

Green Anna Katharine

The Millionaire Baby



Anna Green

The Millionaire Baby

«Public Domain»

Green A.

The Millionaire Baby / A. Green — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| I | 5 |
| II | 13 |
| III | 16 |
| IV | 20 |
| V | 25 |
| VI | 29 |
| Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. | 31 |

Green Anna Katharine The Millionaire Baby

I TWO LITTLE SHOES

The morning of August eighteenth, 190-, was a memorable one to me. For two months I had had a run of bad luck. During that time I had failed to score in at least three affairs of unusual importance, and the result was a decided loss in repute as well as great financial embarrassment. As I had a mother and two sisters to support and knew but one way to do it, I was in a state of profound discouragement. This was before I took up the morning papers. After I had opened and read them, not a man in New York could boast of higher hopes or greater confidence in his power to rise by one bold stroke from threatened bankruptcy to immediate independence.

The paragraph which had occasioned this amazing change must have passed under the eyes of many of you. It created a wide-spread excitement at the time and raised in more than one breast the hope of speedy fortune. It was attached to, or rather introduced, the most startling feature of the week, and it ran thus:

A FORTUNE FOR A CHILD

By cable from Southampton

A reward of five thousand dollars is offered, by Philo Ocumpaugh, to whoever will give such information as will lead to the recovery, alive or dead, of his six-year-old daughter, Gwendolen, missing since the afternoon of August the 16th, from her home in – on-the-Hudson, New York, U. S. A.

Fifty thousand dollars additional and no questions asked if she is restored unharmed within the week to her mother at Homewood.

All communications to be addressed to Samuel Atwater, – on-the-Hudson.

A minute description of the child followed, but this did not interest me, and I did not linger over it. The child was no stranger to me. I knew her well and consequently was quite aware of her personal characteristics. It was the great amount offered for her discovery and restoration which moved me so deeply. Fifty thousand dollars! A fortune for any man. More than a fortune to me, who stood in such need of ready money. I was determined to win this extraordinary sum. I had my reason for hope and, in the light of this unexpectedly munificent reward, decided to waive all the considerations which had hitherto prevented me from stirring in the matter.

There were other reasons less selfish which gave impetus to my resolve. I had done business for the Ocumpaughs before and been well treated in the transaction. I recognized and understood both Mr. Ocumpaugh's peculiarities and those of his admired and devoted wife. As man and woman they were kindly, honorable and devoted to many more interests than those connected with their own wealth. I also knew their hearts to be wrapped up in this child, – the sole offspring of a long and happy union, and the actual as well as prospective inheritor of more millions than I shall ever see thousands, unless I am fortunate enough to solve the mystery now exercising the sympathies of the whole New York public.

You have all heard of this child under another name. From her birth she has been known as the Millionaire Baby, being the direct heir to three fortunes, two of which she had already received. I saw her first when she was three years old – a cherubic little being, lovely to look upon and possessing unusual qualities for so young a child. Indeed, her picturesque beauty and appealing ways would have attracted all eyes and won all hearts, even if she had not represented in her small person the wealth both of the Ocumpaugh and Rathbone families. There was an individuality about her, combined with sensibilities of no ordinary nature, which, fully accounted for the devoted affection with which she was universally regarded; and when she suddenly disappeared, it was easy to comprehend, if one did not share, the thrill of horror which swept from one end of our broad continent to the other. Those who knew the parents, and those who did not, suffered an equal pang at the awful thought of this petted innocent lost in the depths of the great unknown, with only the false caresses of her abductors to comfort her for the deprivation of all those delights which love and unlimited means could provide to make a child of her years supremely happy.

Her father – and this was what gave the keen edge of horror to the whole occurrence – was in Europe when she disappeared. He had been cabled at once and his answer was the proffered reward with which I have opened this history. An accompanying despatch to his distracted wife announced his relinquishment of the project which had taken him abroad and his immediate return on the next steamer sailing from Southampton. As this chanced to be the fastest on the line, we had reason to expect him in six days; meanwhile —

But to complete my personal recapitulations. When the first news of this startling abduction flashed upon my eyes from the bulletin boards, I looked on the matter as one of too great magnitude to be dealt with by any but the metropolitan police; but as time passed and further details of the strange and seemingly inexplicable affair came to light, I began to feel the stirring of the detective instinct within me (did I say that I was connected with a private detective agency of some note in the metropolis?) and a desire, quite apart from any mere humane interest in the event itself, to locate the intelligence back of such a desperate crime: an intelligence so keen that, up to the present moment, if we may trust the published accounts of the affair, not a clue had been unearthed by which its author could be traced, or the means employed for carrying off this petted object of a thousand cares.

To be sure, there was a theory which eliminated all crime from the occurrence as well as the intervention of any one in the child's fate: she might have strayed down to the river and been drowned. But the probabilities were so opposed to this supposition, that the police had refused to embrace it, although the mother had accepted it from the first, and up to the present moment, or so it was stated, had refused to consider any other. As she had some basis for this conclusion – I am still quoting the papers, you understand – I was not disposed to ignore it in the study I proceeded to make of the situation. The details, as I ran them over in the hurried trip I now made up the river to – , were as follows:

On the afternoon of Wednesday, August sixteenth, 190-, the guests assembled in Mrs. Ocumpaugh's white and gold music-room were suddenly thrown into confusion by the appearance among them of a young girl in a state of great perturbation, who, running up to the startled hostess, announced that Gwendolen, the petted darling of the house, was missing from the bungalow where she had been lying asleep, and could not be found, though a dozen men had been out on search.

The wretched mother, who, as it afterward transpired, had not only given the orders by which the child had been thus removed from the excitement up at the house, but had actually been herself but a few moments before to see that the little one was well cared for and happy, seemed struck as by a mortal blow at these words and, uttering a heart-rending scream, ran out on the lawn. A crowd of guests rushed after her, and as they followed her flying figure across the lawn to the small copse in which lay hidden this favored retreat, they could hear, borne back on the wind, the wild protests of the young nurse, that she had left the child for a minute only and then to go no farther than the bench running along the end of the bungalow facing the house; that she had been told she could sit

there and listen to the music, but that she never would have left the child's side for a minute if she had not supposed she would hear her least stir – protests which the mother scarcely seemed to heed, and which were presently lost in the deep silence which fell on all, as, brought to a stand in the thick shrubbery surrounding the bungalow, they saw the mother stagger up to the door, look in and turn toward them with death in her face.

"The river!" she gasped, "the river!" and heedless of all attempt to stop her, heedless even of the efforts made by the little one's nurse to draw her attention to the nearness of a certain opening in the high hedge marking off the Ocumpaugh grounds on this side, she ran down the bank in the direction of the railway, but fainted before she had more than cleared the thicket. When they lifted her up, they all saw the reason for this. She had come upon a little shoe which she held with frantic clutch against her breast – her child's shoe, which, as she afterward acknowledged, she had loosened with her own hand on the little one's foot.

Of course, after this the whole hillside was searched down to the fence which separated it from the railroad track. But no further trace of the missing child was found, nor did it appear possible to any one that she could have strayed away in this direction. For not only was the bank exceedingly steep and the fence at its base impassable, but a gang of men, working as good fortune would have it, at such a point on the road below as to render it next to impossible for her to have crossed the track within a half-mile either way without being observed, had one and all declared that not one of them had seen her or any other person descend the slope.

This, however, made but little impression on the mother. She would listen to no hints of abduction, but persisted in her declaration that the river had swallowed her darling, and would neither rest nor turn her head from its waters till some half a dozen men about the place had been set systematically to work to drag the stream.

Meanwhile, the police had been notified and the whole town aroused. The search, which had been carried on up to this time in a frantic but desultory way, now became methodical. Nor was it confined to the Ocumpaugh estate. All the roads and byways within half a mile either way were covered by a most careful investigation. All the near-by houses were entered, especially those which the child was most in the habit of frequenting, but no one had seen her, nor could any trace of her presence be found. At five o'clock all hope of her return was abandoned and, much against Mrs. Ocumpaugh's wish, who declared that the news of the child's death would affect her father far less than the dreadful possibilities of an abduction, the exact facts of the case had been cabled to Mr. Ocumpaugh.

The night and another day passed, bringing but little relief to the situation. Not an eye had as yet been closed in Homewood, nor had the search ceased for an instant. Not an inch of the great estate had been overlooked, yet men could still be seen beating the bushes and peering into all the secluded spots which once had formed the charm of this delightful place. As on the land, so on the river. All the waters in the dock had been dragged, yet the work went on, some said under the very eye of Mrs. Ocumpaugh. But there was no result as yet.

