Green Anna Katharine

Room Number 3, and Other Detective Stories

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Green A.

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Содержание

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ROOM NUMBER 3

I

"What door is that? You've opened all the others; why do you pass that one by?"

"Oh, that! That's only Number 3. A mere closet, gentlemen," responded the landlord in a pleasant voice. "To be sure, we sometimes use it as a sleeping-room when we are hard pushed. Jake, the clerk you saw below, used it last night. But it's not on our regular list. Do you want a peep at it?"

"Most assuredly. As you know, it's our duty to see every room in this house, whether it is on your regular list or not."

"All right. I haven't the key of this one with me. But – yes, I have. There, gentlemen!" he cried, unlocking the door and holding it open for them to look inside. "You see it no more answers the young lady's description than the others do. And I haven't another to show you. You have seen all those in front, and this is the last one in the rear. You'll have to believe our story. The old lady never put foot in this tavern."

The two men he addressed peered into the shadowy recesses before them, and one of them, a tall and uncommonly good-looking young man of stalwart build and unusually earnest manner, stepped softly inside. He was a gentleman farmer living near, recently appointed deputy sheriff on account of a recent outbreak of horse-stealing in the neighbourhood.

"I observe," he remarked, after a hurried glance about him, "that the paper on these walls is not at all like that she describes. She was very particular about the paper; said that it was of a muddy pink colour and had big scrolls on it which seemed to move and crawl about in whirls as you looked at it. This paper is blue and striped. Otherwise – "

"Let's go below," suggested his companion, who, from the deference with which his most casual word was received, was evidently a man of some authority. "It's cold here, and there are several new questions I should like to put to the young lady. Mr. Quimby," – this to the landlord, "I've no doubt you are right, but we'll give this poor girl another chance. I believe in giving every one the utmost chance possible."

"My reputation is in your hands, Coroner Golden," was the quiet reply. Then, as they both turned, "my reputation against the word of an obviously demented girl."

The words made their own echo. As the third man moved to follow the other two into the hall, he seemed to catch this echo, for he involuntarily cast another look behind him as if expectant of some contradiction reaching him from the bare and melancholy walls he was leaving. But no such contradiction came. Instead, he appeared to read confirmation there of the landlord's plain and unembittered statement. The dull blue paper with its old-fashioned and uninteresting stripes seemed to have disfigured the walls for years. It was not only grimy with age, but showed here and there huge discoloured spots, especially around the stovepipe-hole high up on the left-hand side. Certainly he was a dreamer to doubt such plain evidences as these. Yet —

Here his eye encountered Quimby's, and pulling himself up short, he hastily fell into the wake of his comrade now hastening down the narrow passage to the wider hall in front. Had it occurred to him to turn again before rounding the corner – but no, I doubt if he would have learned anything even then. The closing of a door by a careful hand – the slipping up behind him of an eager and noiseless step – what is there in these to re-awaken curiosity and fix suspicion? Nothing, when the

man concerned is Jacob Quimby; nothing. Better that he failed to look back; it left his judgment freer for the question confronting him in the room below.

Three Forks Tavern has been long forgotten, but at the time of which I write it was a well-known but little-frequented house, situated just back of the highway on the verge of the forest lying between the two towns of Chester and Danton in southern Ohio. It was of ancient build, and had all the picturesquesness of age and the English traditions of its original builder. Though so near two thriving towns, it retained its own quality of apparent remoteness from city life and city ways. This in a measure was made possible by the nearness of the woods which almost enveloped it; but the character of the man who ran it had still more to do with it, his sympathies being entirely with the old, and not at all with the new, as witness the old-style glazing still retained in its ancient doorway. This, while it appealed to a certain class of summer boarders, did not so much meet the wants of the casual traveller, so that while the house might from some reason or other be overfilled one night, it was just as likely to be almost empty the next, save for the faithful few who loved the woods and the ancient ways of the easy-mannered host and his attentive, soft-stepping help. The building itself was of wooden construction, high in front and low in the rear, with gables toward the highway, projecting here and there above a strip of rude old-fashioned carving. These gables were new, that is, they were only a century old; the portion now called the extension, in the passages of which we first found the men we have introduced to you, was the original house. Then it may have enjoyed the sunshine and air of the valley it overlooked, but now it was so hemmed in by yards and outbuildings as to be considered the most undesirable part of the house, and Number 3 the most undesirable of its rooms; which certainly does not speak well for it.

But we are getting away from our new friends and their mysterious errand. As I have already intimated, this tavern with the curious name (a name totally unsuggestive, by the way, of its location on a perfectly straight road) had for its southern aspect the road and a broad expanse beyond of varied landscape which made the front rooms cheerful even on a cloudy day; but it was otherwise with those in the rear and on the north end. They were never cheerful, and especially toward night were frequently so dark that artificial light was resorted to as early as three o'clock in the afternoon. It was so to-day in the remote parlour which these three now entered. A lamp had been lit, though the daylight still struggled feebly in, and it was in this conflicting light that there rose up before them the vision of a woman, who seen at any time and in any place would have drawn, if not held, the eye, but seen in her present attitude and at such a moment of question and suspense, struck the imagination with a force likely to fix her image forever in the mind, if not in the heart, of a sympathetic observer.

I should like to picture her as she stood there, because the impression she made at this instant determined the future action of the man I have introduced to you as not quite satisfied with the appearances he had observed above. Young, slender but vigorous, with a face whose details you missed in the fire of her eye and the wonderful red of her young, fresh but determined mouth, she stood, on guard as it were, before a shrouded form on a couch at the far end of the room. An imperative *Keep back!* spoke in her look, her attitude, and the silent gesture of one outspread hand, but it was the *Keep back!* of love, not of fear, the command of an outraged soul, conscious of its rights and instinctively alert to maintain them.

