Howells William Dean

The Daughter of the Storage

William Howells

The Daughter of the Storage

Howells W.

The Daughter of the Storage / W. Howells — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

The Daughter of the Storage / And Other Things in Prose and Verse

THE DAUGHTER OF THE STORAGE

I

They were getting some of their things out to send into the country, and Forsyth had left his work to help his wife look them over and decide which to take and which to leave. The things were mostly trunks that they had stored the fall before; there were some tables and Colonial bureaus inherited from his mother, and some mirrors and decorative odds and ends, which they would not want in the furnished house they had taken for the summer. There were some canvases which Forsyth said he would paint out and use for other subjects, but which, when he came to look at again, he found really not so bad. The rest, literally, was nothing but trunks; there were, of course, two or three boxes of books. When they had been packed closely into the five-dollar room, with the tables and bureaus and mirrors and canvases and decorative odds and ends put carefully on top, the Forsyths thought the effect very neat, and laughed at themselves for being proud of it.

They spent the winter in Paris planning for the summer in America, and now it had come May, a month which in New York is at its best, and in the Constitutional Storage Safe-Deposit Warehouse is by no means at its worst. The Constitutional Storage is no longer new, but when the Forsyths were among the first to store there it was up to the latest moment in the modern perfections of a safe-deposit warehouse. It was strictly fire-proof; and its long, white, brick-walled, iron-doored corridors, with their clean concrete floors, branching from a central avenue to the tall windows north and south, offered perspectives sculpturesquely bare, or picturesquely heaped with arriving or departing household stuff.

When the Forsyths went to look at it a nice young fellow from the office had gone with them; running ahead and switching on rows of electrics down the corridors, and then, with a wire-basketed electric lamp, which he twirled about and held aloft and alow, showing the dustless, sweet-smelling spaciousness of a perfect five-dollar room. He said it would more than hold their things; and it really held them.

Now, when the same young fellow unlocked the iron door and set it wide, he said he would get them a man, and he got Mrs. Forsyth a gilt armchair from some furniture going into an adjoining twenty-dollar room. She sat down in it, and "Of course," she said, "the pieces I want will be at the very back and the very bottom. Why don't you get yourself a chair, too, Ambrose? What are you looking at?"

With his eyes on the neighboring furniture he answered, "Seems to be the wreck of a millionaire's happy home; parlor and kitchen utensils and office furniture all in white and gold."

"Horrors, yes!" Mrs. Forsyth said, without turning her head from studying her trunks, as if she might divine their contents from their outside.

"Tata and I," her husband said, "are more interested in the millionaire's things." Tata, it appeared, was not a dog, but a child; the name was not the diminutive of her own name, which was Charlotte, but a generic name for a doll, which Tata had learned from her Italian nurse to apply to all little girls and had got applied to herself by her father. She was now at a distance down the corridor, playing a drama with the pieces of millionaire furniture; as they stretched away in variety and splendor

they naturally suggested personages of princely quality, and being touched with her little forefinger tip were capable of entering warmly into Tata's plans for them.

Her mother looked over her shoulder toward the child. "Come here, Tata," she called, and when Tata, having enjoined some tall mirrors to secrecy with a frown and a shake of the head, ran to her, Mrs. Forsyth had forgotten why she had called her. "Oh!" she said, recollecting, "do you know which your trunk is, Tata? Can you show mamma? Can you put your hand on it?"

The child promptly put her hand on the end of a small box just within her tiptoe reach, and her mother said, "I do believe she knows everything that's in it, Ambrose! That trunk has got to be opened the very first one!"

The man that the young fellow said he would send showed at the far end of the corridor, smaller than human, but enlarging himself to the average Irish bulk as he drew near. He was given instructions and obeyed with caressing irony Mrs. Forsyth's order to pull out Tata's trunk first, and she found the key in a large tangle of keys, and opened it, and had the joy of seeing everything recognized by the owner: doll by doll, cook-stove, tin dishes, small brooms, wooden animals on feet and wheels, birds of various plumage, a toy piano, a dust-pan, alphabet blocks, dog's-eared linen Mother Goose books, and the rest. Tata had been allowed to put the things away herself, and she took them out with no apparent sense of the time passed since she saw them last. In the changing life of her parents all times and places were alike to her. She began to play with the things in the storage corridor as if it were yesterday when she saw them last in the flat. Her mother and father left her to them in the distraction of their own trunks. Mrs. Forsyth had these spread over the space toward the window and their lids lifted and tried to decide about them. In the end she had changed the things in them back and forth till she candidly owned that she no longer knew where anything at all was.

As she raised herself for a moment's respite from the problem she saw at the far end of the corridor a lady with two men, who increased in size like her own man as they approached. The lady herself seemed to decrease, though she remained of a magnificence to match the furniture, and looked like it as to her dress of white picked out in gold when she arrived at the twenty-dollar room next the Forsyths'. In her advance she had been vividly played round by a little boy, who ran forward and back and easily doubled the length of the corridor before he came to a stand and remained with his brown eyes fixed on Tata. Tata herself had blue eyes, which now hovered dreamily above the things in her trunk.

The two mothers began politely to ignore each other. She of the twenty-dollar room directed the men who had come with her, and in a voice of authority and appeal at once commanded and consulted them in the disposition of her belongings. At the sound of the mixed tones Mrs. Forsyth signaled to her husband, and, when he came within whispering, murmured: "Pittsburg, *or* Chicago. Did you *ever* hear such a Mid-Western accent!" She pretended to be asking him about repacking the trunk before her, but the other woman was not deceived. She was at least aware of criticism in the air of her neighbors, and she put on greater severity with the workmen. The boy came up and caught her skirt. "What?" she said, bending over. "No, certainly not. I haven't time to attend to you. Go off and play. Don't I tell you no? Well, there, then! Will you get that trunk out where I can open it? That small one there," she said to one of the men, while the other rested for both. She stooped to unlock the trunk and flung up the lid. "Now if you bother me any more I will surely – " But she lost herself short of the threat and began again to seek counsel and issue orders.

The boy fell upon the things in the trunk, which were the things of a boy, as those in Tata's trunk were the things of a girl, and to run with them, one after another, to Tata and to pile them in gift on the floor beside her trunk. He did not stop running back and forth as fast as his short, fat legs could carry him till he had reached the bottom of his box, chattering constantly and taking no note of the effect with Tata. Then, as she made no response whatever to his munificence, he began to be abashed and to look pathetically from her to her father.

"Oh, really, young man," Forsyth said, "we can't let you impoverish yourself at this rate. What have you said to your benefactor, Tata? What are you going to give *him*?"

The children did not understand his large words, but they knew he was affectionately mocking them.

"Ambrose," Mrs. Forsyth said, "you mustn't let him."

"I'm trying to think how to hinder him, but it's rather late," Forsyth answered, and then the boy's mother joined in.

"Indeed, indeed, if you can, it's more than I can. You're just worrying the little girl," she said to the boy.

"Oh no, he isn't, dear little soul," Mrs. Forsyth said, leaving her chair and going up to the two children. She took the boy's hand in hers. "What a kind boy! But you know my little girl mustn't take all your playthings. If you'll give her *one* she'll give *you* one, and that will be enough. You can both play with them all for the present." She referred her suggestion to the boy's mother, and the two ladies met at the invisible line dividing the five-dollar room from the twenty-dollar room.

"Oh yes, indeed," the Mid-Westerner said, willing to meet the New-Yorker half-way. "You're taking things out, I see. I hardly know which is the worst: taking out or putting in."

"Well, we are just completing the experience," Mrs. Forsyth said. "I shall be able to say better how I feel in half an hour."

"You don't mean this is the first time you've stored? I suppose *we've* been in and out of storage twenty times. Not in this warehouse exactly; we've never been here before."

"It seems very nice," Mrs. Forsyth suggested.

"They all do at the beginning. I suppose if we ever came to the end they would seem nicer still. Mr. Bream's business is always taking him away" (it appeared almost instantly that he was the international inspector of a great insurance company's agencies in Europe and South America), "and when I don't go with him it seems easier to break up and go into a hotel than to go on housekeeping. I don't know that it is, though," she questioned. "It's so hard to know what to do with the child in a hotel."

"Yes, but he seems the sort that you could manage with anywhere," Mrs. Forsyth agreed and disagreed.

His mother looked at him where he stood beaming upon Tata and again joyfully awaiting some effect with her. But the child sat back upon her small heels with her eyes fixed on the things in her trunk and made no sign of having seen the heaps of his gifts.