In the city the interest was intense. The telegraph at police headquarters had been clicking incessantly for thirty-six hours under the direction, some said, of the superintendent himself. Everything which could be done had been done, but as yet the papers were able to report nothing beyond some vague stories of a child, with its face very much bound up, having been seen at the heels of a woman in the Grand Central Station in New York, and hints of a covered wagon, with a crying child inside, which had been driven through Westchester County at a great pace shortly before sunset on the previous day, closely followed by a buggy with the storm-apron up, though the sun shone and there was not a cloud in the sky; but nothing definite, nothing which could give hope to the distracted mother or do more than divide the attention of the police between two different but equally tenable theories. Then came the cablegram from Mr. Ocumpaugh, which threw amateur as

well as professional detectives into the field. Among the latter was myself; which naturally brings me back once more to my own conclusions.

Of one thing I felt sure. Very early in my cogitations, before we had quitted the Park Avenue tunnel in fact, I had decided in my own mind that if I were to succeed in locating the lost heiress, it must be by subtler methods than lay open to the police. I was master of such methods (in this case at least), and though one of many owing to similar hopes on this very train which was rushing me through to Homewood, I had no feeling but that of confidence in a final success. How well founded this confidence was, will presently appear.

The number of seedy-looking men with a mysterious air who alighted in my company at – station and immediately proceeded to make their way up the steep street toward Homewood, warned me that it would soon be extremely difficult for any one to obtain access to the parties most interested in the child's loss. Had I not possessed the advantage of being already known to Mrs. Ocumpaugh, I should have immediately given up all hope of ever obtaining access to her presence; and even with this fact to back me, I approached the house with very little confidence in my ability to win my way through the high iron gates I had so frequently passed before without difficulty.

And indeed I found them well guarded. As I came nearer, I could see man after man being turned away, and not till my card had been handed in, and a hurried note to boot, did I obtain permission to pass the first boundary. Another note secured me admission to the house, but there my progress stopped. Mrs. Ocumpaugh had already been interviewed by five reporters and a special agent from the New York police. She could see no one else at present. If, however, my business was of importance, an opportunity would be given me to see Miss Porter. Miss Porter was her companion and female factotum.

As I had calculated upon having a half-dozen words with the mother herself, I was greatly thrown out by this; but going upon the principle that "half a loaf was better than no bread," I was about to express a desire to see Miss Porter, when an incident occurred which effectually changed my mind in this regard.

The hall in which I was standing and which communicated with the side door by which I had entered, ended in a staircase, leading, as I had reason to believe, to the smaller and less pretentious rooms in the rear of the house. While I hesitated what reply to give the girl awaiting my decision, I caught the sound of soft weeping from the top of this staircase, and presently beheld the figure of a young woman coming slowly down, clad in coat and hat and giving every evidence both in dress and manner of leaving for good. It was Miss Graham, a young woman who held the position of nursery-governess to the child. I had seen her before, and had no small admiration for her, and the sensations I experienced at the sight of her leaving the house where her services were apparently no longer needed, proved to me, possibly for the first time, that I had more heart in my breast than I had ever before realized. But it was not this which led me to say to the maid standing before me that I preferred to see Mrs. Ocumpaugh herself, and would call early the next day. It was the thought that this sorrowing girl would have to pass the gauntlet of many prying eyes on her way to the station and that she might be glad of an escort whom she knew and had shown some trust in. Also, – but the reasons behind that *also* will soon become sufficiently apparent.

I was right in supposing that my presence on the porch outside would be a pleasing surprise to her. Though her tears continued to flow she accepted my proffered companionship with gratitude, and soon we were passing side by side across the lawn toward a short cut leading down the bank to the small flag-station used by the family and by certain favored neighbors. As we threaded the shrubbery, which is very thick about the place, she explained to me the cause of her abrupt departure. The sight of her, it seems, had become insupportable to Mrs. Ocumpaugh. Though no blame could be rightfully attached to her, it was certainly true that the child had been carried off while in her charge, and however hard it might be for *her*, few could blame the mother for wishing her removed

from the house desolated by her lack of vigilance. But she was a good girl and felt the humiliation of her departure almost in the light of a disgrace.

As we came again into an open portion of the lawn, she stopped short and looked back.

"Oh!" she cried, gripping me by the arm, "there is Mrs. Ocumpaugh still at the window. All night she has stood there, except when she flew down to the river at the sound of some imaginary call from the boats. She believes, she really believes, that they will yet come upon Gwendolen's body in the dock there."

Following the direction of her glance, I looked up. Was that Mrs. Ocumpaugh – that haggard, intent figure with eyes fixed in awful expectancy on the sinister group I could picture to myself down at the water's edge? Never could I have imagined such a look on features I had always considered as cold as they were undeniably beautiful. As I took in the misery it expressed, that awful waiting for an event momentarily anticipated, and momentarily postponed, I found myself, without reason and simply in response to the force of her expression, unconsciously sharing her expectation, and with a momentary forgetfulness of all the probabilities, was about to turn toward the spot upon which her glances were fixed, when a touch on my arm recalled me to myself.

"Come!" whispered my trembling companion. "She may look down and see us here."

I yielded to her persuasion and turned away into the cluster of trees that lay between us and that opening in the hedge through which our course lay. Had I been alone I should not have budged till I had seen some change – any change – in the face whose appearance had so deeply affected me.

"Mrs. Ocumpaugh certainly believes that the body of her child lies in the water," I remarked, as we took our way onward as rapidly as possible. "Do you know her reasons for this?"

"She says, and I think she is right so far, that the child has been bent for a long time on fishing; that she has heard her father talk repeatedly of his great luck in Canada last year and wished to try the sport for herself; that she has been forbidden to go to the river, but must have taken the first opportunity when no eye was on her to do so; and – and – Mrs. Ocumpaugh shows a bit of string which she found last night in the bushes alongside the tracks when she ran down, as I have said, at some imaginary shout from the boats – a string which she declares she saw rolled up in Gwendolen's hand when she went into the bungalow to look at her. Of course, it may not be the same, but Mrs. Ocumpaugh thinks it is, and –"

"Do you think it possible, after all, that the child did stray down to the water?"

"No," was the vehement disclaimer. "Gwendolen's feet were excessively tender. She could not have taken three steps in only one shoe. I should have heard her cry out."

"What if she went in some one's arms?"

"A stranger's? She had a decided instinct against strangers. Never could any one she did not know and like have carried her so far as that without her waking. Then those men on the track, – they would have seen her. No, Mr. Trevitt, it was not in *that* direction she went."

The force of her emphasis convinced me that she had an opinion of her own in regard to this matter. Was it one she was ready to impart?

"In what direction, then?" I asked, with a gentleness I hoped would prove effective.

Her impulse was toward a frank reply. I saw her lips part and her eyes take on the look which precedes a direct avowal, but, as chance would have it, we came at that moment upon the thicket inclosing the bungalow, and the sight of its picturesque walls, showing brown through the verdure of the surrounding shrubbery, seemed to act as a check upon her, for, with a quick look and a certain dry accent quite new in her speech, she suddenly inquired if I did not want to see the place from which Gwendolen had disappeared.

Naturally I answered in the affirmative and followed her as she turned aside into the circular path which embraces this hidden retreat; but I had rather have heard her answer to my question, than to have gone anywhere or seen anything at that moment. Yet, when in full view of the bungalow's open door, she stopped to point out to me the nearness of the place to that opening in the hedge we

had just been making for, and when she even went so far as to indicate the tangled little path by which that opening could be reached directly from the farther end of the bungalow, I considered that my question had been answered, though in another way than I anticipated, even before I noted the slight flush which rose to her cheek under my earnest scrutiny.

As it is important for the exact location of the bungalow to be understood, I subjoin a diagram of this part of the grounds:

As I took this all in, I ventured to ask some particulars of the family living so near the Ocumpaugh's.

"Who occupies that house?" I asked, pointing to the sloping roofs and ornamental chimneys arising just beyond us over the hedge-rows.

"Oh, that is Mrs. Carew's home. She is a widow and Mrs. Ocumpaugh's dearest friend. How she loved Gwendolen! How we all loved her! And now, that *wretch*—"

She burst into tears. They were genuine ones; so was her grief.

I waited till she was calm again, then I inquired very softly:

"What wretch?"

"You have not been inside," she suggested, pointing sharply to the bungalow.

I took the implied rebuke and entered the door she indicated. A man was sitting within, but he rose and went out when he saw us. He wore a policeman's badge and evidently recognized her or possibly myself. I noted, however, that he did not go far from the doorway.

"It is only a den," remarked Miss Graham.