The landlord at sight of the rebuke thus given to their intrusion, stepped forward with a conciliatory bow.

"I beg pardon," said he, "but these gentlemen, Doctor Golden, the coroner from Chester, and Mr. Hammersmith, wish to ask you a few more questions about your mother's death. You will answer them, I am sure."

Slowly her eyes moved till they met those of the speaker.

"I am anxious to do so," said she, in a voice rich with many emotions. But seeing the open compassion in the landlord's face, the colour left her cheeks, almost her lips, and drawing back the

hand which she had continued to hold outstretched, she threw a glance of helpless inquiry about her which touched the younger man's heart and induced him to say:

"The truth should not be hard to find in a case like this. I'm sure the young lady can explain. Doctor Golden, are you ready for her story?"

The coroner, who had been silent up till now, probably from sheer surprise at the beauty and simple, natural elegance of the woman caught, as he believed, in a net of dreadful tragedy, roused himself at this direct question, and bowing with an assumption of dignity far from encouraging to the man and woman anxiously watching him, replied:

"We will hear what she has to say, of course, but the facts are well known. The woman she calls mother was found early this morning lying on her face in the adjoining woods quite dead. She had fallen over a half-concealed root, and with such force that she never moved again. If her daughter was with her at the time, then that daughter fled without attempting to raise her. The condition and position of the wound on the dead woman's forehead, together with such corroborative facts as have since come to light, preclude all argument on this point. But we'll listen to the young woman, notwithstanding; she has a right to speak, and she shall speak. Did not your mother die in the woods? No hocus-pocus, miss, but the plain unvarnished truth."

"Sirs," – the term was general, but her appeal appeared to be directed solely to the one sympathetic figure before her, "if my mother died in the wood – and, for all I can say, she may have done so – it was not till after she had been in this house. She arrived in my company, and was given a room. I saw the room and I saw her in it. I cannot be deceived in this. If I am, then my mind has suddenly failed me; – something which I find it hard to believe."

"Mr. Quimby, did Mrs. Demarest come to the house with Miss Demarest?" inquired Mr. Hammersmith of the silent landlord.

"She says so," was the reply, accompanied by a compassionate shrug which spoke volumes. "And I am quite sure she means it," he added, with kindly emphasis. "But ask Jake, who was in the office all the evening. Ask my wife, who saw the young lady to her room. Ask anybody and everybody who was around the tavern last night. I'm not the only one to say that Miss Demarest came in alone. All will tell you that she arrived here without escort of any kind; declined supper, but wanted a room, and when I hesitated to give it to her, said by way of explanation of her lack of a companion that she had had trouble in Chester and had left town very hurriedly for her home. That her mother was coming to meet her and would probably arrive here very soon. That when this occurred I was to notify her; but if a gentleman called instead, I was to be very careful not to admit that any such person as herself was in the house. Indeed, to avoid any such possibility she prayed that her name might be left off the register – a favour which I was slow in granting her, but which I finally did, as you can see for yourselves."

"Oh!" came in indignant exclamation from the young woman before them. "I understand my position now. This man has a bad conscience. He has something to hide, or he would not take to lying about little things like that. I never asked him to allow me to leave my name off the register. On the contrary I wrote my name in it and my mother's name, too. Let him bring the book here and you will see."

"We have seen," responded the coroner. "We looked in the register ourselves. Your names are not there."

The flush of indignation which had crimsoned her cheeks faded till she looked as startling and individual in her pallor as she had the moment before in her passionate bloom.

"Not there?" fell from her lips in a frozen monotone as her eyes grew fixed upon the faces before her and her hand went groping around for some support.

Mr. Hammersmith approached with a chair.

"Sit," he whispered. Then, as she sank slowly into an attitude of repose, he added gently, "You shall have every consideration. Only tell the truth, the exact truth without any heightening from your imagination, and, above all, don't be frightened."

She may have heard his words, but she gave no sign of comprehending them. She was following the movements of the landlord, who had slipped out to procure the register, and now stood holding it out toward the coroner.

"Let her see for herself," he suggested, with a bland, almost fatherly, air.

Doctor Golden took the book and approached Miss Demarest.

"Here is a name very unlike yours," he pointed out, as her eye fell on the page he had opened to. "Annette Colvin, Lansing, Michigan."

"That is not my name or writing," said she.

"There is room below it for your name and that of your mother, but the space is blank, do you see?"

"Yes, yes, I see," she admitted. "Yet I wrote my name in the book! Or is it all a monstrous dream!"

The coroner returned the book to the landlord.

"Is this your only book?" he asked.

"The only book."

Miss Demarest's eyes flashed. Hammersmith, who had watched this scene with intense interest, saw, or believed that he saw, in this flash the natural indignation of a candid mind face to face with arrant knavery. But when he forced himself to consider the complacent Quimby he did not know what to think. His aspect of self-confidence equalled hers. Indeed, he showed the greater poise. Yet her tones rang true as she cried:

"You made up one plausible story, and you may well make up another. I demand the privilege of relating the whole occurrence as I remember it," she continued with an appealing look in the one sympathetic direction. "Then you can listen to him."

"We desire nothing better," returned the coroner.