The Forsyths had said to each other before this that their little girl was a queer child, and now they were not so much ashamed of her apparent selfishness or rude indifference as they thought they were. They made a joke of it with the boy's mother, who said she did not believe Tata was anything but shy. She said she often told Mr. Bream that she did wish Peter – yes, that was his name; she didn't like it much, but it was his grandfather's; was Tata a Christian name? Oh, just a pet name! Well, it *was* pretty – could be broken of *his* ridiculous habit; most children – little boys, that was – held onto their things so.

Forsyth would have taken something from Tata and given it to Peter; but his wife would not let him; and he had to content himself with giving Peter a pencil of his own that drew red at one end and blue at the other, and that at once drew a blue boy, that looked like Peter, on the pavement. He told Peter not to draw a boy now, but wait till he got home, and then be careful not to draw a blue boy with the red end. He helped him put his things back into his trunk, and Peter seemed to enjoy that, too.

Tata, without rising from her seat on her heels, watched the restitution with her dreamy eyes; she paid no attention to the blue boy on the pavement; pictures from her father were nothing new to her. The mothers parted with expressions of mutual esteem in spite of their difference of accent and fortune. Mrs. Forsyth asked if she might not kiss Peter, and did so; he ran to his mother and whispered to her; then he ran back and gave Tata so great a hug that she fell over from it.

Tata did not cry, but continued as if lost in thought which she could not break from, and that night, after she had said her prayers with her mother, her mother thought it was time to ask her: "Tata, dear, why did you act so to that boy to-day? Why didn't you give him something of yours when he brought you all his things? Why did you act so oddly?"

Tata said something in a voice so low that her mother could not make it out.

"What did you say?"

"I couldn't tell which," the child still whispered; but now her mother's ear was at her lips.

"How, which?"

"To give him. The more I looked," and the whisper became a quivering breath, "the more I couldn't tell which. And I wanted to give them *all* to him, but I couldn't tell whether it would be right, because you and papa gave them to me for birthday and Christmas," and the quivering breath broke into a sobbing grief, so that the mother had to catch the child up to her heart.

"Dear little tender conscience!" she said, still wiping her eyes when she told the child's father, and they fell into a sweet, serious talk about her before they slept. "And I was ashamed of her before that woman! I know she misjudged her; but *we* ought to have remembered how fine and precious she is, and *known* how she must have suffered, trying to decide."

"Yes, conscience," the father said. "And temperament, the temperament to which decision is martyrdom."

"And she will always have to be deciding! She'll have to decide for you, some day, as I do now; you are very undecided, Ambrose – she gets it from you."

II

The Forsyths were afraid that Tata might want to offer Peter some gift in reparation the next morning, and her father was quite ready, if she said so, to put off their leaving town, and go with her to the Constitutional Storage, which was the only address of Mrs. Bream that he knew. But the child had either forgotten or she was contented with her mother's comforting, and no longer felt remorse.

One does not store the least of one's personal or household gear without giving a hostage to storage, a pledge of allegiance impossible to break. No matter how few things one puts in, one never takes everything out; one puts more things in. Mrs. Forsyth went to the warehouse with Tata in the fall before they sailed for another winter in Paris, and added some old bits she had picked up at farm-houses in their country drives, and they filled the room quite to the top. She told her husband how Tata had entered into the spirit of putting back her trunk of playthings with the hope of seeing it again in the spring; and she added that she had now had to take a seven-fifty room without consulting him, or else throw away the things they had brought home.

During the ten or twelve years that followed, the Forsyths sometimes spent a whole winter in a hotel; sometimes they had a flat; sometimes they had a separate dwelling. If their housing was ample, they took almost everything out of storage; once they got down to a two-dollar bin, and it seemed as if they really were leaving the storage altogether. Then, if they went into a flat that was nearly all studio, their furniture went back in a cataclysmal wave to the warehouse, where a ten-dollar room, a twelve-dollar room, would not dam the overflow.

Tata, who had now outgrown her pet name, and was called Charlotte because her mother felt she ought to be, always went with her to the storage to help look the things over, to see the rooms emptied down to a few boxes, or replenished to bursting. In the first years she played about, close to her mother; as she grew older she ventured further, and began to make friends with other little girls who had come with their mothers. It was quite safe socially to be in the Constitutional Storage; it gave standing; and Mrs. Forsyth fearlessly chanced acquaintance with these mothers, who would sometimes be there whole long mornings or afternoons, taking trunks out or putting them in. With the trunks set into the corridors and opened for them, they would spend the hours looking the contents over, talking to their neighbors, or rapt in long silences when they hesitated with things held off or up, and, after gazing absently at them, putting them back again. Sometimes they varied the process by laying things aside for sending home, and receipting for them at the office as "goods selected."

They were mostly hotel people or apartment people, as Mrs. Forsyth oftenest was herself, but sometimes they were separate-house people. Among these there was one family, not of great rank or wealth, but distinguished, as lifelong New-Yorkers, in a world of comers and goers of every origin. Mrs. Forsyth especially liked them for a certain quality, but what this quality was she could not very well say. They were a mother with two daughters, not quite old maids, but on the way to it, and there was very intermittently the apparently bachelor brother of the girls; at the office Mrs. Forsyth verified her conjecture that he was some sort of minister. One could see they were all gentlefolks, though the girls were not of the last cry of fashion. They were very nice to their mother, and you could tell that they must have been coming with her for years.

At this point in her study of them for her husband's amusement she realized that Charlotte had been coming to the storage with her nearly all her life, and that more and more the child had taken charge of the uneventual inspection of the things. She was shocked to think that she had let this happen, and now she commanded her husband to say whether Charlotte would grow into a storage old maid like those good girls.

Forsyth said, Probably not before her time; but he allowed it was a point to be considered.

Very well, then, Mrs. Forsyth said, the child should never go again; that was all. She had strongly confirmed herself in this resolution when one day she not only let the child go again, but she let her

go alone. The child was now between seventeen and eighteen, rather tall, grave, pretty, with the dull brown hair that goes so well with dreaming blue eyes, and of a stiff grace. She had not come out yet, because she had always been out, handing cakes at her father's studio teas long before she could remember not doing it, and later pouring for her mother with rather a quelling air as she got toward fifteen. During these years the family had been going and coming between Europe and America; they did not know perfectly why, except that it was easier than not.

More and more there was a peculiarity in the goods selected by Charlotte for sending home, which her mother one day noted. "How is it, Charlotte, that you always send exactly the things I want, and when you get your own things here you don't know whether they are what you wanted or not?"

"Because I don't know when I send them. I don't choose them; I can't."

"But you choose the right things for me?"

"No, I don't, mother. I just take what comes first, and you always like it."

"Now, that is nonsense, Charlotte. I can't have you telling me such a thing as that. It's an insult to my intelligence. Do you think I don't know my own mind?"

"I don't know *my* mind," the girl said, so persistently, obstinately, stubbornly, that her mother did not pursue the subject for fear of worse.

She referred it to her husband, who said: "Perhaps it's like poets never being able to remember their own poetry. I've heard it's because they have several versions in their minds when they write and can't remember which they've written. Charlotte has several choices in her mind, and can't choose between her choices."

"Well, we ought to have broken her of her indecision. Some day it will make her very unhappy."

"Pretty hard to break a person of her temperament," Forsyth suggested.

"I know it!" his wife admitted, with a certain pleasure in realizing the fact. "I don't know what we *shall* do."

III

Storage society was almost wholly feminine; in rare instances there was a man who must have been sent in dearth of women or in an hour of their disability. Then the man came hastily, with a porter, and either pulled all the things out of the rooms so that he could honestly say he had seen them, and that the thing wanted was not there; or else merely had the doors opened, and after a glance inside resolved to wait till his wife, or mother, or daughter could come. He agreed in guilty eagerness with the workmen that this was the only way.