I looked about me. She had described it perfectly: a place to lounge in on an August day like the present. Walls of Georgia pine across one of which hung a series of long dark rugs; a long, low window looking toward the house, and a few articles of bamboo furniture describe the place. Among the latter was a couch. It was drawn up underneath the window, on the other side of which ran the bench where my companion declared she had been sitting while listening to the music.

"Wouldn't you think my attention would have been caught by the sound of any one moving about here?" she cried, pointing to the couch and then to the window. "But the window was closed and the door, as you see, is round the corner from the bench."

"A person with a very stealthy step, apparently."

"Very," she admitted. "Oh, how can I ever forgive myself! how can I ever, ever forgive myself!"

As she stood wringing her hands in sight of that empty couch, I cast a scrutinizing glance about me, which led me to remark:

"This interior looks new; much newer than the outside. It has quite a modern air."

"Yes, the bungalow is old, very old; but this room, or den, or whatever you might call it, was all remodeled and fitted up as you see it now when the new house went up. It had long been abandoned as a place of retreat, and had fallen into such decay that it was a perfect eyesore to all who saw it. Now it is likely to be abandoned again, and for what a reason! Oh, the dreadful place! How I hate it, now Gwendolen is gone!"

"One moment. I notice another thing. This room does not occupy the whole of the bungalow."

Either she did not hear me or thought it unnecessary to reply; and perceiving that her grief had now given way to an impatience to be gone, I did not press the matter, but led the way myself to the door. As we entered the little path which runs directly to that outlet in the hedge marked E, I ventured to speak again:

"You have reasons, or so it appears, for believing that the child was carried off through this very path?"

The reply was impetuous:

"How else could she have been spirited away so quickly? Besides, —" here her eye stole back at me over her shoulder, — "I have since remembered that as I ran out of the bungalow in my fright at finding the child gone, I heard the sound of wheels on Mrs. Carew's driveway. It did not mean much

to me then, for I expected to find the child somewhere about the grounds; but *now*, when I come to think, it means everything, for a child's cry mingled with it (or I imagined that it did) and that child – "

"But," I forcibly interposed, "the police should know this."

"They do; and so does Mrs. Ocumpaugh; but she has only the one idea, and nothing can move her."

I remembered the wagon with the crying child inside which had been seen on the roads the previous evening, and my heart fell a little in spite of myself.

"Couldn't Mrs. Carew tell us something about this?" I asked, with a gesture toward the house we were now passing.

"No. Mrs. Carew went to New York that morning and had only just returned when we missed Gwendolen. She had been for her little nephew, who has lately been made an orphan, and she was too busy making him feel at home to notice if a carriage had passed through her grounds."

"Her servants then?"

"She had none. All had been sent away. The house was quite empty."

I thought this rather odd, but having at this moment reached the long flight of steps leading down the embankment, I made no reply till we reached the foot. Then I observed:

"I thought Mrs. Carew was very intimate with Mrs. Ocumpaugh."

"She is; they are more like sisters than mere friends."

"Yet she goes to New York the very day her friend gives a musicale."

"Oh, she had good reasons for that. Mrs. Carew is planning to sail this week for Europe, and this was her only opportunity for getting her little nephew, who is to go with her. But I don't know as she will sail, now. She is wild with grief over Gwendolen's loss, and will not feel like leaving Mrs. Ocumpaugh till she knows whether we shall ever see the dear child again. But, I shall miss my train."

Here her step visibly hastened.

As it was really very nearly due, I had not the heart to detain her. But as I followed in her wake I noticed that for all her hurry a curious hesitancy crept into her step at times, and I should not have been surprised at any moment to see her stop and confront me on one of the two remaining long flights of steps leading down the steep hillside.

But we both reached the base without her having yielded to this impulse, and presently we found ourselves in full view of the river and the small flag-station located but a few rods away toward the left. As we turned toward the latter, we both cast an involuntary look back at the Ocumpaugh dock, where a dozen men could be seen at work dragging the river-bed with grappling irons. It made a sadly suggestive picture, and the young girl at my side shuddered violently as we noted the expression of morbid curiosity on the faces of such onlookers, men and women, as were drawn up at the end of the small point on which the boat-house stood.

But I had another reason than this for urging her on. I had noticed how, at the sight of her slight figure descending the slope, some half-dozen men or so had separated themselves from this group, with every appearance of intending to waylay and question her. She noticed this too, and drawing up more closely to my side, exclaimed with marked feeling:

"Save me from these men and I will tell you something that no one – "

But here she stopped, here our very thoughts stopped. A shout had risen from the group at the water-edge; a shout which made us both turn, and even caused the men who had started to follow us to wheel about and rush back to the dock with every appearance of intense excitement.

"What is it? What can it be?" faltered my greatly-alarmed companion.

"They have found something. See! what is that the man in the boat is holding up? It looks like – "

But she was already half-way to the point, outstripping the very men whose importunities she had shrunk from a moment before. I was not far behind her, and almost immediately we found ourselves wedged among the agitated group leaning over the little object which had been tossed ashore into the first hand outstretched to receive it.

It was a second little shoe – filled with sand and dripping with water, but recognizable as similar to the one already found on the preceding day high up on the bank. As this fact was borne in on us all, a groan of pity broke from more than one pair of lips, and eye after eye stole up the hillside to that far window in the great pile above us where the mother's form could be dimly discerned swaying in an agitation caught from our own excitement.

But there was one amongst us whose glance never left that little shoe. The train she had been so anxious to take whistled and went thundering by, but she never moved or noticed. Suddenly she reached out her hand.

"Let me see it, please," she entreated. "I was her nurse; let me take it in my hand."

The man who held it passed it over. She examined it long and closely.

"Yes, it is hers," said she. But in another moment she had laid it down with what I thought was a very peculiar look.

Instantly it was caught up and carried with a rush up the slope to where Mrs. Ocumpaugh could be seen awaiting it with outstretched arms. But I did not linger to mark her reception of it. Miss Graham had drawn me to one side and was whispering in my ear:

"I must talk to you. I can not keep back another moment what I think or what I feel. Some one is playing with Mrs. Ocumpaugh's fears. That shoe is Gwendolen's, but it is not the mate of the one found on the bank above. That was for the left foot *and so is this one*. Did you not notice?"

II

"A FEARSOME MAN"

The effect of this statement upon me was greater than even she had contemplated.

"You thought the child had been stolen for the reward she would bring?" she continued. "She was not; she was taken out of pure hate, and that is why I suffer so. What may they not do to her! In what hole hide her! My darling, O my darling!"

She was going off into hysterics, but the look and touch I gave her recalled her to herself.

"We need to be calm," I urged. "You, because you have something of importance to impart, and I, because of the action I must take as soon as the facts you have concealed become known to me. What gives you such confidence in this belief, which I am sure is not shared by the police, and who is the *some one* who, as you say, is playing upon Mrs. Ocumpaugh's fears? A short time ago it was as *the wretch* you spoke of him. Are not *some one* and *the wretch* one and the same person, and can you not give him now a name?"

We had been moving all this time in the direction of the station and had now reached the foot of the platform. Pausing, she cast a last look up the bank. The trees were thick and hid from our view the Ocumpaugh mansion, but in imagination she beheld the mother moaning over that little shoe.

"I shall never return there," she muttered; "why do I hesitate so to speak!" Then in a burst, as I watched her in growing excitement: "She – Mrs. Ocumpaugh – begged me not to tell what she believed had nothing to do with our Gwendolen's loss. But I can not keep silence. This proof of a conspiracy against herself certainly relieves me from any promise I may have made her. Mr. Trevitt, I am positive that I know who carried off Gwendolen."

This was becoming interesting, intensely interesting to me. Glancing about and noting that the group down at the water-edge had become absorbed again in renewed efforts toward farther discoveries, I beckoned her to follow me into the station. It was but a step, but it gave me time to think. What was I encouraging this young girl to do? To reveal to *me*, who had no claim upon her but that of friendship, a secret which had not been given to the police? True, it might not be worth much, but it was also true that it might be worth a great deal. Did she know how much? I wanted money – few wanted it more – but I felt that I could not listen to her story till I had fairly settled this point. I therefore hastened to interpose a remark:

"Miss Graham, you are good enough to offer to reveal some fact hitherto concealed. Do you do this because you have no closer friend than myself, or because you do not know what such knowledge may be worth to the person you give it to – in money, I mean?"

"In money? I am not thinking of money," was her amazed reply; "I am thinking of Gwendolen."

"I understand, but you should think of the practical results as well. Have you not heard of the enormous reward offered by Mr. Ocumpaugh?"

