothing worse than a reckless disregard of my wishes.

Yet it was torment unspeakable to lie there in an uncertainty which threw a cloud over all my sons. For hours my thoughts ran the one gamut, George, Leighton, Alfred, clinging agonisedly to each beloved name in turn, only to drop into a dreadful uncertainty as I remembered the temptations besetting each one of you, and the readiness with which you all, from the oldest to the youngest, have ever succumbed to them. There was no determining point in the character of any of you which made me able to say in this solitary and awful communion with my own fears, "This one at least is innocent!" If I dwelt on George's generous good nature, I also recalled his wild extravagance and the debts he so recklessly heaps up at every turn he makes in this God-forsaken city; if some recollection of Leighton's strict ways in open matters of conscience came to soothe me, there instantly came with it the remembrance of the various tales which had reached my ears of certain secret attachments which drew him into circles where crime is more than a suggestion, and murder a possible attendant upon every feast. Then Alfred – youngest of all but the least youthful in his attitude towards the world and his fellow-men – what honourable ambition had he ever shown calculated to give me solace at this awful time, and make the association of his name with a damnable crime an impossibility and an outrage?

Meanwhile, my whole mental vision was clouded with the pictured remembrances of your faces as seen in childhood, in early youth, or at any other time, indeed, than the intolerable present. George's, when he brought home his first school medal; Leighton's, when he denied himself a new pair of skates that he might give the money to a crying street urchin; Alfred's, when the fever left him and his cheeks grew rosy again with renewed health. All these young and innocent faces crowded about me, awakening poignant suggestions of the change which a few short, short years had wrought in relations which once seemed warm and alive with promise. Then, a group of frank-eyed boys; now, – this awful question: *which?*

It was not till an hour had passed that I remembered that the phial had not been returned to the cabinet. In whose possession would it be found? Should I have a search made for it? I turned cold in bed at the debasing, the intolerable prospect of acting as detective in my own house. Then the poisoned glass! it still stood beside me; if I left it untouched it would show suspicion on my part, and suspicion might precipitate my doom. How could I avoid taking it without raising doubts as to my discovery of the trick which had been played so near me? In the feverish condition of my mind but one plan suggested itself. Throwing out my arm, I precipitated the glass to the floor, over which I heard it roll, with extraordinary sensations. Then I waited for daybreak, in much the same condition of mind in which a man awaits his last

hour; for my heart yearned over my sons even while panting under the consciousness that one of them was a monster of ingratitude and innate depravity.

When Hewson and the girls came down, and I heard the stir of life in the house, I rang my bell and asked for Hope. She came in with beaming face and a smile full of happiness. She had risen from a beauty sleep and, possibly because my thoughts had been so dark, I had never seen her look so bright and lovely. But her cheeks paled as she approached my bedside and noticed my miserable appearance; and it was with sudden anxiety she cried:

"What a wretched night you must have had, uncle! You look poorly this morning. You should have sent for me before."

Again I summoned up all my powers of acting.

"I knocked over my medicine in the night. Perhaps that is why I look so wretched. I did not sleep after four. You can say so, if any of the boys ask after me at the breakfast table."

With a woman's solicitude she moved around to my side, where the screen stood.

"Why, what's this?" she exclaimed, stooping as her foot encountered some small object.

I expected her to lift the glass. Instead of that she lifted the bottle. It had been left there on the floor and not carried out of the room, as I had naturally supposed.

I endeavoured to look undisturbed and as if this bottle had been thrown over with the glass, but I failed pitiably. At the sight of her dear, womanly face and the affection beaming in every look, I broke down and raised my arms imploringly towards her.

"Come to my arms!" I prayed. "Let me feel one true head on my breast."

The next minute I was conscious of having said a word too much. Her look, which you all know and love, changed, and, while she submitted to my caresses and even warmly returned them, it was with an appearance of doubt which I almost cursed myself for having roused in that innocent breast.

"Why one true heart?" she repeated. "Are there not others in this house? George and Alfred love you devotedly; and little Claire – what child could show more fondness for a grandfather than she?"

Why had she not included Leighton?