The exception to the general rule was a young man who came one bright spring morning when all nature suggested getting one's stuff out and going into the country, and had the room next the Forsyths' original five-dollar room opened. As it happened, Charlotte was at the moment visiting this room upon her mother's charge to see whether certain old scrim sash-curtains, which they had not needed for ages but at last simply *must* have, were not lurking there in a chest of general curtainings. The Forsyths now had rooms on other floors, but their main room was at the end of the corridor branching northward from that where the five-dollar room was. Near this main room that nice New York family had their rooms, and Charlotte had begun the morning in their friendly neighborhood, going through some chests that might perhaps have the general curtainings in them and the scrim curtains among the rest. It had not, and she had gone to what the Forsyths called their old ancestral five-dollar room, where that New York family continued to project a sort of wireless chaperonage over her. But the young man had come with a porter, and, with her own porter, Charlotte could not feel that even a wireless chaperonage was needed, though the young man approached with the most beaming face she thought she had ever seen, and said he hoped he should not be in her way. She answered with a sort of helpless reverberation of his glow, Not at all; she should only be a moment. She wanted to say she hoped she would not be in *his* way, but she saved herself in time, while, with her own eyes intent upon the façade of her room and her mind trying to lose itself in the question which curtain-trunk the scrims might be in, she kept the sense of his sweet eyes, the merriest eyes she had ever seen, effulgent with good-will and apology and reverent admiration. She blushed to think it admiration, though she liked to think it so, and she did not snub him when the young man jumped about, neglecting his own storage, and divining the right moments for his offers of help. She saw that he was a little shorter than herself, that he was very light and quick on his feet, and had a round, brown face, clean-shaven, and a round, brown head, close shorn, from which in the zeal of his attentions to her he had shed his straw hat onto the window-sill. He formed a strong contrast to the contents of his store-room, which was full, mainly, of massive white furniture picked out in gold, and very blond. He said casually that it had been there, off and on, since long before he could remember, and at these words an impression, vague, inexplicable, deepened in Charlotte's mind.

"Mother," she said, for she had now disused the earlier "mamma" in deference to modern usage, "how old was I when we first took that five-dollar room?"

She asked this question after she had shown the scrim curtains she had found and brought home with her.

"Why? I don't know. Two or three; three or four. I should have to count up. What makes you ask?"

"Can a person recollect what happened when they were three or four?"

"I should say not, decidedly."

"Or recollect a face?"

"Certainly not."

"Then of course it wasn't. Mother, do you remember ever telling me what the little boy was like who gave me all his playthings and I couldn't decide what to give him back?"

"What a question! Of course not! He was very brown and funny, with the beamingest little face in the world. Rather short for his age, I should say, though I haven't the least idea what his age was."

"Then it was the very same little boy!" Charlotte said.

"Who was the very same little boy?" her mother demanded.

"The one that was there to-day; the young man, I mean," Charlotte explained, and then she told what had happened with a want of fullness which her mother's imagination supplied.

"Did he say who he was? Is he coming back to-morrow or this afternoon? Did you inquire who he was or where?"

"What an idea, mother!" Charlotte said, grouping the several impossibilities under one head in her answer.

"You had a perfect right to know, if you thought he was the one."

"But I didn't *think* he was the one, and I don't *know* that he is now; and if he was, what could I do about it?"

"That is true," Mrs. Forsyth owned. "But it's very disappointing. I've always felt as if they ought to know it was your undecidedness and not ungenerousness."

Charlotte laughed a little forlornly, but she only said, "Really, mother!"

Mrs. Forsyth was still looking at the curtains. "Well, these are not the scrims I wanted. You must go back. I believe I will go with you. The sooner we have it over the better," she added, and she left the undecided Charlotte to decide whether she meant the scrim curtains or the young man's identity.

It was very well, for one reason, that she decided to go with Charlotte that afternoon. The New-Yorkers must have completed the inspection of their trunks, for they had not come back. Their failure to do so was the more important because the young man had come back and was actively superintending the unpacking of his room. The palatial furniture had all been ranged up and down the corridor, and as fast as a trunk was got out and unlocked he went through it with the help of the storage-men, listed its contents in a note-book with a number, and then transferred the number and a synopsis of the record to a tag and fastened it to the trunk, which he had put back into the room.

When the Forsyths arrived with the mistaken scrim curtains, he interrupted himself with apologies for possibly being in their way; and when Mrs. Forsyth said he was not at all in their way, he got white-and-gold arm-chairs for her and Charlotte and put them so conveniently near the old ancestral room that Mrs. Forsyth scarcely needed to move hand or foot in letting Charlotte restore the wrong curtains and search the chests for the right ones. His politeness made way for conversation and for the almost instant exchange of confidences between himself and Mrs. Forsyth, so that Charlotte was free to enjoy the silence to which they left her in her labors.

"Before I say a word," Mrs. Forsyth said, after saying some hundreds in their mutual inculpation and exculpation, "I want to ask something, and I hope you will excuse it to an old woman's curiosity and not think it rude."

At the words "old woman's" the young man gave a protesting "Oh!" and at the word "rude" he said, "Not at all."

"It is simply this: how long have your things been here? I ask because we've had this room thirteen or fourteen years, and I've never seen your room opened in that whole time."

The young man laughed joyously. "Because it hasn't been opened in that whole time. I was a little chap of three or four bothering round here when my mother put the things in; I believe it was a great frolic for me, but I'm afraid it wasn't for her. I've been told that my activities contributed to the confusion of the things and the things in them that she's been in ever since, and I'm here now to make what reparation I can by listing them."

"She'll find it a great blessing," Mrs. Forsyth said. "I wish we had ours listed. I suppose you remember it all very vividly. It must have been a great occasion for you seeing the things stored at that age."

The young man beamed upon her. "Not so great as now, I'm afraid. The fact is, I don't remember anything about it. But I've been told that I embarrassed with my personal riches a little girl who was looking over her doll's things."

"Oh, indeed!" Mrs. Forsyth said, stiffly, and she turned rather snubbingly from him and said, coldly, to Charlotte: "I think they are in that green trunk. Have you the key?" and, stooping as her daughter stooped, she whispered, "Really!" in condemnation and contempt.

Charlotte showed no signs of sharing either, and Mrs. Forsyth could not very well manage them alone. So when Charlotte said, "No, I haven't the key, mother," and the young man burst in with, "Oh, do let me try my master-key; it will unlock anything that isn't a Yale," Mrs. Forsyth sank back enthroned and the trunk was thrown open.

She then forgot what she had wanted it opened for. Charlotte said, "They're not here, mother," and her mother said, "No, I didn't suppose they were," and began to ask the young man about his mother. It appeared that his father had died twelve years before, and since then his mother and he had been nearly everywhere except at home, though mostly in England; now they had come home to see where they should go next or whether they should stay.

"That would never suit my daughter," Mrs. Forsyth lugged in, partly because the talk had gone on away from her family as long as she could endure, and partly because Charlotte's indecision always amused her. "She can't bear to choose."

"Really?" the young man said. "I don't know whether I like it or not, but I have had to do a lot of it. You mustn't think, though, that I chose this magnificent furniture. My father bought an Italian palace once, and as we couldn't live in it or move it we brought the furniture here."

"It *is* magnificent," Mrs. Forsyth said, looking down the long stretches of it and eying and fingering her specific throne. "I wish my husband could see it – I don't believe he remembers it from fourteen years ago. It looks – excuse me! – very studio."

"Is he a painter? Not Mr. Forsyth the painter?"

"Yes," Mrs. Forsyth eagerly admitted, but wondering how he should know her name, without reflecting that a score of trunk-tags proclaimed it and that she had acquired his by like means.

"I like his things so much," he said. "I thought his three portraits were the best things in the Salon last year."

"Oh, you *saw* them?" Mrs. Forsyth laughed with pleasure and pride. "Then," as if it necessarily followed, "you must come to us some Sunday afternoon. You'll find a number of his new portraits and some of the subjects; they like to see themselves framed." She tried for a card in her hand-bag, but she had none, and she said, "Have you one of my cards, my dear?" Charlotte had, and rendered it up with a severity lost upon her for the moment. She held it toward him. "It's Mr. *Peter* Bream?" she smiled upon him, and he beamed back.

"Did you remember it from our first meeting?"

In their cab Mrs. Forsyth said, "I don't know whether he's what you call rather fresh or not, Charlotte, and I'm not sure that I've been very wise. But he is so nice, and he looked so *glad* to be asked."

Charlotte did not reply at once, and her silent severity came to the surface of her mother's consciousness so painfully that it was rather a relief to have her explode, "Mother, I will thank you not to discuss my temperament with people."

She gave Mrs. Forsyth her chance, and her mother was so happy in being able to say, "I won't – your *temper*, my dear," that she could add with sincere apology: "I'm sorry I vexed you, and I won't do it again."