"No; I – "

"Five thousand dollars for information; and fifty thousand to the one who will bring her back within the week unharmed. Mr. Ocumpaugh cabled to that effect yesterday."

"It is a large sum," she faltered, and for a moment she hesitated. Then, with a sweet and candid look which sank deep into my heart, she added gravely: "I had rather not think of money in connection with Gwendolen. If what I have to tell leads to her recovery, you can be trusted, I know, to do what is right toward me. Mr. Trevitt, the man who stole her from her couch and carried her away through Mrs. Carew's grounds in a wagon or otherwise, is a long-haired, heavily whiskered man of sixty or more years of age. His face is deeply wrinkled, but chiefly marked by a long scar running down between his eyebrows, which are so shaggy that they would quite hide his eyes if they were not lit

up with an extraordinary expression of resolution, carried almost to the point of frenzy; a fearsome man, making your heart stand still when he pauses to speak to you."

Startled as I had seldom been, for reasons which will hereafter appear, I surveyed her in mingled wonder and satisfaction.

"His name?" I demanded.

"I do not know his name."

Again I stopped to look at her.

"Does Mrs. Ocumpaugh?"

"I do not think so. She only knows what I told her."

"And what did you tell her?"

"Ah! who are these?"

Two or three persons had entered the station, probably to wait for the next train.

"No one who will molest you."

But she was not content till we had withdrawn to where the time-table hung up on the opposite wall. Turning about as if to consult it, she told the following story. I never see a time-table now but I think of her expression as she stood there looking up as if her mind were fixed on what she probably did not see at all.

"Last Wednesday – no, it was on the Wednesday preceding – I was taking a ride with Gwendolen on one of the side roads branching off toward Fordham. We were in her own little pony cart, and as we seldom rode together like this, she had been chattering about a hundred things till her eyes danced in her head and she looked as lovely as I had ever seen her. But suddenly, just as we were about to cross a small wooden bridge, I saw her turn pale and her whole sensitive form quiver. 'Some one I don't like,' she cried. 'There is some one about whom I don't like. Drive on, Ellie, drive on.' But before I could gather up the reins a figure which I had not noticed before stepped from behind a tree at the farther end of the bridge, and advancing into the middle of the road with arms thrown out, stopped our advance. I have told you how he looked, but I can give you no idea of the passionate fury lighting up his eyes, or the fiery dignity with which he held his place and kept us subdued to his will till he had looked the shrinking child all over, and laughed, not as a madman laughs, oh, much too slow and ironically for that! but like one who takes an unholy pleasure in mocking the happy present with evil prophecy. Nothing that I can say will make you see him as I saw him in that one instant, and though there was much in the circumstance to cause fear, I think it was more awe than fright we felt, so commanding was his whole appearance and so forcible the assurance with which he held us there till he was ready to move. Gwendolen cried out, but the imploring sound had no effect upon him; it only reawakened his mirth and led him to say, in a clear, cold, mocking tone which I hear yet, 'Cry out, little one, for your short day is nearly over. Silks and feathers and carriages and servants will soon be a half-forgotten memory to you; and right it is that it should be so. Ten days, little one, only ten days more.' And with that he moved, and, slipping aside behind the tree, allowed us to drive on. Mr. Trevitt, yesterday saw the end of those ten days, and where is she now? Only that man knows. He is one man in a thousand. Can not you find him?"

She turned; a train was coming, a train which it was very evident she felt it her duty to take. I had no right to detain her, but I found time for a question or two.

"And you told Mrs. Ocumpaugh this?"

"The moment we arrived home."

"And she? What did she think of it?"

"Mrs. Ocumpaugh is not a talkative woman. She grew very white and clasped the child passionately in her arms. But the next minute she had to all appearance dismissed the whole occurrence from her thoughts. 'Some socialistic fanatic,' she called him and merely advised me to stop driving with Gwendolen for the present."

"Didn't you recall the matter to her when you found the child missing?"

"Yes; but then she appeared to regard it in a superstitious way only. It was a warning of death, she said, and the man an irresponsible clairvoyant. When I tried to urge my own idea upon her and describe how I thought he might have obtained access to the bungalow and carried her off, while still asleep, to some vehicle awaiting them in Mrs. Carew's grounds, she only rebuked me for my folly and bade me keep still about the whole occurrence, saying that I should only be getting some poor half-demented old wretch into trouble for something for which he was not in the least responsible."

"A very considerate woman," I remarked; to which Miss Graham made reply as the train came storming up:

"Nobody knows how considerate, even if she has dismissed me rather suddenly from her service. Don't let that wretch" – again she used the word – "deceive her or you into thinking that the little one perished in the water. Gwendolen is alive, I say. Find him and you will find her. I saw his resolution in his eye."

Here she made a rush for the cars, and I had time only to get her future address before the train started and all further opportunity of conversation between us was over for that day.

I remained behind because I was by no means through with my investigations. What she had told me only convinced me of the necessity I had already recognized of making myself master of all that could be learned at Homewood before undertaking the very serious business of locating the child or even the aged man just described to me, and who I was now sure had been the chief, if not the sole, instrument in her abduction.

III

A CHARMING WOMAN

Stopping only long enough to send a telegram to my partner in New York, (for which purpose I had to walk along the tracks to the main station) I returned by the short cut to Homewood. My purpose in doing this was twofold. I should have a chance of seeing if the men were still at work in the river, and I should also have the added opportunity of quietly revisiting the bungalow, on the floor of which I had noted some chalk-marks, which I felt called for a closer examination than I had given them. As I came in view of the dock, I saw that the men were still busy, but at a point farther out in the river, as if all hope had been abandoned of their discovering anything more inshore. But the chalk-marks in the bungalow were almost forgotten by me in the interest I experienced in a certain adventure which befell me on my way there.

I had just reached the opening in the hedge communicating with Mrs. Carew's grounds, when I heard steps on the walk inside and a woman's rich voice saying:

"There, that will do. You must play on the other side of the house, Harry. And Dinah, see that he does so, and that he does not cross the hall again till I come back. The sight of so merry a child might kill Mrs. Ocumpaugh if she happened to look this way."

Moved by the tone, which was one in a thousand, I involuntarily peered through the outlet I was passing, in the hope of catching a glimpse of its owner, and thus was favored with the sight of a face which instantly fixed itself in my memory as one of the most enchanting I had ever encountered. Not from its beauty, yet it may have been beautiful; nor from its youth, for the woman before me was not youthful, but from the extraordinary eloquence of its expression caught at a rare moment when the heart, which gave it life, was full. She was standing half-way down the path, throwing kisses to a little boy who was leaning toward her from an upper window. The child was laughing with glee, and it was this laugh she was trying to check; but her countenance, as she made the effort, was almost as merry as his, and yet was filled with such solemn joy – such ecstasy of motherhood I should be inclined to call it, if I had not been conscious that this must be Mrs. Carew and the child her little nephew – that in my admiration for this exhibition of pure feeling, I forgot to move on as she advanced into the hedge-row, and so we came face to face. The result was as extraordinary to me as all the rest. Instantly all the gay abandonment left her features, and she showed me a grave, almost troubled, countenance, more in keeping with her severe dress, which was as nearly like mourning as it could be and not be made of crape.

It was such a sudden change and of so complete a character, that I was thrown off my guard for a moment and probably betrayed the curiosity I undoubtedly felt; for she paused as she reached me, and, surveying me very quietly but very scrutinizingly too, raised again that marvelous voice of hers and pointedly observed:

"This is a private path, sir. Only the friends of Mrs. Ocumpaugh or of myself pass here."

This was a speech calculated to restore my self-possession. With a bow which evidently surprised her, I answered with just enough respect to temper my apparent presumption:

"I am here in the interests of Mrs. Ocumpaugh, to assist her in finding her child. Moments are precious; so I ventured to approach by the shorter way."

"Pardon me!" The words did not come instantly, but after some hesitation, during which she kept her eyes on my face in a way to rob me of all thought save that she possessed a very strong magnetic quality, to which it were well for a man like myself to yield. "You will be my friend, too, if you succeed in restoring Gwendolen." Then quickly, as she crossed to the Ocumpaugh grounds: "You do not look like a member of the police. Are you here at Mrs. Ocumpaugh's bidding, and has she at last given up all expectation of finding her child in the river?"

I, too, thought a minute before answering, then I put on my most candid expression, for was not this woman on her way to Mrs. Ocumpaugh, and would she not be likely to repeat what she heard me say?