I endeavoured to right myself with some mechanical phrase or other, but the attempt was not very successful, and she was leaving the room in great disturbance when I called her hurriedly back.

"I want you to smile as usual," I gravely enjoined. "George's extravagances and Alfred's caprices are no new story to you. I have been thinking about them, that is all, but I had rather they did not know it."

I could not mention Leighton's name, either.

Meantime she was standing there with the poison bottle in her hand. I could not bear to look at it, and motioned her to restore it to the cabinet. As she did so, I perceived her turn with half-open lips, as if about to ask some question. But she either lacked the courage or the will to do so, for she proceeded to the cabinet with the bottle, which she placed quietly on the shelf. But almost instantly she took it up again.

"Why, uncle," she cried, "there is not as much here as there ought to be! I am sure the bottle was half full last night."

And then I remembered it was she who prepared my medicine for me.

"And I left it on the shelf," she went on. "Uncle, how came it to be lying by the side of your bed? Did you try to strengthen the dose? You know you ought not to; Dr. Bennett said that three drops in half a glass of water were all you could take with safety."

I had not a word to say. My mind seemed a blank, and no excuse presented itself. The wish which I had openly cherished of seeing Hope married to one of my sons clogged my faculties. My protest confined itself to a slow shake of the head and a dubious smile she was far from understanding.

"I think I will stay with you," she gently suggested. "Nellie will bring my breakfast up with yours, and we can have a *tête-à-tête* meal at your bedside."

But this did not chime in with my plans.

"No," said I. "Nellie can stay with me if you wish, but I want you to go down. Your cousins will miss you if you are not there to pour the coffee for them. Alfred shows an astonishing punctuality of late, and George quite emulates his younger brother's precision and haste. Leighton was never late."

Her cheek grew the colour of a rose. Never before had I so much as suggested to her the secret wish you have one and all entertained ever since her beauty and affectionate nature brought sunshine into this cold dwelling.

I was glad to see this colour; at the same time I was made poignantly wretched by what it suggested. If Hope loved one of my sons, and he should be the one who had – I felt more than ever called upon to act warily. Here was someone besides myself to think of. Your mother is dead and in Paradise, but Hope is young and the crushing weight under which I staggered could not well be borne by her. For her sake if not for my own, I must locate the plague-spot that to my mind spread defilement over all my sons. I must know which of you to trust and which to fear; and that no mistake should follow my attempt at this, I made haste to insure that no warning should reach you through any change in Hope's manner. So I reiterated my old command.

"Let me see you smile," said I, "or I shall think you regard me as being in worse condition than I really am. Indeed, I am almost well, Hope. My disease has yielded to Dr. Bennett's treatment, and when I can rise above these sickly fancies, which are the effect, no doubt, of the powerful remedies I have taken, I shall be quite like my old self. After breakfast let me see you here again. I may have some letters requiring an immediate answer."

My natural tones reassured her. The force of my feelings had brought some colour into my cheeks, and I probably looked less ghastly. She turned away with a smile. Alas! her face renewed its brightness and shone with sweet expectancy as she approached the door.

Nellie brought me my breakfast and I forced myself to eat it. My mind was regaining its equilibrium and my will its power. Just as I was folding my napkin, Hewson came in. He had brought me an especial tid-bit, prepared in the chafing dish by Hope's own hands. But I could not eat it. The thought would rise that she had seen far enough into my mind to imagine I would dread eating anything she had not cooked for me herself. As Hewson was withdrawing, I asked if you were all well. His answer was an astonished Yes. At which I ventured to remark that I had heard someone up in the night. "That was Miss Meredith," he explained. "I heard her tell Mr. George at the breakfast table that she came down to your door about one in the morning to listen if you were quiet. She said she found the gas blown out

in the hall, and that she lit it again. I had left the sky-light open; it don't do these windy nights, sir."

I was disturbed by this discovery. That she should have been at the door at a moment so fraught with danger and misery to myself was a thrilling thought; besides, might she not have been so happy or so unhappy as to have caught a glimpse of the man who crept out of my dressing-closet a moment later! Overcome by a possibility which might settle the whole question for me, I let Hewson go in silence; and when Hope came back, drew her gently but resolutely down on the bed at my side and said to her with a smile:

"I have just learned how my dear girl watches over her uncle's slumbers. You are too careful of me; I had rather have you sleep. George's room is on this floor; let him come and see how I am in the night, if you are so uneasy."