IV

The next day was Sunday; Peter Bream took it for some Sunday, and came to the tea on Mrs. Forsyth's generalized invitation. She pulled her mouth down and her eyebrows up when his card was brought in, but as he followed hard she made a lightning change to a smile and gave him a hand of cordial welcome. Charlotte had no choice but to welcome him, too, and so the matter was simple for her. She was pouring, as usual, for her mother, who liked to eliminate herself from set duties and walk round among the actual portraits in fact and in frame and talk about them to the potential portraits. Peter, qualified by long sojourn in England, at once pressed himself into the service of handing about the curate's assistant; Mrs. Forsyth electrically explained that it was one of the first brought to New York, and that she had got it at the Stores in London fifteen years before, and it had often been in the old ancestral room, and was there on top of the trunks that first day. She did not recur to the famous instance of Charlotte's infant indecision, and Peter was safe from a snub when he sat down by the girl's side and began to make her laugh. At the end, when her mother asked Charlotte what they had been laughing about, she could not tell; she said she did not know they were laughing.

The next morning Mrs. Forsyth was paying for her Sunday tea with a Monday headache, and more things must be got out for the country. Charlotte had again no choice but to go alone to the storage, and yet again no choice but to be pleasant to Peter when she found him next door listing the contents of his mother's trunks and tagging them as before. He dropped his work and wanted to help her. Suddenly they seemed strangely well acquainted, and he pretended to be asked which pieces she should put aside as goods selected, and chose them for her. She hinted that he was shirking his own work; he said it was an all-summer's job, but he knew her mother was in a hurry. He found the little old trunk of her playthings, and got it down and opened it and took out some toys as goods selected. She made him put them back, but first he catalogued everything in it and synopsized the list on a tag and tagged the trunk. He begged for a broken doll which he had not listed, and Charlotte had so much of her original childish difficulty in parting with that instead of something else that she refused it.

It came lunch-time, and he invited her to go out to lunch with him; and when she declined with dignity he argued that if they went to the Woman's Exchange she would be properly chaperoned by the genius of the place; besides, it was the only place in town where you got real strawberry shortcake. She was ashamed of liking it all; he besought her to let him carry her hand-bag for her, and, as he already had it, she could not prevent him; she did not know, really, how far she might successfully forbid him in anything. At the street door of the apartment-house they found her mother getting out of a cab, and she asked Peter in to lunch; so that Charlotte might as well have lunched with him at the Woman's Exchange.

At all storage warehouses there is a season in autumn when the corridors are heaped with the incoming furniture of people who have decided that they cannot pass another winter in New York and are breaking up housekeeping to go abroad indefinitely. But in the spring, when the Constitutional Safe-Deposit offered ample space for thoughtful research, the meetings of Charlotte and Peter could recur without more consciousness of the advance they were making toward the fated issue than in so many encounters at tea or luncheon or dinner. Mrs. Forsyth was insisting on rather a drastic overhauling of her storage that year. Some of the things, by her command, were shifted to and fro between the more modern rooms and the old ancestral room, and Charlotte had to verify the removals. In deciding upon goods selected for the country she had the help of Peter, and she helped him by interposing some useful hesitations in the case of things he had put aside from his mother's possessions to be sold for her by the warehouse people.

One day he came late and told Charlotte that his mother had suddenly taken her passage for England, and they were sailing the next morning. He said, as if it logically followed, that he had been in love with her from that earliest time when she would not give him the least of her possessions, and

now he asked her if she would not promise him the greatest. She did not like what she felt "rehearsed" in his proposal; it was not her idea of a proposal, which ought to be spontaneous and unpremeditated in terms; at the same time, she resented his precipitation, which she could not deny was inevitable.

She perceived that they were sitting side by side on two of those white-and-gold thrones, and she summoned an indignation with the absurdity in refusing him. She rose and said that she must go; that she must be going; that it was quite time for her to go; and she would not let him follow her to the elevator, as he made some offer of doing, but left him standing among his palatial furniture like a prince in exile.

By the time she reached home she had been able to decide that she must tell her mother at once. Her mother received the fact of Peter's proposal with such transport that she did not realize the fact of Charlotte's refusal. When this was connoted to her she could scarcely keep her temper within the bounds of maternal tenderness. She said she would have nothing more to do with such a girl; that there was but one such pearl as Peter in the universe, and for Charlotte to throw him away like that! Was it because she could not decide? Well, it appeared that she could decide wrong quickly enough when it came to the point. Would she leave it now to her mother?

That Charlotte would not do, but what she did do was to write a letter to Peter taking him back as much as rested with her; but delaying so long in posting it, when it was written, that it reached him among the letters sent on board and supplementarily delivered by his room steward after all the others when the ship had sailed. The best Peter could do in response was a jubilant Marconigram of unequaled cost and comprehensiveness.

His mother had meant to return in the fall, after her custom, to find out whether she wished to spend the winter in New York or not. Before the date for her sailing she fell sick, and Peter came sadly home alone in the spring. Mrs. Bream's death brought Mrs. Forsyth a vain regret; she was sorry now that she had seen so little of Mrs. Bream; Peter's affection for her was beautiful and spoke worlds for both of them; and they, the Forsyths, must do what they could to comfort him.

Charlotte felt the pathos of his case peculiarly when she went to make provision for goods selected for the summer from the old ancestral room, and found him forlorn among his white-and-gold furniture next door. He complained that he had no association with it except the touching fact of his mother's helplessness with it, which he had now inherited. The contents of the trunks were even less intimately of his experience; he had performed a filial duty in listing their contents, which long antedated him, and consisted mostly of palatial bric-à-brac and the varied spoils of travel.

He cheered up, however, in proposing to her that they should buy a Castle in Spain and put them into it. The fancy pleased her, but visibly she shrank from a step which it involved, so that he was, as it were, forced to say, half jokingly, half ruefully, "I can imagine your not caring for this rubbish or what became of it, Charlotte, but what about the owner?"

"The owner?" she asked, as it were somnambulantly.

"Yes. Marrying him, say, sometime soon."

"Oh, Peter, I couldn't."

"Couldn't? You know that's not playing the game exactly."

"Yes; but not – not right away?"

"Well, I don't know much about it in my own case, but isn't it usual to fix some approximate date? When should you think?"

"Oh, Peter, I *can't* think."

"Will you let me fix it? I must go West and sell out and pull up, you know, preparatory to never going again. We can fix the day now or we can fix it when I come back."

"Oh, when you come back," she entreated so eagerly that Peter said:

"Charlotte, let me ask you one thing. Were you ever sorry you wrote me that taking-back letter?"

"Why, Peter, you know how I am. When I have decided something I have undecided it. That's all."

From gay he turned to grave. "I ought to have thought. I haven't been fair; *I* haven't played the game. I ought to have given you another chance; and I haven't, have I?"

"Why, I suppose a girl can always change," Charlotte said, suggestively.

"Yes, but you won't always be a girl. I've never asked you if you wanted to change. I ask you now. Do you?"

"How can I tell? Hadn't we better let it go as it is? Only not hurry about – about – marrying?"

"Certainly not hurry about marrying. I've wondered that a girl could make up her mind to marry any given man. Haven't you ever wished that you had not made up your mind about me?"

"Hundreds of times. But I don't know that I meant anything by it."

He took her hand from where it lay in her lap as again she sat on one of the white-and-gold thrones beside him and gently pressed it. "Well, then, let's play we have never been engaged. I'm going West to-night to settle things up for good, and I won't be back for three or four months, and when I come back we'll start new. I'll ask you, and you shall say yes or no just as if you had never said either before."

"Peter, when you talk like that!" She saw his brown, round face dimly through her wet eyes, and she wanted to hug him for pity of him and pride in him, but she could not decide to do it. They went out to lunch at the Woman's Exchange, and the only regret Peter had was that it was so long past the season of strawberry shortcake, and that Charlotte seemed neither to talk nor to listen; she ought to have done one or the other.

They had left the Vaneckens busy with their summer trunks at the far end of the northward corridor, where their wireless station had been re-established for Charlotte's advantage, though she had not thought of it the whole short morning long. When she came back from lunch the Vaneckens were just brushing away the crumbs of theirs, which the son and brother seemed to have brought in for them in a paper box; at any rate, he was now there, making believe to help them.

Mrs. Forsyth had promised to come, but she came so late in the afternoon that she owned she had been grudgingly admitted at the office, and she was rather indignant about it. By this time, without having been West for three months, Peter had asked a question which had apparently never been asked before, and Charlotte had as newly answered it. "And now, mother," she said, while Mrs. Forsyth passed from indignant to exultant, "I want to be married right away, before Peter changes his mind about taking me West with him. Let us go home at once. You always said I should have a home wedding."