"I do not know how Mrs. Ocumpaugh feels at present. But I know what her dearest wish is – to see her child again alive and well. That wish I shall do my best to gratify. It is true that I am not a police detective, but I have an agency of my own, well-known to both Mrs. and Mr. Ocumpaugh. All its resources will be devoted to this business and I hope to succeed, madam. If, as I suspect, you are on your way to Mrs. Ocumpaugh, please tell her that Robert Trevitt, of Trevitt and Jupp, hopes to succeed."

"*I will*," she emphasized. Then stepping back to me in all the grace of her thrilling personality, she eagerly added: "If there is any information I can give, do not be afraid to ask me. I love children, and would give anything in the world to see Mrs. Ocumpaugh as happy with Gwendolen again as I am with my little nephew. Are you quite sure that there is any possibility of this? I was told that the child's shoe has been found in the river; but almost immediately following this information came the report that there was something odd about this shoe, and that Mrs. Ocumpaugh had gone into hysterics. Do *you* know what they meant by that? I was just going over to see."

I did know what they meant, but I preferred to seem ignorant.

"I have not seen Mrs. Ocumpaugh," I evasively rejoined. "But *I* don't look for the child to be drawn from the water."

"Nor I," she repeated, with a hoarse catch in her breath. "It is thirty-six hours since we lost her. Time enough for the current to have carried her sweet little body far away from here."

I surveyed the lady before me in amazement.

"Then *you* think she strayed down to the water?"

"Yes; it would madden me to believe otherwise; loving her so well, and her parents so well, I dare not think of a worse fate."

Taking advantage of her amiability and the unexpected opportunity it offered for a leading question, I hereupon ventured to say: "You were not at home, I hear, when she vanished from the bungalow."

"No; that is, if it happened before three o'clock. I arrived from the station just as the clock was striking the hour, and having my little nephew with me, I was too much occupied in reconciling him to his new home, to hear or see anything outside. Most unfortunate!" she mourned, "most unfortunate! I shall never cease reproaching myself. A tragedy at my door" – here she glanced across the shrubbery at the bungalow – "and I occupied with my own affairs!"

With a flush, the undoubted result of her own earnestness, she turned as if to go. But I could not let her depart without another question:

"Excuse me, Mrs. Carew, but you gave me permission to seem importunate. With the exception of her nurse, you were the one person nearest the bungalow at the time. Didn't you hear a carriage drive through your grounds at about the hour the alarm was first started? I know you have been asked this before, but not by me; and it is a very important fact to have settled; very important for those who wish to discover this child at once."

For reply she gave me a look of very honest amazement.

"Of course I did," she replied. "I came in a carriage myself from the station and naturally heard it drive away."

At her look, at her word, the thread which I had seized with such avidity seemed to slip from my fingers. Had little Miss Graham's theory no better foundation than this? and were the wheels she heard only those of Mrs. Carew's departing carriage? I resolved to press the matter even if I ran the risk of displeasing her.

"Mrs. Carew – for it must be Mrs. Carew I am addressing – did your little nephew cry when you first brought him to the house?"

"I think he did," she admitted slowly; "I think he did."

I must have given evidence of the sudden discouragement this brought me, for her lips parted and her whole frame trembled with sudden earnestness.

"Did you think – did any one think – that those cries came from Gwendolen? That she was carried out through my grounds? Could any one have thought that?"

"I have been told that the nursery-governess did."

"Little Miss Graham? Poor girl! she is but defending herself from despair. She is ready to believe everything but that the child is dead."

Was it so? Was I following the false light of a will-o'-the-wisp? No, no; the strange coincidence of the threat made on the bridge with the disappearance of the child on the day named, was at least real. The thread had not altogether escaped from my hands. It was less tangible, but it was still there.

"You may be right," I acquiesced, for I saw that her theories were entirely opposed to those of Miss Graham. "But we must try everything, *everything*."

I was about to ask whether she had ever seen in the adjoining grounds, or on the roads about, an old man with long hair and a remarkable scar running down between his eyebrows, when a young girl in the cap and apron of a maid-servant came running through the shrubbery from the Ocumpaugh house, and, seeing Mrs. Carew, panted out:

"Oh, do come over to the house, Mrs. Carew. Mrs. Ocumpaugh has been told that the two shoes which have been found, one on the bank and the other in the river, are not mates, and it has quite distracted her. She has gone to her room and will let no one else in. We can hear her moaning and crying, but we can do nothing. Perhaps she will see you. She called for you, I know, before she shut her door."

"I will go." Mrs. Carew had turned quite pale, and from standing upright in the road, had moved so as to gain support from one of the hedges.

I expected to see her turn and go as soon as her trembling fit was over, but she did not, though she waved the girl away as if she intended to follow her. Had I not learned to distrust my own impression of people's motives from their manners and conduct, I should have said that she was waiting for me to precede her.

"Two shoes and not mates!" she finally exclaimed. "What does she mean?"

"Simply that another shoe has been drawn up from the river-bottom which does not mate the one picked up near the bungalow. Both are for the left foot."

"Ah!" gasped this sympathetic woman. "And what inference can we draw from that?"

I should not have answered her; but the command in her eyes or the thrilling effect of her manner compelled me, and I spoke the truth at once, just as I might have done to Mrs. Ocumpaugh, or, better still, to Mr. Ocumpaugh, if either had insisted.

"But one," said I. "There is a conspiracy on the part of one or more persons to delude Mrs. Ocumpaugh into believing the child dead. They blundered over it, but they came very near succeeding."

"Who blundered, and what is the meaning of the conspiracy you hint at? Tell me. Tell me what such men as you think."

Her plastic features had again shown a change. She was all anxiety now; cheeks burning, eyes blazing – a very beautiful woman.

"We think that the case looks serious. We think from the very mystery it displays, that there is a keen intelligence back of this crime. I can not go any further than that. The affair is as yet too obscure."

"You amaze me!" she faltered, making an effort to collect her thoughts. "I have always thought, just as Mrs. Ocumpaugh has, that the child had somehow found her way to the water and was drowned. But if all this is true we shall have to face a worse evil. A conspiracy against such a tender little being

as that! A conspiracy, and for what? Not to extort money, or why these blundering efforts to make the child appear dead?"

She was the same sympathetic woman, agitated by real feeling as before, yet at this moment – I do not understand now just why – I became aware of an inner movement of caution against too great a display of candor on my own part.

"Madam, it is all a mystery at present. I am sure that the police will tell you the same. But another day may bring developments."

"Let us hope so!" was her ardent reply, accompanied by a gesture, the freedom of which suited her style and person as it would not have done those of a less impressionable woman. And, seeing that I had no intention of leaving the spot where I stood, she moved at last from where she held herself upright against the hedge, and entered the Ocumpaugh grounds. "Will you call in to see me to-morrow?" she asked, pausing to look back at a turn in the path. "I shall not sleep to-night for thinking of those possible developments."

"Since you permit me," I returned; "that is, if I am still here. Affairs may call me away at any moment."

"Yes, and so with me. Affairs may call me away also. I was to sail on Saturday for Liverpool. Only Mrs. Ocumpaugh's distress detains me. If the situation lightens, if we hear any good news to-night, or even early to-morrow, I shall continue my preparations, which will take me again to New York."

"I will call if you are at home."

She gave me a slight nod and vanished.

Why did I stand a good three minutes where she had left me, thinking, but not getting anything from my thoughts, save that I was glad that I had not been betrayed into speaking of the old man Miss Graham had met on the bridge? Yet it might have been well, after all, if I had done so, if only to discover whether Mrs. Ocumpaugh had confided this occurrence to her most intimate friend.

IV CHALK-MARKS

My next move was toward the bungalow. Those chalk-marks still struck me as being worthy of investigation, and not only they, but the bungalow itself. That certainly merited a much closer inspection than I had been able to give it under Miss Graham's eye.

It was not quite a new place to me, nor was I so ignorant of its history (and it had a history) as I had appeared to be in my conversation with Miss Graham. Originally it had been a stabling place for horses; and tradition said that it had once harbored for a week the horse of General Washington. This was when the house on the knoll above had been the seat and home of one of our most famous Revolutionary generals. Later, as the trees grew up around this building, it attracted the attention of a new owner, William Ocumpaugh, the first of that name to inhabit Homewood, and he, being a man of reserved manners and very studious habits, turned it into what we would now call, as Miss Graham did, a den, but which he styled a pavilion, and used as a sort of study or reading-room.

His son, who inherited it, Judge Philo Ocumpaugh, grandfather of the present Philo, was as studious as his father, but preferred to read and write in the quaint old library up at the house, famous for its wide glass doors opening on to the lawn, and its magnificent view of the Hudson. His desk, which many remember (it has a place in the present house, I believe), was so located that for forty years or more he had this prospect ever before him, a prospect which included the sight of his own pavilion, around which, for no cause apparent to his contemporaries, he had caused a high wall to be built, effectually shutting in both trees and building.