"George would never wake up without assistance," said she. "I could not trust you to his tender care, well meaning as he is."

"Leighton, then. He's a light sleeper. I have often heard you say that you have heard him pacing the floor of his room as late as three in the morning."

"But he sleeps better now. Alfred might stop on his way in; but Alfred does not stay out as late as he used to. He comes in quite regularly since you have been ill."

Were her eyes quite true? Yes, they were as true as the sky they mirror. I grasped her hand and ventured upon a vital question.

"Who was up at the same time you were last night? I am sure I heard a man's step in the hall, just about the time you relighted the gas."

"Did you know about the gas?" she asked. "I found it smelling dreadfully. But I didn't encounter anyone in the hall. I guess you imagined that, uncle."

"Perhaps!" was my muttered reply, as I wondered how I was to ask the next question. "When did you go upstairs?" I finally inquired.

"Oh, right away. I didn't wait a minute after I found you quiet. It was cold in the halls – Hewson had left the sky-light open, and my trip after a match chilled me."

"Was your cousin Leighton's door open?" I instantly inquired. "Or did you hear any door shut after you went up?"

She leaned over me and looked anxiously into my face.

"Why do you ask so many questions, uncle, and in so hard a voice? Would there have been any harm in my cousins being up, or in my running across one of them in the hall?"

"Not ordinarily. But last night – "

Here my weakness found vent. I must share my secret, if only as a safeguard; I could not breathe under the dreadful weight imposed upon me by this uncertainty. And she knew I had some dreadful tale to tell; this I was assured of by the white line creeping into view about her lips, and by the convulsive clasp with which she answered my clutch. Forgetting her youth, ignoring all the resolves I had made in the secret watches of the night, I drew her ear down to my mouth and gasped into it the few tell-tale sentences which revealed the dishonour of our house. I caught the thrill of anguish which went through her as I made plain the attempt which had been made upon my life, and never shall I forget her eyes as she slowly drew back at the completion of my tale, and surveyed me in the silent suspense which seemed to mirror forth my own deep heart-question: *Which?*

Sons, I could not answer the demand made by that look, nor can I answer it now. You all came in soon after, and each and all of you had something to say about the mischance of the night which had so visibly affected me. And I did not dare to

read your eyes. Brought face to face with you, I seemed to shrink from, rather than seek for, the settling of this dreadful question. Perhaps because I regard you with equal affection. Perhaps because your mother's picture was visible over your heads, and it seemed like sacrilege to her memory to consider such a question under her loving and trusting eyes. At all events you left me with my mind still in doubt, to confront Hope again, and with her the wretched future which the night's experience had unfolded before us both. I found her filled with a confidence I could not easily share. She believed in the integrity of the man she held dearest, but she would not tell me which of you she thus loved. And I could only guess. But even this belief weakened a little as we talked together, and I soon saw by the arguments she used that peace and certainty would never be hers again as long as a doubt remained as to which of her cousins had conceived and perpetrated this criminal act. As for me, the future holds no comfort. I shall give each of you a thousand dollars to-night in celebration of my anniversary of marriage, and perhaps this will awaken the conscience of the one who loves my money better than my life. Then, though I shall not change my will, I shall publish abroad that I have had losses which only a fortunate speculation can make good, and see if by these means the cupidity which came near costing me my life may not serve to insure me a sufficiently prolonged existence for me to separate in my own mind the one black sheep from the white. But if these measures fail, if I am doomed to fall a victim to the unknown hand which I must henceforth see lifted over my life, if Hope's watchfulness and my own vigilance cannot prevent the repetition of an act which, if once determined upon, cannot fail of fulfilment in a house like this, then this letter read by you all in concert must prove the punishment of the guilty one. And since none of you will read these lines except under these circumstances of death and crime, I hereby charge that guilty one to speak, and as he hopes to escape my curse and the wrath of an outraged Deity, to avow his crime in her presence and in that of the two brothers he will thus exonerate.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.