"What a ridiculous idea!" Mrs. Forsyth said, more to gain time than anything else. She added, "Everything is at sixes and sevens in the flat. There wouldn't be standing-room." A sudden thought flashed upon her, which, because it was sudden and in keeping with her character, she put into tentative words. "You're more at home *here* than anywhere else. You were almost born here. You've played about here ever since you were a child. You first met Peter here. He proposed to you here, and you rejected him here. He's proposed here again, and you've accepted him, you say – "

"Mother!" Charlotte broke in terribly upon her. "Are you suggesting that I should be married in a storage warehouse? Well, I haven't fallen quite so low as that yet. If I can't have a *home* wedding, I will have a *church* wedding, and I will wait till doomsday for it if necessary."

"I don't know about doomsday," Mrs. Forsyth said, "but as far as to-day is concerned, it's too late for a church wedding. Peter, isn't there something about canonical hours? And isn't it past them?"

"That's in the Episcopal Church," Peter said, and then he asked, very politely, "Will you excuse me for a moment?" and walked away as if he had an idea. It was apparently to join the Vaneckens, who stood in a group at the end of their corridor, watching the restoration of the trunks which they had been working over the whole day. He came back with Mr. Vanecken and Mr. Vanecken's mother. He was smiling radiantly, and they amusedly.

"It's all right," he explained. "Mr. Vanecken is a Presbyterian minister, and he will marry us now."

"But not here!" Charlotte cried, feeling herself weaken.

"No, certainly not," the dominie reassured her. "I know a church in the next block that I can borrow for the occasion. But what about the license?"

It was in the day before the parties must both make application in person, and Peter took a paper from his breast pocket. "I thought it might be needed, sometime, and I got it on the way up, this morning."

"Oh, how thoughtful of you, Peter!" Mrs. Forsyth moaned in admiration otherwise inexpressible, and the rest laughed, even Charlotte, who laughed hysterically. At the end of the corridor they met the Misses Vanecken waiting for them, unobtrusively expectant, and they all went down in the elevator together. Just as they were leaving the building, which had the air of hurrying them out, Mrs. Forsyth had an inspiration. "Good heavens!" she exclaimed, and then, in deference to Mr. Vanecken, said, "Good gracious, I *mean*. My husband! Peter, go right into the office and telephone Mr. Forsyth."

"Perhaps," Mr. Vanecken said, "I had better go and see about having my friend's church opened, in the meanwhile, and – "

"By all means!" Mrs. Forsyth said from her mood of universal approbation.

But Mr. Vanecken came back looking rather queer and crestfallen. "I find my friend has gone into the country for a few days; and I don't quite like to get the sexton to open the church without his authority, and – But New York is full of churches, and we can easily find another, with a little delay, if – "

He looked at Peter, who looked at Charlotte, who burst out with unprecedented determination. "No, we can't wait. I shall never marry Peter if we do. Mother, you are right. But *must* it be in the old ancestral five-dollar room?"

They all laughed except Charlotte, who was more like crying.

"Certainly not," Mr. Vanecken said. "I've no doubt the manager – "

He never seemed to end his sentences, and he now left this one broken off while he penetrated the railing which fenced in the manager alone among a group of vacated desks, frowning impatient. At some murmured words from the dominie, he shouted, "*What!*" and then came out radiantly smiling, and saying, "Why, certainly." He knew all the group as old storers in the Constitutional, and called them each by name as he shook them each by the hand. "Everything else has happened here, and I don't see why this shouldn't. Come right into the reception-room."

With some paintings of biblical subjects, unclaimed from the storage, on the walls, the place had a religious effect, and the manager significantly looked out of it a lingering stenographer, who was standing before a glass with two hatpins crossed in her mouth preparatory to thrusting them through the straw. She withdrew, visibly curious and reluctant, and then the manager offered to withdraw himself.

"No," Charlotte said, surprisingly initiative in these junctures, "I don't know how it is in Mr. Vanecken's church, but, if father doesn't come, perhaps you'll have to give me away. At any rate, you're an old friend of the family, and I should be hurt if you didn't stay."

She laid her hand on the manager's arm, and just as he had protestingly and politely consented, her father arrived in a taxicab, rather grumbling from having been obliged to cut short a sitting. When it was all over, and the Vaneckens were eliminated, when, in fact, the Breams had joined the Forsyths at a wedding dinner which the bride's father had given them at Delmonico's and had precipitated themselves into a train for Niagara ("So banal," Mrs. Forsyth said, "but I suppose they had to go somewhere, and *we* went to Niagara, come to think of it, and it's on their way West"), the bride's mother remained up late talking it all over. She took credit to herself for the whole affair, and gave herself a great deal of just praise. But when she said, "I do believe, if it hadn't been for me, at the last, Charlotte would never have made up her mind," Forsyth demurred.

"I should say Peter had a good deal to do with making up her mind for her."

"Yes, you might say that."

"And for once in her life Charlotte seems to have had her mind ready for making up."

"Yes, you might say that, too. I believe she is going to turn out a decided character, after all. I *never* saw anybody so determined not to be married in a storage warehouse."

II
A PRESENTIMENT

Over our coffee in the Turkish room Minver was usually a censor of our several foibles rather than a sharer in our philosophic speculations and metaphysical conjectures. He liked to disable me as one professionally vowed to the fabulous, and he had unfailing fun with the romantic sentimentality of Rulledge, which was in fact so little in keeping with the gross super-abundance of his person, his habitual gluttony, and his ridiculous indolence. Minver knew very well that Rulledge was a good fellow withal, and would willingly do any kind action that did not seriously interfere with his comfort, or make too heavy a draft upon his pocket. His self-indulgence, which was quite blameless, unless surfeit is a fault, was the basis of an interest in occult themes, which was the means of even higher diversion to Minver. He liked to have Rulledge approach Wanhope from this side, in the invincible persuasion that the psychologist would be interested in these themes by the law of his science, though he had been assured again and again that in spite of its misleading name psychology did not deal with the soul as Rulledge supposed the soul; and Minver's eyes lighted up with a prescience of uncommon pleasure when, late one night, after we had vainly tried to hit it off in talk, now of this, now of that, Rulledge asked Wanhope, abruptly as if it followed from something before:

"Wasn't there a great deal more said about presentiments forty or fifty years ago than there is now?"

Wanhope had been lapsing deeper and deeper into the hollow of his chair; but he now pulled himself up, and turned quickly toward Rulledge. "What made you think of that?" he asked.

"I don't know. Why?"

"Because I was thinking of it myself." He glanced at me, and I shook my head.

"Well," Minver said, "if it will leave Acton out in the cold, I'll own that I was thinking of it, too. I was going back in my mind, for no reason that I know of, to my childhood, when I first heard of such a thing as a presentiment, and when I was afraid of having one. I had the notion that presentiments ran in the family."

"Why had you that notion?" Rulledge demanded.

"I don't know that I proposed telling," the painter said, giving himself to his pipe.

"Perhaps you didn't have it," Rulledge retaliated.

"Perhaps," Minver assented.

Wanhope turned from the personal aspect of the matter. "It's rather curious that we should all three have had the same thing in mind just now; or, rather, it is not very curious. Such coincidences are really very common. Something must have been said at dinner which suggested it to all of us."

"All but Acton," Minver demurred.

"I mightn't have heard what was said," I explained. "I suppose the passing of all that sort of sub-beliefs must date from the general lapse of faith in personal immortality."

"Yes, no doubt," Wanhope assented. "It is very striking how sudden the lapse was. Everyone who experienced it in himself could date it to a year, if not to a day. The agnosticism of scientific men was of course all the time undermining the fabric of faith, and then it fell in abruptly, reaching one believer after another as fast as the ground was taken wholly or partly from under his feet. I can remember how people once disputed whether there were such beings as guardian spirits or not. That minor question was disposed of when it was decided that there were no spirits at all."

"Naturally," Minver said. "And the decay of the presentiment must have been hastened by the failure of so many presentiments to make good."

"The great majority of them have failed to make good, from the beginning of time," Wanhope replied.

"There are two kinds of presentiments," Rulledge suggested, with a philosophic air. "The true and the untrue."

"Like mushrooms," Minver said. "Only, the true presentiment kills, and the true mushroom nourishes. Talking of mushrooms, they have a way in Switzerland of preserving them in walnut oil, and they fill you with the darkest forebodings, after you've filled yourself with the mushrooms. There's some occult relation between the two. Think it out, Rulledge!"

Rulledge ignored him in turning to Wanhope. "The trouble is how to distinguish the true from the untrue presentiment."

"It would be interesting," Wanhope began, but Minver broke in upon him maliciously.

"To know how much the dyspepsia of our predecessors had to with the prevalence of presentimentalism? I agree with you, that a better diet has a good deal to do with the decline of the dark foreboding among us. What I can't understand is, how a gross and reckless feeder, like Rulledge here, doesn't go about like ancestral voices prophesying all sorts of dreadful things."