This wall has since been removed; but I have often heard it spoken of, and always with a certain air of mystery; possibly because, as I have said, there seemed no good reason for its erection, the place holding no treasure and the gate standing always open; possibly because of its having been painted, in defiance of all harmony with everything about the place, a dazzling white; and possibly because it had not been raised till after the death of the judge's first wife, who, some have said, breathed her last within the precincts it inclosed.

However that may be, there seems to be no doubt that this place exerted, very likely against his will, for he never visited it, a singular fascination over the secretive mind of this same upright but strangely taciturn ancestor of the Ocumpaughs. For during the forty years in which he wrote and read at this desk, the shutters guarding the door overlooking those decaying walls were never drawn to, or so the tradition runs; and when he died, it was found that, by a clause in his will, this pavilion, hut or bungalow, all of which names it bore at different stages of its existence, was recommended to the notice of his heirs as an object which they were at liberty to leave in its present forsaken condition, though he did not exact this, but which was never, under any circumstances or to serve any purpose, to be removed from its present site, or even to suffer any demolition save such as came with time and the natural round of the seasons, to whose tender mercies he advised it to be left. In other words, it was to stand, and to stand unmolested, till it fell of its own accord, or was struck to the earth by lightning – a tragic alternative in the judgment of those who knew it for a structure of comparative insignificance, and one which, in the minds of many, and perhaps I may say in my own, appeared to point to some serious and unrevealed cause not unlinked with the almost forgotten death of that young wife to which I have just alluded.

This was years ago, far back in the fifties, and his son, who was a minor at his death, grew up and assumed his natural proprietorship. The hut – it was nothing but a hut now – had remained untouched – a ruin no longer habitable. The spirit, as well as the letter, of that particular clause in his father's will had so far been literally obeyed. The walls being of stone, had withstood decay, and still rose straight and firm; but the roof had begun to sag, and whatever of woodwork yet remained

about it had rotted and fallen away, till the building was little more than a skeleton, with holes for its windows and an open gap for its door.

As for the surrounding wall, it no longer stood out, an incongruous landmark, from its background of trees and shrubbery. Young shoots had started up and old branches developed till brick and paint alike were almost concealed from view by a fresh girdle of greenery.

And now comes the second mystery.

Sometime after this latter Ocumpaugh had attained his majority – his name was Edwin, and he was, as you already imagine, the father of the present Philo – he made an attempt – a daring one it was afterward called – to brighten this neglected spot and restore it to some sort of use, by giving a supper to his friends within its broken-down walls.

This supper was no orgy, nor were the proprieties in any way transgressed by so harmless a festivity; yet from this night a singular change was observed in this man. Pleasure no longer charmed him, and instead of repeating the experiment I have just described, he speedily evinced such an antipathy to the scene of his late revel that only from the greatest necessity would he ever again visit that part of the grounds.

What did it mean? What had occurred on that night of innocent enjoyment to disturb or alarm him? Had some note in his own conscience been struck by an act which, in his cooler moments, he may have looked upon as a species of sacrilege? Or had some whisper from the past reached him amid the feasting, the laughing and the jesting, to render these old walls henceforth intolerable to him? He never said, but whatever the cause of this sudden aversion, the effect was deep and promised to be lasting. For, one morning, not long after this event, a party of workmen was seen leaving these grounds at daybreak, and soon it was noised about that a massive brick partition had been put up across the interior of this same pavilion, completely shutting off, for no reason that any one could see, some ten feet of what had been one long and undivided room.

It was a strange act enough; but when, a few days later, it was followed by one equally mysterious, and they saw the encircling wall which had been so carefully raised by Judge Ocumpaugh ruthlessly pulled down, and every sign of its former presence there destroyed, wonder filled the highway and the curiosity of neighbors and friends passed all bounds.

But no explanations were volunteered then or ever. People might query and peer, but they learned nothing. What was left open to view told no tales beyond the old one, and as for the single window which was the sole opening into the shut-off space, it was then, as now, so completely blocked up by a network of closely impacted vines, that it offered little more encouragement than the wall itself to the eyes of such curiosity-mongers as crept in by way of the hedge-rows to steal a look at the hut, and if possible gain a glimpse of an interior which had suddenly acquired, by the very means taken to shut it off from every human eye, a new importance pointing very decidedly toward the tragic.

But soon even this semblance of interest died out or was confined to strange tales whispered under breath on weird nights at neighboring firesides, and the old neglect prevailed once more. The whole place – new brick and old stone – seemed doomed to a common fate under the hand of time, when the present Philo Ocumpaugh, succeeding to the property, brought new wealth and business enterprise into the family, and the old house on the hill was replaced by the marble turrets of Homewood, and this hut – or rather the portion open to improvement – was restored to some sort of comfort, and rechristened the bungalow.

Was fate to be appeased by this effort at forgetfulness? No. In emulation of the long abandoned portion so hopelessly cut off by that dividing wall, this brightly-furnished adjunct to the great house had linked itself in the minds of men to a new mystery – the mystery which I had come there to solve, if wit and patience could do it, aided by my supposedly unshared knowledge of a fact connecting me with this family's history in a way it little dreamed of.

Naturally, my first look was at the building itself. I have described its location and the room from which the child was lost. What I wanted to see now, after studying those chalk-marks, was whether that partition which had been put in, was as impassable as was supposed.

The policeman on guard having strolled a few feet away, I approached the open doorway without hindrance, and at once took that close look I had promised myself, of the marks which I had observed scrawled broadly across the floor just inside the threshold. They were as interesting and fully as important as I had anticipated. Though nearly obliterated by the passing of the policeman's feet across them, I was still enabled to read the one word which appeared to me significant.

If you will glance at the following reproduction of a snap-shot which I took of this scrawl, you will see what I mean.

The significant character was the 16. Taken with the "ust," there could be no doubt that the whole writing had been a record of the date on which the child had disappeared: August 16, 190-.

This in itself was of small consequence if the handwriting had not possessed those marked peculiarities which I believed belonged to but one man – a man I had once known – a man of reverend aspect, upright carriage and a strong distinguishing mark, like an old-time scar, running straight down between his eyebrows. This had been my thought when I first saw it. It was doubly so on seeing it again after the doubts expressed by Miss Graham of a threatening old man who possessed similar characteristics.

Satisfied on this point, I turned my attention to what still more seriously occupied it. The three or four long rugs, which hung from the ceiling across the whole wall at my left, evidently concealed the mysterious partition put up in Mr. Ocumpaugh's father's time directly across this portion of the room. Was it a totally unbroken partition? I had been told so; but I never accept such assertions without a personal investigation.

Casting a glance through the doorway and seeing that it would take my dreaming friend, the policeman, some two or three minutes yet to find his way back to his post, I hastily lifted these rugs aside, one after the other, and took a look behind them. A stretch of Georgia pine, laid, as I readily discovered by more than one rap of my knuckles, directly over the bricks it was intended to conceal, was visible under each; from end to end a plain partition with no indications of its having been tampered with since the alterations were first made.

Dismissing from my mind one of those vague possibilities, which add such interest to the calling of a detective, I left the place, with my full thought concentrated on the definite clue I had received from the chalk-marks.

But I had not walked far before I met with a surprise which possibly possessed a significance equal to anything I had already observed, if only I could have fully understood it.

On the path into which I now entered, I encountered again the figure of Mrs. Carew. Her face was turned full on mine, and she had evidently retraced her steps to have another instant's conversation with me. The next moment I was sure of this. Her eyes, always magnetic, shone with increasing brightness as I advanced to meet her, and her manner, while grave, was that of a woman quite conscious of the effect she produced by her least word or action.

"I have returned to tell you," said she, "that I have more confidence in your efforts than in those of the police officers around here. If Gwendolen's fate is determined by any one it will be by you. So I want to be of aid to you if I can. Remember that. I may have said this to you before, but I wish to impress it upon you."

There was a flutter in her movements which astonished me. She was surveying me in a straightforward way, and I could not but feel the fire and force of her look. Happily she was no longer a young woman or I might have misunderstood the disturbance which took place in my own breast as I waited for the musical tones to cease.

"You are very good," I rejoined. "I need help, and shall be only too glad to receive your assistance."

Yet I did question her, though I presently found myself walking toward the house at her side. She may not have expected me to presume so far. Certainly she showed no dissatisfaction when, at a parting in the path, I took my leave of her and turned my face in the direction of the gates. A strange sweet woman, with a power quite apart from the physical charms which usually affect men of my age, but one not easily read nor parted from unless one had an imperative errand, as I had.