"I shall have to mention a circumstance very mortifying to myself," she proceeded, with a sudden effort at self-control, which commanded the admiration even of the coroner. "My one adviser is dead," here her eyes flashed for a moment toward the silent form behind her. "If I make mistakes, if I seem unwomanly – but you have asked for the truth and you shall have it, all of it. I have no father. Since early this morning I have had no mother. But when I had, I found it my duty to work for her as well as for myself, that she might have the comforts she had been used to and could no longer afford. For this purpose I sought a situation in Chester, and found one in a family I had rather not name." A momentary tremor, quickly suppressed, betrayed the agitation which this allusion cost her. "My mother lived in Danton (the next town to the left). Anybody there will tell you what a good woman she was. I had wished her to live in Chester (that is, at first; later, I – I was glad she didn't), but she had been born in Danton, and could not accustom herself to strange surroundings. Once a week I went home, and once a week, usually on a Wednesday, she would come and meet me on the highroad, for a little visit. Once we met here, but this is a circumstance no one seems to remember. I was very fond of my mother and she of me. Had I loved no one else, I should have been happy still, and not been obliged to face strangers over her body and bare the secrets of my heart to preserve my good name. There is a man, he seems a thousand miles away from me now, so much have I lived since yesterday. He – he lived in the house where I did – was one of the family – always at table – always before my eyes. He fancied me. I – I might have fancied him had he been a better man. But he was far from being of the sort my mother approved, and when he urged his suit too far, I grew frightened and finally ran away. It was not so much that I could not trust him," she bravely added after a moment of silent confusion, "but that I could not trust myself. He had an unfortunate influence over me, which I hated while I half yielded to it."

"You ran away. When was this?"

"Yesterday afternoon at about six. He had vowed that he would see me again before the evening was over, and I took that way to prevent a meeting. There was no other so simple, – or such was my thought at the time. I did not dream that sorrows awaited me in this quiet tavern, and perplexities so much greater than any which could have followed a meeting with him that I feel my reason fail when I contemplate them."

"Go on," urged the coroner, after a moment of uneasy silence. "Let us hear what happened after you left your home in Chester."

"I went straight to the nearest telegraph office, and sent a message to my mother. I told her I was coming home, and for her to meet me on the road near this tavern. Then I went to Hudson's and had supper, for I had not eaten before leaving my employer's. The sun had set when I finally started, and I walked fast so as to reach Three Forks before dark. If my mother had got the telegram at once, which I calculated on her doing, as she lived next door to the telegraph office in Danton, she would be very near this place on my arrival here. So I began to look for her as soon as I entered the woods. But I did not see her. I came as far as the tavern door, and still I did not see her. But farther on, just where the road turns to cross the railroad-track, I spied her coming, and ran to meet her. She was glad to see me, but asked a good many questions which I had some difficulty in answering. She saw this, and held me to the matter till I had satisfied her. When this was done it was late and cold, and we decided to come to the tavern for the night. *And we came!* Nothing shall ever make me deny so positive a fact. *We came*, and this man received us."

With her final repetition of this assertion, she rose and now stood upright, with her finger pointing straight at Quimby. Had he cringed or let his eyes waver from hers by so much as a hair's breadth, her accusation would have stood and her cause been won. But not a flicker disturbed the steady patience of his look, and Hammersmith, who had made no effort to hide his anxiety to believe her story, showed his disappointment with equal frankness as he asked:

"Who else was in the office? Surely Mr. Quimby was not there alone?"

She reseated herself before answering. Hammersmith could see the effort she made to recall that simple scene. He found himself trying to recall it, too – the old-fashioned, smoke-begrimed office, with its one long window toward the road and the glass-paned door leading into the hall of entrance. They had come in by that door and crossed to the bar, which was also the desk in this curious old hostelry. He could see them standing there in the light of possibly a solitary lamp, the rest of the room in shadow unless a game of checkers were on, which evidently was not so on this night. Had she turned her head to peer into those shadows? It was not likely. She was supported by her mother's presence, and this she was going to say. By some strange telepathy that he would have laughed at a few hours before, he feels confident of her words before she speaks. Yet he listens intently as she finally looks up and answers:

"There was a man, I am sure there was a man somewhere at the other end of the office. But I paid no attention to him. I was bargaining for two rooms and registering my name and that of my mother."

"Two rooms; why two? You are not a fashionable young lady to require a room alone."

"Gentlemen, I was tired. I had been through a wearing half-hour. I knew that if we occupied the same room or even adjoining ones that nothing could keep us from a night of useless and depressing conversation. I did not feel equal to it, so I asked for two rooms a short distance apart."

An explanation which could at least be accepted. Mr. Hammersmith felt an increase of courage and scarcely winced as his colder-blooded companion continued this unofficial examination by asking:

"Where were you standing when making these arrangements with Mr. Quimby?"

"Right before the desk."

"And your mother?"

"She was at my left and a little behind me. She was a shy woman. I usually took the lead when we were together."

"Was she veiled?" the coroner continued quietly.

"I think so. She had been crying – " The bereaved daughter paused.

"But don't you know?"

"My impression is that her veil was down when we came into the room. She may have lifted it as she stood there. I know that it was lifted as we went upstairs. I remember feeling glad that the lamps gave so poor a light, she looked so distressed."

"Physically, do you mean, or mentally?"

Mr. Hammersmith asked this question. It seemed to rouse some new train of thought in the girl's mind. For a minute she looked intently at the speaker, then she replied in a disturbed tone:

"Both. I wonder – " Here her thought wavered and she ceased.

"Go on," ordered the coroner impatiently. "Tell your story. It contradicts that of the landlord in almost every point, but we've promised to hear it out, and we will."

Rousing, she hastened to obey him.