"That's rather cheap talk, even for you, Minver," Rulledge said. "Why did you think presentiments ran in *your* family?"

"Well, there you have me, Rulledge. That's where my theory fails. I can remember," Minver continued soberly, "the talk there used to be about them among my people. They were serious people in an unreligious way, or rather an unecclesiastical way. They were never spiritualists, but I don't think there was one of them who doubted that he should live hereafter; he might doubt that he was living here, but there was no question of the other thing. I must say it gave a dignity to their conversation which, when they met, as they were apt to do at one another's houses on Sunday nights, was not of common things. One of my uncles was a merchant, another a doctor; my father was a portrait-painter by profession, and a sign-painter by practice. I suppose that's where I got my knack, such as it is. The merchant was an invalid, rather, though he kept about his business, and our people merely recognized him as being out of health. He was what we could call, for that day and region – the Middle West of the early fifties – a man of unusual refinement. I suppose this was temperamental with him largely; but he had cultivated tastes, too. I remember him as a peculiarly gentle person, with a pensive cast of face, and the melancholy accomplishment of playing the flute."

"I wonder why nobody plays the flute nowadays," I mused aloud.

"Yes, it's quite obsolete," Minver said. "They only play the flute in the orchestras now. I always look at the man who plays it and think of my uncle. He used to be very nice to me as a child; and he was very fond of my father, in a sort of filial way; my father was so much older. I can remember my young aunt; and how pretty she was as she sat at the piano, and sang and played to his fluting. When she looked forward at the music, her curls fell into her neck; they wore curls then, grown-up women; and though I don't think curls are beautiful, my aunt's beauty would have been less without them; in fact, I can't think of her without them.

"She was delicate, too; they were really a pair of invalids; but she had none of his melancholy. They had had several children, who died, one after another, and there was only one left at the time I am speaking of. I rather wonder, now, that the thought of those poor little ghost-cousins didn't make me uncomfortable. I was a very superstitious boy, but I seem not to have thought of them. I played with the little girl who was left, and I liked going to my uncle's better than anywhere else. I preferred going in the daytime and in the summer-time. Then my cousin and I sat in a nook of the garden and fought violets, as we called it; hooked the wry necks of the flowers together and twitched to see which blossom would come off first. She was a sunny little thing, like her mother, and she had curls, like her. I can't express the feeling I had for my aunt; she seemed the embodiment of a world that was at once very proud and very good. I suppose she dressed fashionably, as things went then and there; and her style as well as her beauty fascinated me. I would have done anything to please her, far more than to please my cousin. With her I used to squabble, and sometimes sent her crying to her mother.

Then I always ran off home, but when I sneaked back, or was sent for to come and play with my cousin, I was not scolded for my wickedness.

"My uncle was more prosperous than his brothers; he lived in a much better house than ours, and I used to be quite awe-struck by its magnificence. He went East, as we said, twice a year to buy goods, and he had things sent back for his house such as we never saw elsewhere; those cask-shaped seats of blue china for the verandas, and bamboo chairs. There were cane-bottom chairs in the sitting-room, such as we had in our best room; in the parlor the large pieces were of mahogany veneer, upholstered in black hair-cloth; they held me in awe. The piano filled half the place; the windows came down to the ground, and had Venetian blinds and lace curtains.

"We all went in there after the Sunday night supper, and then the fathers and mothers were apt to begin talking of those occult things that gave me the creeps. It was after the Rochester Knockings, as they were called, had been exposed, and so had spread like an infection everywhere. It was as if people were waiting to have the fraud shown up in order to believe in it."

"That sort of thing happens," Wanhope agreed. "It's as if the seeds of the ventilated imposture were carried atmospherically into the human mind broadcast and a universal crop of self-delusion sprang up."

"At any rate," Minver resumed, "instead of the gift being confined to a few persons – a small sisterhood with detonating knee-joints – there were rappings in every well-regulated household; all the tables tipped; people went to sleep to the soft patter of raps on the headboards of their beds; and girls who could not spell were occupied in delivering messages from Socrates, Ben Franklin and Shakespeare. Besides the physical demonstrations, there were all sorts of psychical intimations from the world which we've now abolished."

"Not permanently, perhaps," I suggested.

"Well, that remains to be seen," Minver said. "It was this sort of thing which my people valued above the other. Perhaps they were exclusive in their tastes, and did not care for an occultism which the crowd could share with them; though this is a conjecture too long after the fact to have much value. As far as I can now remember, they used to talk of the double presence of living persons, like their being where they greatly wished to be as well as where they really were; of clairvoyance; of what we call mind-transference, now; of weird coincidences of all kinds; of strange experiences of their own and of others; of the participation of animals in these experiences, like the testimony of cats and dogs to the presence of invisible spirits; of dreams that came true, or came near coming true; and, above everything, of forebodings and presentiments.

"I dare say they didn't always talk of such things, and I'm giving possibly a general impression from a single instance; everything remembered of childhood is as if from large and repeated occurrence. But it must have happened more than once, for I recall that when it came to presentiments my aunt broke it up, perhaps once only. My cousin used to get very sleepy on the rug before the fire, and her mother would carry her off to bed, very cross and impatient of being kissed good night, while I was left to the brunt of the occult alone. I could not go with my aunt and cousin, and I folded myself in my mother's skirt, where I sat at her feet, and listened in an anguish of drowsy terror. The talk would pass into my dreams, and the dreams would return into the talk; and I would suffer a sort of double nightmare, waking and sleeping."

"Poor little devil!" Rulledge broke out. "It's astonishing how people will go on before children, and never think of the misery they're making for them."

"I believe my mother thought of it," Minver returned, "but when that sort of talk began, the witchery of it was probably too strong for her. 'It held her like a two years' child'; I was eight that winter. I don't know how long my suffering had gone on, when my aunt came back and seemed to break up the talk. It had got to presentiments, and, whether they knew that this was forbidden ground with her, or whether she now actually said something about it, they turned to talk of other things. I'm

not telling you all this from my own memory, which deals with only a point or two. My father and mother used to recur to it when I was older, and I am piecing out my story from their memories.

"My uncle, with all his temperamental pensiveness, was my aunt's stay and cheer in the fits of depression which she paid with for her usual gaiety. But these fits always began with some uncommon depression of his – some effect of the forebodings he was subject to. Her opposition to that kind of thing was purely unselfish, but certainly she dreaded it for him as well as herself. I suppose there was a sort of conscious silence in the others which betrayed them to her. 'Well,' she said, laughing, 'have you been at it again? That poor child looks frightened out of his wits.'

"They all laughed then, and my father said, hypocritically, 'I was just going to ask Felix whether he expected to start East this week or next.'

"My uncle tried to make light of what was always a heavy matter with him. 'Well, yesterday,' he answered, 'I should have said next week; but it's this week, now. I'm going on Wednesday.'

"'By stage or packet?' my father asked.

"'Oh, I shall take the canal to the lake, and get the boat for Buffalo there,' my uncle said.

"They went on to speak of the trip to New York, and how much easier it was then than it used to be when you had to go by stage over the mountains to Philadelphia and on by stage again. Now, it seemed, you got the Erie Canal packet at Buffalo and the Hudson River steamboat at Albany, and reached New York in four or five days, in great comfort without the least fatigue. They had all risen and my aunt had gone out with her sisters-in-law to help them get their wraps. When they returned, it seemed that they had been talking of the journey, too, for she said to my mother, laughing again, 'Well, Richard may think it's easy; but somehow Felix never expects to get home alive.'

"I don't think I ever heard my uncle laugh, but I can remember how he smiled at my aunt's laughing, as he put his hand on her shoulder; I thought it was somehow a very sad smile. On Wednesday I was allowed to go with my aunt and cousin to see him off on the packet, which came up from Cincinnati early in the morning; I had lain awake most of the night, and then nearly overslept myself, and then was at the canal in time. We made a gay parting for him, but when the boat started, and I was gloating on the three horses making up the tow-path at a spanking trot, under the snaky spirals of the driver's smacking whip-lash, I caught sight of my uncle standing on the deck and smiling that sad smile of his. My aunt was waving her handkerchief, but when she turned away she put it to her eyes.