This errand was to meet and forestall the messenger boy whom I momentarily expected with the answer to my telegram. That an opportunity for gossip was likewise afforded by the motley group of men and boys drawn up near one of the gate-posts, gave an added interest to the event which I was quite ready to appreciate. Approaching this group, I assimilated myself with it as speedily as possible, and, having some tact for this sort of thing, soon found myself the recipient of various gratuitous opinions as to the significance of the find which had offered such a problem both to the professional and unprofessional detective. Two mismatched shoes! Had Gwendolen Ocumpaugh by any chance worn such? No – or the ones mating them would have been found in her closet, and this, some one shouted out, had not been done. Only the one corresponding to that fished up from the waters of the dock had come to light; the other, the one which the child must really have worn, was no nearer being found than the child herself. What did it all mean? No one knew; but all attempted some sort of hazardous guess which I was happy to see fell entirely short of the mark.

There was not a word of the vindictive old man described by Miss Graham, till I myself introduced the topic. My reason or rather my excuse for introducing it was this:

On the gate-post near me I had observed the remnants of a strip of paper which had been pasted there and afterward imperfectly torn off. It had an unsightly look, but I did not pay much attention to it till some movement in the group forced me a little nearer to the post, when I was surprised enough to see that this scrap of paper showed signs of words, and that these words gave evidence of being a date written in the very hand I now had no difficulty in recognizing as that of the old man uppermost in my own mind, even if he were not the one whom Miss Graham had seen on the bridge. This date – strange to say – was the same significant one already noted on the floor of the bungalow – a fact which I felt merited an explanation if any one about me could give it.

Waiting, therefore, for a lull in the remarks passing between the stable-men and other employees about the place, I drew the attention of the first man who would listen, to the half torn-off strip of paper on the post, and asked if that was the way the Ocumpaughs gave notice of their entertainments.

He started, then turned his back on me.

"That wasn't put there for the entertainment," he growled; "that was pasted up there by some one who wanted to show off his writin'. There don't seem to be no other reason."

As the man who spoke these words had thereby proved himself a blockhead, I edged away from him as soon as possible toward a very decent looking fellow who appeared to have more brains than speech.

"Do you know who pasted that date upon the post?" I inquired.

He answered very directly.

"No, or I should have been laying for him long before this. Why, it is not only there you can see it. I found it pinned to the carriage cushions one day just as I was going to drive Mrs. Ocumpaugh out." (Evidently I had struck upon the coachman.) "And not only that. One of the girls up at the house – one as I knows pretty well – tells me – I don't care who hears it now – that it was written across a card which was left at the door for Mrs. Ocumpaugh, and all in the same handwriting, which is not a common one, as you can see. This means something, seeing it was the date when our bad luck fell on us."

He had noted that.

"You don't mean to say that these things were written and put about before the date you see on them."

"But I do. Would we have noticed since? But who are you, sir, if I may ask? One of them detective fellows? If so, I have a word to say: Find that child or Mrs. Ocumpaugh's blood will be on your head! She'll not live till Mr. Ocumpaugh comes home unless she can show him his child."

"Wait!" I called out, for he was turning away toward the stable. "You know who wrote those slips?"

"Not a bit of it. No one does. Not that anybody thinks much about them but me."

"The police must," I ventured.

"May be, but they don't say anything about it. Somehow it looks to me as if they were all at sea."

"Possibly they are," I remarked, letting him go as I caught sight of a small boy coming up the road with several telegrams in his hand.

"Is one of those directed to Robert Trevitt?" I asked, crowding up with the rest, as his small form was allowed to slip through the gate.

"Spec's there is," he replied, looking them over and handing me one.

I carried it to one side and hastily tore it open. It was, as I expected, from my partner, and read as follows:

Man you want has just returned after two days' absence. Am on watch. Saw him just alight from buggy with what looked like sleeping child in his arms. Closed and fastened front door after him. Safe for to-night.

Did I allow my triumph to betray itself? I do not think so. The question which kept down my elation was this: Would I be the first man to get there?

V

THE OLD HOUSE IN YONKERS

The old man whose handwriting I had now positively identified was a former employer of mine. I had worked in his office when a lad. He was a doctor of very fair reputation in Westchester County, and I recognized every characteristic of his as mentioned by Miss Graham, save the frenzy which she described as accompanying his address.

In those days he was calm and cold and, while outwardly scrupulous, capable of forgetting his honor as a physician under a sufficiently strong temptation. I had left him when new prospects opened, and in the years which had elapsed had contented myself with the knowledge that his shingle still hung out in Yonkers, though his practice was nothing to what it used to be when I was in his employ. Now I was going to see him again.

That his was the hand which had stolen Gwendolen seemed no longer open to doubt. That she was under his care in the curious old house I remembered in the heart of Yonkers, seemed equally probable; but why so sordid a man – one who loved money above everything else in the world – should retain the child one minute after the publication of the bountiful reward offered by Mr. Ocumpaugh, was what I could not at first understand. Miss Graham's theory of hate had made no impression on me. He was heartless and not likely to be turned aside from any project he had formed, but he was not what I considered vindictive where nothing was to be gained. Yet my comprehension of him had been but a boy's comprehension, and I was now prepared to put a very different estimate on one whose character had never struck me as being an open one, even when my own had been most credulous.

That my enterprise, even with the knowledge I possessed of this man, promised well or held out any prospects of easy fulfilment, I no longer allowed myself to think. If money was his object – and what other could influence a man of his temperament? – the sum offered by Mr. Ocumpaugh, large though it was, had apparently not sufficed to satisfy his greed. He was holding back the child, or so I now believed, in order to wring a larger, possibly a double, amount from the wretched mother. Fifty thousand was a goodly sum, but one hundred thousand was better; and this man had gigantic ideas where his cupidity was concerned. I remember how firmly he had once stood out for ten thousand dollars when he had been offered five; and I began to see, though in an obscure way as yet, how it might very easily be a part of his plan to work Mrs. Ocumpaugh up to a positive belief in the child's death before he came down upon her for the immense reward he had fixed his heart upon. The date he had written all over the place might thus find some explanation in a plan to weaken her nerve before pressing his exorbitant claims upon her.

Nothing was clear, yet everything was possible in such a nature; and anxious to enter upon the struggle both for my own sake and that of the child of whose condition under that terrible eye I scarcely dared to think, I left Homewood in haste and took the first train for Yonkers. Though the distance was not great, I had fully arranged my plans before entering the town where so many of my boyish years had been spent. I knew the old fox well enough, or thought I did, to be certain that I should have anything but an easy entrance into his house, in case it still harbored the child whom my partner had seen carried in there. I anticipated difficulties, but was concerned about none but the possibility of not being able to bring myself face to face with him. Once in his presence, the knowledge which I secretly possessed of an old but doubtful transaction of his, would serve to make him mine even to the point of yielding up the child he had forcibly abducted. But would he accord me an interview? Could I, without appeal to the police – and you can readily believe I was not anxious to allow them to put their fingers in my pie – force him to open his door and let me into his house, which, as I well recalled, he locked up at nine – after which he would receive no one, not even a patient?

It was not nine yet, but it was very near that hour. I had but twenty minutes in which to mount the hill to the old house marked by the doctor's sign and by another peculiarity of so distinct a nature that it would serve to characterize a dwelling in a city as large as New York – though I doubt if New York can show its like from the Battery to the Bronx. The particulars of this I will mention later. I have first to relate the relief I felt when, on entering the old neighborhood, I heard in response to a few notes of a certain popular melody which I had allowed to leave my lips, an added note or two which warned me that my partner was somewhere hidden among the alleys of this very unaristocratic quarter. Indeed, from the sound, I judged him to be in the rear of the doctor's house and, being anxious to hear what he had to say before advancing upon the door which might open my way to easy fortune or complete defeat, I paused a few steps off and waited for his appearance.

He was at my elbow before I had either seen or heard him. He was always light of foot, but this time he seemed to have no tread at all.

"Still here," was his comforting assurance.

"Both?" I whispered back.

"Both."

"Any one else?"

"No. A boy drove away the buggy and has not come back. Sawbones keeps no girl."

"Is the child quiet? Has there been no alarm?"

"Not a breath."

"No cops in the neighborhood? No spies around?"

"Not one. We've got it all this time. But – "

"Hush!"

"There's nobody."

"Yes, the doctor; he's fastening up his house. I must hasten; nothing would induce me to let that innocent remain under his roof all night."

"It's not the windows he is at."

"What then?"

"The door, the big front door."

"The – "

"Yes."

I gave my partner a surprised look, undoubtedly lost in the darkness, and drew a step nearer the house.