"Mr. Quimby told the truth when he said that he asked me if I would have supper, also when he repeated what I said about a gentleman, but not when he declared that I wished to be told if my mother should come and ask for me. My mother was at my side all the time we stood there talking, and I did not need to make any requests concerning her. When we went to our rooms a woman accompanied us. He says she is his wife. I should like to see that woman."

"I am here, miss," spoke up a voice from a murky corner no one had thought of looking in till now.

Miss Demarest at once rose, waiting for the woman to come forward. This she did with a quick, natural step which insensibly prepared the mind for the brisk, assertive woman who now presented herself. Mr. Hammersmith, at sight of her open, not unpleasing face, understood for the first time the decided attitude of the coroner. If this woman corroborated her husband's account, the poor young girl, with her incongruous beauty and emotional temperament, would not have much show. He looked to see her quailing now. But instead of that she stood firm, determined, and feverishly beautiful.

"Let her tell you what took place upstairs," she cried. "She showed us the rooms and carried water afterward to the one my mother occupied."

"I am sorry to contradict the young lady," came in even tones from the unembarrassed, motherly-looking woman thus appealed to. "She thinks that her mother was with her and that I conducted this mother to another room after showing her to her own. I don't doubt in the least that she has worked herself up to the point of absolutely believing this. But the facts are these: She came alone and went to her room unattended by any one but myself. And what is more, she seemed entirely composed at the time, and I never thought of suspecting the least thing wrong. Yet her mother lay all that time in the wood – "

"Silence!"

This word was shot at her by Miss Demarest, who had risen to her full height and now fairly flamed upon them all in her passionate indignation. "I will not listen to such words till I have finished all I have to say and put these liars to the blush. My mother *was* with me, and this woman witnessed our good-night embrace, and then showed my mother to her own room. I watched them going. They went down the hall to the left and around a certain corner. I stood looking after them till they turned this corner, then I closed my door and began to take off my hat. But I wasn't quite satisfied with the good-night which had passed between my poor mother and myself, and presently I opened my door and ran down the hall and around the corner on a chance of finding her room. I don't remember very well how that hall looked. I passed several doors seemingly shut for the night, and should have turned back, confused, if at that moment I had not spied the landlady's figure, your figure, madam, coming out of one room on your way to another. You were carrying a pitcher, and I made haste and ran after

you and reached the door just before you turned to shut it. Can you deny that, or that you stepped aside while I ran in and gave my mother another hug? If you can and do, then you are a dangerous and lying woman, or I – But I won't admit that I'm not all right. It is you, base and untruthful woman, who for some end I cannot fathom persist in denying facts on which my honour, if not my life, depends. Why, gentlemen, you, one of you at least, have heard me describe the very room in which I saw my mother. It is imprinted on my mind. I didn't know at the time that I took especial notice of it, but hardly a detail escaped me. The paper on the wall – "

"We have been looking through the rooms," interpolated the coroner. "We do not find any papered with the muddy pink you talk about."

She stared, drew back from them all, and finally sank into a chair. "You do not find – But you have not been shown them all."

"I think so."

"You have not. There *is* such a room. I could not have dreamed it."

Silence met this suggestion.

Throwing up her hands like one who realises for the first time that the battle is for life, she let an expression of her despair and desolation rush in frenzy from her lips:

"It's a conspiracy. The whole thing is a conspiracy. If my mother had had money on her or had worn valuable jewelry, I should believe her to have been a victim of this lying man and woman. As it is, I don't trust them. They say that my poor mother was found lying ready dressed and quite dead in the wood. That may be true, for I saw men bringing her in. But if so, what warrant have we that she was not lured there, slaughtered, and made to seem the victim of accident by this unscrupulous man and woman? Such things have been done; but for a daughter to fabricate such a plot as they impute to me is past belief, out of Nature and impossible. With all their wiles, they cannot prove it. I dare them to do so; I dare any one to do so."

Then she begged to be allowed to search the house for the room she so well remembered. "When I show you that," she cried, with ringing assurance, "you will believe the rest of my story."

"Shall I take the young lady up myself?" asked Mr. Quimby. "Or will it be enough if my wife accompanies her?"

"We will all accompany her," said the coroner.

"Very good," came in hearty acquiescence.

"It's the only way to quiet her," he whispered in Mr. Hammersmith's ear.

The latter turned on him suddenly.

"None of your insinuations," he cried. "She's as far from insane as I am myself. We shall find the room."

"You, too," fell softly from the other's lips as he stepped back into the coroner's wake. Mr. Hammersmith gave his arm to Miss Demarest, and the landlady brought up the rear.

"Upstairs," ordered the trembling girl. "We will go first to the room I occupied."

As they reached the door, she motioned them all back, and started away from them down the hall. Quickly they followed. "It was around a corner," she muttered broodingly, halting at the first turning. "That is all I remember. But we'll visit every room."

"We have already," objected the coroner, but meeting Mr. Hammersmith's warning look, he desisted from further interference.

"I remember its appearance perfectly. I remember it as if it were my own," she persisted, as door after door was thrown back and as quickly shut again at a shake of her head. "Isn't there another hall? Might I not have turned some other corner?"

"Yes, there is another hall," acquiesced the landlord, leading the way into the passage communicating with the extension.

"Oh!" she murmured, as she noted the increased interest in both the coroner and his companion; "we shall find it here."

"Do you recognise the hall?" asked the coroner as they stepped through a narrow opening into the old part.

"No, but I shall recognise the room."

"Wait!" It was Hammersmith who called her back as she was starting forward. "I should like you to repeat just how much furniture this room contained and where it stood."