"The rest of the story, such as it is, I know, almost to the very end, from what I heard my father and mother say from my uncle's report afterward. He told them that, when the boat started, the stress to stay was so strong upon him that if he had not been ashamed he would have jumped ashore and followed us home. He said that he could not analyze his feelings; it was not yet any definite foreboding, but simply a depression that seemed to crush him so that all his movements were leaden, when he turned at last, and went down to breakfast in the cabin below. The stress did not lighten with the little changes and chances of the voyage to the lake. He was never much given to making acquaintance with people, but now he found himself so absent-minded that he was aware of being sometimes spoken to by friendly strangers without replying until it was too late even to apologize. He was not only steeped in this gloom, but he had the constant distress of the effort he involuntarily made to trace it back to some cause or follow it forward to some consequence. He kept trying at this, with a mind so tensely bent to the mere horror that he could not for a moment strain away from it. He would very willingly have occupied himself with other things, but the anguish which the double action of his mind gave him was such that he could not bear the effort; all he could do was to abandon himself to his obsession. This would ease him only for a while, though, and then he would suffer the misery of trying in vain to escape from it.

"He thought he must be going mad, but insanity implied some definite delusion or hallucination, and, so far as he could make out, he had none. He was simply crushed by a nameless foreboding. Something dreadful was to happen, but this was all he felt; knowledge had no part in his condition.

He could not say whether he slept during the two nights that passed before he reached Toledo, where he was to take the lake steamer for Buffalo. He wished to turn back again, but the relentless pressure which had kept him from turning back at the start was as strong as ever with him. He tried to give his presentiment direction by talking with the other passengers about a recent accident to a lake steamer, in which several hundred lives were lost; there had been a collision in rough weather, and one of the boats had gone down in a few minutes. There was a sort of relief in that, but the double action of the mind brought the same intolerable anguish again, and he settled back for refuge under the shadow of his impenetrable doom. This did not lift till he was well on his way from Albany to New York by the Hudson River. The canal-boat voyage from Buffalo to Albany had been as eventless as that to Toledo, and his lake steamer had reached Buffalo in safety, for which it had seemed as if those lost in the recent disaster had paid.

"He tried to pierce his heavy cloud by argument from the security in which he had traveled so far, but the very security had its hopelessness. If something had happened – some slight accident – to interrupt it, his reason, or his unreason, might have taken it for a sign that the obscure doom, whatever it was, had been averted.

"Up to this time he had not been able to connect his foreboding with anything definite, and he was not afraid for himself. He was simply without the formless hope that helps us on at every step, through good and bad, and it was a mortal peril, which he came through safely while scores of others were lost, that gave his presentiment direction. He had taken the day boat from Albany, and about the middle of the afternoon the boat, making way under a head-wind, took fire. The pilot immediately ran her ashore, and her passengers, those that had the courage for it, ran aft, and began jumping from the stern, but a great many women and children were burned. My uncle was one of the first of those who jumped, and he stood in the water, trying to save those who came after from drowning; it was not very deep. Some of the women lost courage for the leap, and some turned back into the flames, remembering children they had left behind. One poor creature stood hesitating wildly, and he called up to her to jump. At last she did so, almost into his arms, and then she clung about him as he helped her ashore. 'Oh,' she cried out between her sobs, 'if you have a wife and children at home, God will take you safe back to them; you have saved my life for my husband and little ones.' 'No,' he was conscious of saying, 'I shall never see my wife again,' and now his foreboding had the direction that it had wanted before.

"From that on he simply knew that he should not get home alive, and he waited resignedly for the time and form of his disaster. He had a sort of peace in that. He went about his business intelligently, and from habit carefully, but it was with a mechanical action of the mind, something, he imagined, like the mechanical action of his body in those organs which do their part without bidding from the will. He was only a few days in New York, but in the course of them he got several letters from his wife telling him that all was going well with her and their daughter. It was before the times when you can ask and answer questions by telegraph, and he started back, necessarily without having heard the latest news from home.

"He made the return trip in a sort of daze, talking, reading, eating, and sleeping in the calm certainty of doom, and only wondering how it would be fulfilled, and what hour of the night or day. But it is no use my eking this out; I heard it, as I say, when I was a child, and I am afraid that if I should try to give it with the full detail I should take to inventing particulars." Minver paused a moment, and then he said: "But there was one thing that impressed itself indelibly on my memory. My uncle got back perfectly safe and well."

"Oh!" Rulledge snorted in rude dissatisfaction.

"What was it impressed itself on your memory?" Wanhope asked, with scientific detachment from the story as a story.

Minver continued to address Wanhope, without regarding Rulledge. "My uncle told my father that some sort of psychical change, which he could not describe, but which he was as conscious of as if it were physical, took place within him as he came in sight of his house – "

"Yes," Wanhope prompted.

"He had driven down from the canal-packet in the old omnibus which used to meet passengers and distribute them at their destinations in town. All the way to his house he was still under the doom as regarded himself, but bewildered that he should be getting home safe and well, and he was refusing his escape, as it were, and then suddenly, at the sight of the familiar house, the change within him happened. He looked out of the omnibus window and saw a group of neighbors at his gate. As he got out of the omnibus, my father took him by the hand, as if to hold him back a moment. Then he said to my father, very quietly, 'You needn't tell me: my wife is dead.'"

There was an appreciable pause, in which we were all silent, and then Rulledge demanded, greedily, "And was she?"

"Really, Rulledge!" I could not help protesting.

Minver asked him, almost compassionately and with unwonted gentleness, as from the mood in which his reminiscence had left him: "You suspected a hoax? She had died suddenly the night before while she and my cousin were getting things ready to welcome my uncle home in the morning. I'm sorry you're disappointed," he added, getting back to his irony.

"Whatever," Rulledge pursued, "became of the little girl?"

"She died rather young; a great many years ago; and my uncle soon after her."

Rulledge went away without saying anything, but presently returned with the sandwich which he had apparently gone for, while Wanhope was remarking: "That want of definition in the presentiment at first, and then its determination in the new direction by, as it were, propinquity – it is all very curious. Possibly we shall some day discover a law in such matters."

Rulledge said: "How was it your boyhood was passed in the Middle West, Minver? I always thought you were a Bostonian."

"I was an adoptive Bostonian for a good while, until I decided to become a native New-Yorker, so that I could always be near to you, Rulledge. You can never know what a delicate satisfaction you are."

Minver laughed, and we were severally restored to the wonted relations which his story had interrupted.

III
CAPTAIN DUNLEVY'S LAST TRIP

It was against the law, in such case made and provided,
Of the United States, but by the good will of the pilots
That we would some of us climb to the pilot-house after our breakfast
For a morning smoke, and find ourselves seats on the benching
Under the windows, or in the worn-smooth arm-chairs. The pilot,
Which one it was did not matter, would tilt his head round and say, "All right!"
When he had seen who we were, and begin, or go on as from stopping
In the midst of talk that was leading up to a story,
Just before we came in, and the story, begun or beginning,
Always began or ended with some one, or something or other,Having to do with the river. If one left the wheel to the other,
Going off watch, he would say to his partner standing behind him
With his hands stretched out for the spokes that were not given up yet,
"Captain, you can tell them the thing I was going to tell them
Better than I could, I reckon," and then the other would answer,
"Well, I don't know as I feel so sure of that, captain," and having
Recognized each other so by that courtesy title of captain
Never officially failed of without offense among pilots,
One would subside into Jim and into Jerry the other.

It was on these terms, at least, Captain Dunn relieved Captain Davis
When we had settled ourselves one day to listen in comfort,
After some psychological subtleties we had indulged in at breakfast
Touching that weird experience every one knows when the senses
Juggle the points of the compass out of true orientation,
Changing the North to the South, and the East to the West. "Why, Jerry, what was it
You was going to tell them?" "Oh, never *you* mind what it *was*, Jim.
You tell them something else," and so Captain Davis submitted,
While Captain Dunn, with a laugh, got away beyond reach of his protest.
Then Captain Davis, with fitting, deprecatory preamble,
Launched himself on a story that promised to be all a story
Could be expected to be, when one of those women – you know them —
Who interrupt on any occasion or none, interrupted,
Pointed her hand, and asked, "Oh, what is that island there, captain?"
"That one, ma'am?" He gave her the name, and then the woman persisted,
"Don't say you know them all by sight!" "Yes, by sight or by feeling."
"What do you mean by feeling?" "Why, just that by daylight we see them,

And in the dark it's like as if somehow we felt them, I reckon.
Every foot of the channel and change in it, wash-out and cave-in,
Every bend and turn of it, every sand-bar and landmark,
Every island, of course, we have got to see them, or feel them."
"But if you don't?" "But we've got to." "But aren't you ever mistaken?"
"Never the second time." "Now, what do you mean, Captain Davis?
Never the second time." "Well, let me tell you a story.
It's not the one I begun, but that island you asked about yonder
Puts me in mind of it, happens to be the place where it happened,
Three years ago. I suppose no man ever knew the Ohio
Better than Captain Dunlevy, if any one else knew it like him.
Man and boy he had been pretty much his whole life on the river:
Cabin-boy first on a keelboat before the day of the steamboats,
Back in the pioneer times; and watchman then on a steamboat;
Then second mate, and then mate, and then pilot and captain and owner
—
But he was proudest, I reckon, of being about the best pilot
On the Ohio. He knew it as well as he knew his own Bible,
And I don't hardly believe that ever Captain Dunlevy
Let a single day go by without reading a chapter."