"It's just the same old gloom-box," I exclaimed, and paused for an instant to mark the changes which had taken place in the surroundings. They were very few and I turned back to fix my eye on the front door where a rattling sound could be heard, as of some one fingering the latch. It was this door which formed the peculiarity of the house. In itself it was like any other that was well-fashioned and solid, but it opened upon space – that is, if it was ever opened, which I doubted. The stoop and even the railing which had once guarded it, had all been removed, leaving a bare front, with this inhospitable entrance shut against every one who had not the convenience for mounting to it by a ladder. There was another way in, but this was round on one side, and did not present itself to the eye unless one approached from the west end of the street; so that to half the passers-by the house looked like a deserted one till they came abreast of the flagged path which led to the office door. As the windows had never been unclosed in my day and were not now, I took it for granted that they had remained thus inhospitably shut during all the years of my absence, which certainly offered but little encouragement to a man bent on an errand which would soon take him into those dismal precincts.

"What goes on behind those shuttered windows?" thought I. "I know of one thing, but what else?" The one thing was the counting of money and the arranging of innumerable gold pieces on the great top of a baize-covered table in what I should now describe as the back parlor. I remembered

how he used to do it. I caught him at it once, having crept up one windy night from my little room off the office to see what kept the doctor up so late.

As I now stood listening in the dark street to those strange touches on a door disused for years, I recalled the tremor with which I rounded the top of the stair that night of long ago and the mingled fear and awe with which I recognized, not only such a mint of money as I had never seen out of the bank before, but the greedy and devouring passion with which he pushed the glittering coins about and handled the bank-notes and gloated over the pile it all made when drawn together by his hooked fingers, till the sound, perhaps, of my breathing in the dark hall startled him with a thought of discovery, and his two hands came together over that pile with a gesture more eloquent even than the look with which he seemed to penetrate the very shadows in the silent space wherein I stood. It was a vision short, but inexpressibly vivid, of the miser incarnate, and having seen it and escaped detection, as was my undeserved luck that night, I needed never to ask again why he had been willing to accept risks from which most men shrink from fear if not from conscience. He loved money, not as the spender loves it, openly and with luxurious instincts, but secretly and with a knavish dread of discovery which spoke of treasure ill acquired.

And now he was seeking to add to his gains, and I stood on the outside of his house listening to sounds I did not understand, instead of attempting to draw him to the office-door by ringing the bell he never used to disconnect till nine.

"Do you know that I don't quite like the noises which are being made up there?" came in a sudden whisper to my ear. "Supposing it was the child trying to get out! She does not know there is no stoop; she seemed sleeping or half-dead when he carried her in, and if by any chance she has got hold of the key and the door should open – "

"Hush!" I cried, starting forward in horror of the thought he had suggested. "It is opening. I see a thread of light. What does it mean, Jupp? The child? No; there is more than a child's strength in that push. Hist!" Here I drew him flat against the wall. The door above had swung back and some one was stamping on the threshold over our heads in what appeared to be an outburst of ungovernable fury.

That it was the doctor I could not doubt. But why this anger; why this mad gasping after breath and the half-growl, half-cry, with which he faced the night and the quiet of a street which to his glance, passing as it did over our heads, must have appeared altogether deserted? We were consulting each other's faces for some explanation of this unlooked-for outbreak, when the door above us suddenly slammed to and we heard a renewal of that fumbling with lock and key which had first drawn our attention. But the hand was not sure or the hall was dark, for the key did not turn in the lock. Suddenly awake to my opportunity, I wheeled Jupp about and, making use of his knee and back, climbed up till I was enabled to reach the knob and turn it just as the man within had stepped back, probably to procure more light.

The result was that the door swung open and I stumbled in, falling almost face downward on the marble floor faintly checkered off to my sight in the dim light of a lamp set far back in a bare and dismal hall. I was on my feet again in an instant and it was in this manner, and with all the disadvantages of a hatless head and a disordered countenance, that I encountered again my old employer after five years of absence.

He did not recognize me. I saw it by the look of alarm which crossed his features and the involuntary opening of his lips in what would certainly have been a loud cry if I had not smiled and cried out with false gaiety:

"Excuse me, doctor, I never came in by that door before. Pardon my awkwardness. The step is somewhat high from the street."

My smile is my own, they say; at all events it served to enlighten him.

"Bob Trevitt," he exclaimed, but with a growl of displeasure I could hardly condemn under the circumstances.

I hastened to push my advantage, for he was looking very threateningly toward the door which was swaying gently and in an inviting way to a man who if old, had more power in his arms than I had in my whole body.

"*Mr.* Trevitt," I corrected; "and on a very important errand. I am here on behalf of Mrs. Ocumpaugh, whose child you have at this moment under your roof."

VI DOCTOR POOL

It was a direct attack and for a minute I doubted if I had not made a mistake in making it so suddenly and without gloves. His face purpled, the veins on his forehead started out, his great form shook with an ire that in such domineering natures as his can only find relief in a blow. But the right hand did not rise nor the heavy fist fall. With admirable self-restraint he faced me for a moment, without attempting either protest or denial. Then his blazing eyes cooled down, and with a sudden gesture which at once relaxed his extreme tension of nerve and muscle, he pointed toward the end of the hall and remarked with studied politeness:

"My office is below, as you know. Will you oblige me by following me there?"

I feared him, for I saw that studiously as he sought to hide his impressions, he too regarded the moment as one of critical significance. But I assumed an air of perfect confidence, merely observing as I left the neighborhood of the front door and the proximity of Jupp:

"I have friends on the outside who are waiting for me; so you must not keep me too long."

He was bending to take up the lamp from a small table near the basement stair as I threw out these words in apparent carelessness, and the flash which shot from under his shaggy brows was thus necessarily heightened by the glare in which he stood. Yet with all allowances made I marked him down in my own mind as dangerous, and was correspondingly surprised when he turned on the top step of the narrow staircase I remembered so vividly from the experience I have before named, and in the mildest of accents remarked:

"These stairs are a trifle treacherous. Be careful to grasp the hand-rail as you come down."

Was the game deeper than I thought? In all my remembrance of him I had never before seen him look benevolent, and it alarmed me, coming as it did after the accusation I had made. I felt tempted to make a stand and demand that the interview be held then and there. For I knew his subterranean office very well, and how difficult it would be to raise a cry there which could be heard by any one outside. Still, with a muttered, "Thank you," I proceeded to follow him down, only stopping once in the descent to listen for some sound by which I could determine in which room of the many I knew to be on this floor the little one lay, on whose behalf I was incurring a possible bullet from the pistol I once saw lurking amongst bottles and corks in one of the innumerable drawers of the doctor's table. But all was still around and overhead; too still for my peace of mind, in which dreadful visions began to rise of a drugged or dying child, panting out its innocent breath in darkness and solitude. Yet no. With those thousands to be had for the asking, any man would be a fool to injure or even seriously to frighten a child upon whose good condition they depended; much less a miser whose whole heart was fixed on money.

The clock struck as I put foot on the landing; so much can happen in twenty minutes when events crowd and the passions of men reach their boiling-point! I expected to see the old man try that door, even to double bolt it as in the years gone by. But he merely threw a look that way and proceeded on down the three or four steps which led into the species of basement where he had chosen to fix his office. In another moment that dim and dismal room broke upon my view under the vague light of the small and poorly-trimmed lamp he carried. I saw again its musty walls covered with books, where there were shelves laden with bottles and a loose array of miscellaneous objects I had often handled but out of which I never could make any meaning. I recognized it all and detected but few changes. But these were startling ones. The old lounge standing under the two barred windows which I had often likened in my own mind to those of a jail, had been recovered; and lying on the table, which I had always regarded with a mixture of awe and apprehension, I perceived something

which I had never seen there before: a Bible, with its edges worn and its leaves rumped as if often and eagerly handled.

I was so struck by this last discovery that I stopped, staring, in the doorway, looking from the sacred volume to his worn but vigorous figure drawn up in the middle of the room, with the lamp still in his hand and his small but brilliant eyes fixed upon mine with a certain ironical glitter in them, which gave me my first distrust of the part I had come there to play.

"We will waste no words," said he, setting down the lamp, and seizing with his disengaged hand the long locks of his flowing beard. "In what respect are you a messenger from Mrs. Ocumpaugh, and what makes you think I have her child in this house?"

I found it easier to answer the last question first.

"I know the child is here," I replied, "because my partner saw you bring her in. I have gone into the detective business since leaving you."

"Ah!"

There was an astonishing edge to his smile and I felt that I should have to make the most of that old discovery of mine, if I were to hold my own with this man.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

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

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