She stopped, startled, and then said:

"It was awfully bare; a bed was on the left – "

"On the left?"

"She said the left," quoth the landlord, "though I don't see that it matters; it's all fancy with her."

"Go on," kindly urged Hammersmith.

"There was a window. I saw the dismal panes and my mother standing between them and me. I can't describe the little things."

"Possibly because there were none to describe," whispered Hammersmith in his superior's ear.

Meanwhile the landlord and his wife awaited their advance with studied patience. As Miss Demarest joined him, he handed her a bunch of keys, with the remark:

"None of these rooms are occupied to-day, so you can open them without hesitation."

She stared at him and ran quickly forward. Mr. Hammersmith followed speedily after. Suddenly both paused. She had lost the thread of her intention before opening a single door.

"I thought I could go straight to it," she declared. "I shall have to open all the doors, as we did in the other hall."

"Let me help you," proffered Mr. Hammersmith. She accepted his aid, and the search recommenced with the same results as before. Hope sank to disappointment as each door was passed. The vigour of her step was gone, and as she paused heartsick before the last and only remaining door, it was with an ashy face she watched Mr. Hammersmith stoop to insert the key.

He, on his part, as the door fell back, watched her for some token of awakened interest. But he watched in vain. The smallness of the room, its bareness, its one window, the absence of all furniture save the solitary cot drawn up on the right (not on the left, as she had said), seemed to make little or no impression on her.

"The last! the last! and I have not found it. Oh, sir," she moaned, catching at Mr. Hammersmith's arm, "am I then mad? Was it a dream? Or is this a dream? I feel that I no longer know." Then, as the landlady officiously stepped up, she clung with increased frenzy to Mr. Hammersmith, crying, with positive wildness, "*This* is the dream! The room I remember is a real one and my story is real. Prove it, or my reason will leave me. I feel it going – going – "

"Hush!" It was Hammersmith who sought thus to calm her. "Your story *is* real and I will prove it so. Meanwhile trust your reason. It will not fail you."

He had observed the corners of the landlord's hitherto restrained lips settle into a slightly sarcastic curl as the door of this room closed for the second time.

II

"The girl's beauty has imposed on you."

"I don't think so. I should be sorry to think myself so weak. I simply credit her story more than I do that of Quimby."

"But his is supported by several witnesses. Hers has no support at all."

"That is what strikes me as so significant. This man Quimby understands himself. Who are his witnesses? His wife and his head man. There is nobody else. In the half-hour which has just passed I have searched diligently for some disinterested testimony supporting his assertion, but I have found none. No one knows anything. Of the three persons occupying rooms in the extension last night, two were asleep and the third overcome with drink. The maids won't talk. They seem uneasy, and I detected a sly look pass from the one to the other at some question I asked, but they won't talk. There's a conspiracy somewhere. I'm as sure of it as that I am standing here."

"Nonsense! What should there be a conspiracy about? You would make this old woman an important character. Now we know that she wasn't. Look at the matter as it presents itself to an unprejudiced mind. A young and susceptible girl falls in love with a man, who is at once a gentleman and a scamp. She may have tried to resist her feelings, and she may not have. Your judgment and mine would probably differ on this point. What she does *not* do is to let her mother into her confidence. She sees the man – runs upon him, if you will, in places or under circumstances she cannot avoid – till her judgment leaves her and the point of catastrophe is reached. Then, possibly, she awakens, or what is more probable, seeks to protect herself from the penetration and opposition of his friends by meetings less open than those in which they had lately indulged. She says that she left the house to escape seeing him again last night. But this is not true. On the contrary, she must have given him to understand where she was going, for she had an interview with him in the woods before she came upon her mother. He acknowledges to the interview. I have just had a talk with him over the telephone."

"Then you know his name?"

"Yes, of course, she had to tell me. It's young Maxwell. I suspected it from the first."

"Maxwell!" Mr. Hammersmith's cheek showed an indignant colour. Or was it a reflection from the setting sun? "You called him a scamp a few minutes ago. A scamp's word isn't worth much."

"No, but it's evidence when on oath, and I fancy he will swear to the interview."

"Well, well, say there was an interview."

"It changes things, Mr. Hammersmith. It changes things. It makes possible a certain theory of mine which accounts for all the facts."

"It does!"

"Yes. I don't think this girl is really responsible. I don't believe she struck her mother or is deliberately telling a tissue of lies to cover up some dreadful crime. I consider her the victim of a mental hallucination, the result of some great shock. Now what was the shock? I'll tell you. This is how I see it, how Mr. Quimby sees it, and such others in the house as have ventured an opinion. She was having this conversation with her lover in the woods below here when her mother came in sight. Surprised, for she had evidently not expected her mother to be so prompt, she hustled her lover off and hastened to meet the approaching figure. But it was too late. The mother had seen the man, and in the excitement of the discovery and the altercation which undoubtedly followed, made such a sudden move, possibly of indignant departure, that her foot was caught by one of the roots protruding at this point and she fell her whole length and with such violence as to cause immediate death. Now, Mr. Hammersmith, stop a minute and grasp the situation. If, as I believe at this point in the inquiry, Miss Demarest had encountered a passionate opposition to her desires from this upright and thoughtful mother, the spectacle of this mother lying dead before her, with all opposition gone and the way cleared in an instant to her wishes, but cleared in a manner which must haunt her to her

own dying day, was enough to turn a brain already heated with contending emotions. Fancies took the place of facts, and by the time she reached this house had so woven themselves into a concrete form that no word she now utters can be relied on. This is how I see it, Mr. Hammersmith, and it is on this basis I shall act."