While the pilot went on with his talk, and in regular, rhythmical motion
Swayed from one side to the other before his wheel, and we listened,
Certain typical facts of the picturesque life of the river
Won their way to our consciousness as without help of our senses.
It was along about the beginning of March, but already
In the sleepy sunshine the budding maples and willows,
Where they waded out in the shallow wash of the freshet,
Showed the dull red and the yellow green of their blossoms and catkins,
And in their tops the foremost flocks of blackbirds debated
As to which they should colonize first. The indolent house-boats
Loafing along the shore, sent up in silvery spirals
Out of their kitchen pipes the smoke of their casual breakfasts.
Once a wide tow of coal-barges, loaded clear down to the gunwales,
Gave us the slack of the current, with proper formalities shouted
By the hoarse-throated stern-wheeler that pushed the black barges before her,
And as she passed us poured a foamy cascade from her paddles.
Then, as a raft of logs, which the spread of the barges had hidden,
River-wide, weltered in sight, with a sudden jump forward the pilot
Dropped his whole weight on the spokes of the wheel just in time to escape it.

"Always give those fellows," he joked, "all the leeway they ask for;
Worst kind of thing on the river you want your boat to run into.
Where had I got about Captain Dunlevy? Oh yes, I remember.
Well, when the railroads began to run away from the steamboats,
Taking the carrying trade in the very edge of the water,
It was all up with the old flush times, and Captain Dunlevy

Had to climb down with the rest of us pilots till he was only
Captain the same as any and every pilot is captain,
Glad enough, too, to be getting his hundred and twenty-five dollars
Through the months of the spring and fall while navigation was open.
Never lowered himself, though, a bit from captain and owner,
Knew his rights and yours, and never would thought of allowing
Any such thing as a liberty *from* you or taking one *with* you.
I had been his cub, and all that I knew of the river
Captain Dunlevy had learnt me; and if you know what the feeling
Is of a cub for the pilot that learns him the river, you'll trust me
When I tell you I felt it the highest kind of an honor
Having him for my partner; and when I came up to relieve him,
One day, here at the wheel, and actu'lly thought that I found him
Taking that island there on the left, I thought I was crazy.
No, I couldn't believe my senses, and yet I couldn't endure it.
Seeing him climb the spokes of the wheel to warp the *Kanawha*,
With the biggest trip of passengers ever she carried,
Round on the bar at the left that fairly stuck out of the water.
Well, as I said, he learnt me all that I knew of the river,
And was I to learn *him* now which side to take of an island
When I knew he knew it like his right hand from his left hand?
My, but I hated to speak! It certainly seemed like my tongue clove,
Like the Bible says, to the roof of my mouth! But I had to.
'Captain,' I says, and it seemed like another person was talking,
'Do you usu'lly take that island there on the eastward?'
'Yes,' he says, and he laughed, 'and I thought I had learnt you to do it,
When you was going up.' 'But not going *down*, did you, captain?'
'Down?' And he whirled at me, and, without ever stopping his laughing,
Turned as white as a sheet, and his eyes fairly bulged from their sockets.
Then he whirled back again, and looked up and down on the river,
Like he was hunting out the shape of the shore and the landmarks.
Well, I suppose the thing has happened to every one sometime,
When you find the points of the compass have swapped with each other,
And at the instant you're looking, the North and the South have changed places.
I knew what was in his mind as well as Dunlevy himself did.
Neither one of us spoke a word for nearly a minute.
Then in a kind of whisper he says, 'Take the wheel, Captain Davis!'
Let the spokes fly, and while I made a jump forwards to catch them,
Staggered into that chair – well, the very one you are in, ma'am.
Set there breathing quick, and, when he could speak, all he said was,
'This is the end of it for me on the river, Jim Davis,'
Reached up over his head for his coat where it hung by that window,
Trembled onto his feet, and stopped in the door there a second,
Stared in hard like as if for good-by to the things he was used to,
Shut the door behind him, and never come back again through it."
While we were silent, not liking to prompt the pilot with questions,
"Well," he said, at last, "it was no use to argue. We tried it,

In the half-hearted way that people do that don't mean it.
Every one was his friend here on the *Kanawha*, and *we* knew
It was the first time he ever had lost his bearings, but *he* knew,
In such a thing as that, that the first and the last are the same time.
When we had got through trying our worst to persuade him, he only
Shook his head and says, 'I am done for, boys, and you know it,'
Left the boat at Wheeling, and left his life on the river —
Left his life on the earth, you may say, for I don't call it living,
Setting there homesick at home for the wheel he can never go back to.
Reads the river-news regular; knows just the stage of the water
Up and down the whole way from Cincinnati to Pittsburg;
Follows every boat from the time she starts out in the spring-time
Till she lays up in the summer, and then again in the winter;
Wants to talk all about her and who is her captain and pilot;
Then wants to slide away to that everlastingly puzzling
Thing that happened to him that morning on the *Kanawha*
When he lost his bearings and North and South had changed places —
No, I don't call that living, whatever the rest of you call it."
We were silent again till that woman spoke up, "And what was it,
Captain, that kept him from going back and being a pilot?"
"Well, ma'am," after a moment the pilot patiently answered,
"*I* don't hardly believe that I could explain it exactly."

IV
THE RETURN TO FAVOR

He never, by any chance, quite kept his word, though there was a moment in every case when he seemed to imagine doing what he said, and he took with mute patience the rakings which the ladies gave him when he disappointed them.

Disappointed is not just the word, for the ladies did not really expect him to do what he said. They pretended to believe him when he promised, but at the bottom of their hearts they never did or could. He was gentle-mannered and soft-spoken, and when he set his head on one side, and said that a coat would be ready on Wednesday, or a dress on Saturday, and repeated his promise upon the same lady's expressed doubt, she would catch her breath and say that now she absolutely must have it on the day named, for otherwise she would not have a thing to put on. Then he would become very grave, and his soft tenor would deepen to a bass of unimpeachable veracity, and he would say, "Sure, lady, you have it."

The lady would depart still doubting and slightly sighing, and he would turn to the customer who was waiting to have a button sewed on, or something like that, and ask him softly what it was he could do for him. If the customer offered him his appreciation of the case in hand, he would let his head droop lower, and in a yet deeper bass deplore the doubt of the ladies as an idiosyncrasy of their sex. He would make the customer feel that he was a favorite customer whose rights to a perfect fidelity of word and deed must by no means be tampered with, and he would have the button sewed on or the rip sewed up at once, and refuse to charge anything, while the customer waited in his shirt-sleeves in the small, stuffy shop opening directly from the street. When he tolerantly discussed the peculiarities of ladies as a sex, he would endure to be laughed at, "for sufferance was the badge of all his tribe," and possibly he rather liked it.

The favorite customer enjoyed being there when some lady came back on the appointed Wednesday or Saturday, and the tailor came soothingly forward and showed her into the curtained alcove where she was to try on the garments, and then called into the inner shop for them. The shirt-sleeved journeyman, with his unbuttoned waistcoat-front all pins and threaded needles, would appear in his slippers with the things barely basted together, and the tailor would take them, with an airy courage, as if they were perfectly finished, and go in behind the curtain where the lady was waiting in a dishabille which the favorite customer, out of reverence for the sex, forbore to picture to himself. Then sounds of volcanic fury would issue from the alcove. "Now, Mr. Morrison, you have lied to me again, deliberately *lied*. Didn't I tell you I *must* have the things perfectly ready to-day? You see yourself that it will be another week before I can have my things."

"A week? Oh, madam! But I assure you – "

"Don't talk to me any more! It's the last time I shall ever come to you, but I suppose I can't take the work away from you as it is. *When* shall I have it?"

"To-morrow. Yes, to-morrow noon. Sure!"

"Now you know you are always out at noon. I should think you would be ashamed."

"If it hadn't been for sickness in the family I would have finished your dress with my own hands. Sure I would. If you come here to-morrow noon you find your dress all ready for you."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.