Hammersmith made an effort and, nodding slightly, said in a restrained tone:

"Perhaps you are justified. I have no wish to force my own ideas upon you; they are much too vague at present. I will only suggest that this is not the first time the attention of the police has been drawn to this house by some mysterious occurrence. You remember the Stevens case? There must have been notes to the amount of seven thousand dollars in the pile he declared had been taken from him some time during the day and night he lodged here."

"Stevens! I remember something about it. But they couldn't locate the theft here. The fellow had been to the fair in Chester all day and couldn't swear that he had seen his notes after leaving the grounds."

"I know. But he always looked on Quimby as the man. Then there is the adventure of little Miss Thistlewaite."

"I don't remember that."

"It didn't get into the papers; but it was talked about in the neighbourhood. She is a quaint one, full of her crotchets, but clear – clear as a bell where her interests are involved. She took a notion to spend a summer here – in this house, I mean. She had a room in one of the corners overlooking the woods, and professing to prefer Nature to everything else, was happy enough till she began to miss things – rings, pins, a bracelet and, finally, a really valuable chain. She didn't complain at first – the objects were trivial, and she herself somewhat to blame for leaving them lying around in her room, often without locking the door. But when the chain went, the matter became serious, and she called Mr. Quimby's attention to her losses. He advised her to lock her door, which she was careful to do after that, but not with the expected result. She continued to miss things, mostly jewelry of which she had a ridiculous store. Various domestics were dismissed, and finally one of the permanent boarders was requested to leave, but still the thefts went on till, her patience being exhausted, she notified the police and a detective was sent: I have always wished I had been that detective. The case ended in what was always considered a joke. Another object disappeared while he was there, and it having been conclusively proved to him that it could not have been taken by way of the door, he turned his attention to the window which it was one of her freaks always to keep wide open. The result was curious. One day he spied from a hiding-place he had made in the bushes a bird flying out from that window, and following the creature till she alighted in her nest he climbed the tree and searched that nest. It was encrusted with jewels. The bird was a magpie and had followed its usual habits, but – the chain was not there, nor one or two other articles of decided value. Nor were they ever found. The bird bore the blame; the objects missing were all heavy and might have been dropped in its flight, but I have always thought that the bird had an accomplice, a knowing fellow who understood what's what and how to pick out his share."

The coroner smiled. There was little conviction and much sarcasm in that smile. Hammersmith turned away. "Have you any instructions for me?" he said.

"Yes, you had better stay here. I will return in the morning with my jury. It won't take long after that to see this thing through."

The look he received in reply was happily hidden from him.

III

"Yes, I'm going to stay here to-night. As it's a mere formality, I shall want a room to sit in, and if you have no objection I'll take Number 3 on the rear corridor."

"I'm sorry, but Number 3 is totally unfit for use, as you've already seen."

"Oh, I'm not particular. Put a table in and a good light, and I'll get along with the rest. I have something to do. Number 3 will answer."

The landlord shifted his feet, cast a quick scrutinising look at the other's composed face, and threw back his head with a quick laugh.

"As you will. I can't make you comfortable on such short notice, but that's your lookout. I've several other rooms vacant."

"I fancy that room," was all the reply he got.

Mr. Quimby at once gave his orders. They were received by Jake with surprise.

Fifteen minutes later Hammersmith prepared to install himself in these desolate quarters. But before doing so he walked straight to the small parlour where he had last seen Miss Demarest and, knocking, asked for the privilege of a word with her. It was not her figure, however, which appeared in the doorway, but that of the landlady.

"Miss Demarest is not here," announced that buxom and smooth-tongued woman. "She was like to faint after you gentlemen left the room, and I just took her upstairs to a quiet place by herself."

"On the rear corridor?"

"Oh, no, sir; a nice front room; we don't consider money in a case like this."

"Will you give me its number?"

Her suave and steady look changed to one of indignation.

"You're asking a good deal, aren't you? I doubt if the young lady – "

"The number, if you please," he quietly put in.

"Thirty-two," she snapped out. "She will have every care," she hastened to assure him as he turned away.

"I've no doubt. I do not intend to sleep to to-night; if the young lady is worse, you will communicate the fact to me. You will find *me* in Number 3."

He had turned back to make this reply, and was looking straight at her as the number dropped from his lips. It did not disturb her set smile, but in some inscrutable way all meaning seemed to leave that smile, and she forgot to drop her hand which had been stretched out in an attempted gesture.

"Number 3," he repeated. "Don't forget, madam."

The injunction seemed superfluous. She had not dropped her hand when he wheeled around once more in taking the turn at the foot of the staircase.

Jake and a very sleepy maid were on the floor above when he reached it. He paid no attention to Jake, but he eyed the girl somewhat curiously. She was comparatively a new domestic in the tavern, having been an inmate there for only three weeks. He had held a few minutes' conversation with her during the half-hour of secret inquiry in which he had previously indulged and he remembered some of her careful answers, also the air of fascination with which she had watched him all the time they were together. He had made nothing of her then, but the impression had remained that she was the one hopeful source of knowledge in the house. Now she looked dull and moved about in Jake's wake like an automaton. Yet Hammersmith made up his mind to speak to her as soon as the least opportunity offered.

"Where is 32?" he asked as he moved away from them in the opposite direction from the course they were taking.

"I thought you were to have room Number 3," blurted out Jake.

"I am. But where is 32?"

"Round there," said she. "A lady's in there now. The one – "

"Come on," urged Jake. "Huldah, you may go now. I'll show the gentleman his room."

Huldah dropped her head, and began to move off, but not before Hammersmith had caught her eye.

"Thirty-two," he formed with his lips, showing her a scrap of paper which he held in his hand.

He thought she nodded, but he could not be sure. Nevertheless, he ventured to lay the scrap down on a small table he was passing, and when he again looked back, saw that it was gone and Huldah with it. But whither, he could not be quite sure. There was always a risk in these attempts, and he only half trusted the girl. She might carry it to 32, and she might carry it to Quimby. In the first case, Miss Demarest would know that she had an active and watchful friend in the house; in the other, the dubious landlord would but receive an open instead of veiled intimation that the young deputy had his eye on him and was not to be fooled by appearances and the lack of evidence to support his honest convictions.

They had done little more than he had suggested to make Number 3 habitable. As the door swung open under Jake's impatient hand, the half-lighted hollow of the almost empty room gaped uninvitingly before them, with just a wooden-bottomed chair and a rickety table added to the small cot-bed which had been almost its sole furnishing when he saw it last. The walls, bare as his hand, stretched without relief from baseboard to ceiling, and the floor from door to window showed an unbroken expanse of unpainted boards, save for the narrow space between chair and table, where a small rug had been laid. A cheerless outlook for a tired man, but it seemed to please Hammersmith. There was paper and ink on the table, and the lamp which he took care to examine held oil enough to last till morning. With a tray of eatables, this ought to suffice, or so his manner conveyed, and Jake, who had already supplied the eatables, was backing slowly out when his eye, which seemingly against his will had been travelling curiously up and down the walls, was caught by that of Hammersmith, and he plunged from the room, with a flush visible even in that half light.

It was a trivial circumstance, but it fitted in with Hammersmith's trend of thought at the moment, and when the man was gone he stood for several minutes with his own eye travelling up and down those dusky walls in an inquiry which this distant inspection did not seem thoroughly to satisfy, for in another instant he had lifted a glass of water from the tray and, going to the nearest wall, began to moisten the paper at one of the edges. When it was quite wet, he took out his penknife, but before using it, he looked behind him, first at the door, and then at the window. The door was shut; the window seemingly guarded by an outside blind; but the former was not locked, and the latter showed, upon closer inspection, a space between the slats which he did not like. Crossing to the door, he carefully turned the key, then proceeding to the window, he endeavoured to throw up the sash in order to close the blinds more effectually. But he found himself balked in the attempt. The cord had been cut and the sash refused to move under his hand.

Casting a glance of mingled threat and sarcasm out into the night, he walked back to the wall and, dashing more water over the spot he had already moistened, began to pick at the loosened edges of the paper which were slowly falling away. The result was a disappointment; how great a disappointment he presently realised, as his knife-point encountered only plaster under the peeling edges of the paper. He had hoped to find other paper under the blue – the paper which Miss Demarest remembered – and not finding it, was conscious of a sinking of the heart which had never attended any of his miscalculations before. Were his own feelings involved in this matter? It would certainly seem so.

Astonished at his own sensations, he crossed back to the table, and sinking into the chair beside it, endeavoured to call up his common sense, or at least shake himself free from the glamour which had seized him. But this especial sort of glamour is not so easily shaken off. Minutes passed – an hour, and little else filled his thoughts than the position of this bewitching girl and the claims she had on his sense of justice. If he listened, it was to hear her voice raised in appeal at his door. If he

closed his eyes, it was to see her image more plainly on the background of his consciousness. The stillness into which the house had sunk aided this absorption and made his battle a losing one. There was naught to distract his mind, and when he dozed, as he did for a while after midnight, it was to fall under the conjuring effect of dreams in which her form dominated with all the force of an unfettered fancy. The pictures which his imagination thus brought before him were startling and never to be forgotten. The first was that of an angry sea in the blue light of an arctic winter. Stars flecked the zenith and shed a pale lustre on the moving ice-floes hurrying toward a horizon of skurrying clouds and rising waves. On one of those floes stood a woman alone, with face set toward her death.

The scene changed. A desert stretched out before him. Limitless, with the blazing colours of the arid sand topped by a cloudless sky, it revealed but one suggestion of life in its herbless, waterless, shadowless solitude. *She* stood in the midst of this desert, and as he had seen her sway on the ice-floe, so he saw her now stretching unavailing arms to the brazen heavens and sink – No! it was not a desert, it was not a sea, ice-bound or torrid, it was a toppling city, massed against impenetrable night one moment, then shown to its awful full the next by the sudden tearing through of lightning-flashes. He saw it all – houses, churches, towers, erect and with steadfast line, a silhouette of quiet rest awaiting dawn; then at a flash, the doom, the quake, the breaking down of outline, the caving in of walls, followed by the sickening collapse in which life, wealth, and innumerable beating human hearts went down into the unseen and unknowable. He saw and he heard, but his eyes clung to but one point, his ears listened for but one cry. There at the extremity of a cornice, clinging to a bending beam, was the figure again – the woman of the ice-floe and the desert. She seemed nearer now. He could see the straining muscles of her arm, the white despair of her set features. He wished to call aloud to her not to look down – then, as the sudden darkness yielded to another illuminating gleam, his mind changed and he would fain have begged her to look, slip, and end all, for subtly, quietly, ominously somewhere below her feet, he had caught the glimpsing of a feathery line of smoke curling up from the lower débris. Flame was there; a creeping devil which soon —

Horror! it was no dream! He was awake, he, Hammersmith, in this small solitary hotel in Ohio, and there was fire, real fire in the air, and in his ears the echo of a shriek such as a man hears but few times in his life, even if his lot casts him continually among the reckless and the suffering. Was it *hers*? Had these dreams been forerunners of some menacing danger? He was on his feet, his eyes staring at the floor beneath him, through the cracks of which wisps of smoke were forcing their way up. The tavern was not only on fire, *but on fire directly under him*. This discovery woke him effectually. He bounded to the door; it would not open. He wrenched at the key; but it would not turn, it was hampered in the lock. Drawing back, he threw his whole weight against the panels, uttering loud cries for help. The effort was useless. No yielding in the door, no rush to his assistance from without. Aroused now to his danger – reading the signs of the broken cord and hampered lock only too well – he desisted from his vain attempts and turned desperately toward the window. Though it might be impossible to hold up the sash and crawl under it at the same time, his only hope of exit lay there, as well as his only means of surviving the inroad of smoke which was fast becoming unendurable. He would break the sash and seek escape that way. They had doomed him to death, but he could climb roofs like a cat and feared nothing when once relieved from this smoke. Catching up the chair, he advanced toward the window.

But before reaching it he paused. It was not only he they sought to destroy, but the room. There was evidence of crime in the room. In that moment of keenly aroused intelligence he felt sure of it. What was to be done? How could he save the room, and, by these means, save himself and her? A single glance about assured him that he could not save it. The boards under his feet were hot. Glints of yellow light streaking through the shutters showed that the lower storey had already burst into flame. The room must go and with it every clue to the problem which was agitating him. Meanwhile, his eyeballs were smarting, his head growing dizzy. No longer sure of his feet, he staggered over to the wall and was about to make use of its support in his effort to reach the window, when his eyes fell

on the spot from which he had peeled the paper, and he came to a sudden standstill. A bit of pink was showing under one edge of the blue.

Dropping the chair which he still held, he fumbled for his knife, found it, made a dash at that wall, and for a few frenzied moments worked at the plaster till he had hacked off a piece which he thrust into his pocket. Then seizing the chair again, he made for the window and threw it with all his force against the panes. They crashed and the air came rushing in, reviving him enough for the second attempt. This not only smashed the pane, but loosened the shutters, and in one instant two sights burst upon his view – the face of a man in an upper window of the adjoining barn and the sudden swooping up from below of a column of deadly smoke which seemed to cut off all hope of his saving himself by the means he had calculated on. Yet no other way offered. It would be folly to try the door again. This was the only road, threatening as it looked, to possible safety for himself and her. He would take it, and if he succumbed in the effort, it should be with a final thought of her who was fast becoming an integral part of his own being.

Meanwhile he had mounted to the sill and taken another outward look. This room, as I have already intimated, was in the rear of an extension running back from the centre of the main building. It consisted of only two stories, surmounted by a long, slightly-peaked roof. As the ceilings were low in this portion of the house, the gutter of this roof was very near the top of the window. To reach it was not a difficult feat for one of his strength and agility, and if only the smoke would blow aside – Ah, it is doing so! A sudden change of wind had come to his rescue, and for the moment the way is clear for him to work himself out and up on to the ledge above. But once there, horror makes him weak again. A window, high up in the main building overlooking the extension, had come in sight, and in it sways a frantic woman ready to throw herself out. She screamed as he measured with his eye the height of that window from the sloping roof and thence to the ground, and he recognised the voice. It was the same he had heard before, but it was not *hers*. She would not be up so high, besides the shape and attitude, shown fitfully by the light of the now leaping flames, were those of a heavier, and less-refined woman. It was one of the maids – it was *the* maid Huldah, the one from whom he had hoped to win some light on this affair. Was she locked in, too? Her frenzy and mad looking behind and below her seemed to argue that she was. What deviltry! and, ah! what a confession of guilt on the part of the vile man who had planned this abominable end for the two persons whose evidence he dreaded. Helpless with horror, he became a man again in his indignation. Such villainy should not succeed. He would fight not only for his own life, but for this woman's. Miss Demarest was doubtless safe. Yet he wished he were sure of it; he could work with so much better heart. Her window was not visible from where he crouched. It was on the other side of the house. If she screamed, he would not be able to hear her. He must trust her to Providence. But his dream! his dream! The power of it was still upon him; a forerunner of fate, a picture possibly of her doom. The hesitation which this awful thought caused him warned him that not in this way could he make himself effective. The woman he saw stood in need of his help, and to her he must make his way. The bustle which now took place in the yards beneath, the sudden shouts and the hurried throwing up of windows all over the house showed that the alarm had now become general. Another moment, and the appalling cry – the most appalling which leaves human lips – of fire! fire! rang from end to end of the threatened building. It was followed by women's shrieks and men's curses and then – by flames.

"She will hear, she will wake now," he thought, with his whole heart pulling him her way. But he did not desist from his intention to drop his eyes from the distraught figure entrapped between a locked door and a fall of thirty feet. He could reach her if he kept his nerve. A slow but steady hitch along the gutter was bringing him nearer every instant. Would she see him and take courage? No! her eyes were on the flames which were so bright now that he could actually see them glassed in her eyeballs. Would a shout attract her? The air was full of cries as the yards filled with escaping figures, but he would attempt it at the first lull – now – while her head was turned his way. Did she hear him? Yes. She is looking at him.

"Don't jump," he cried. "Tie your sheet to the bedpost. Tie it strong and fasten the other one to it and throw down the end. I will be here to catch it. Then you must come down hand over hand."

She threw up her arms, staring down at him in mortal terror; then, as the whole air grew lurid, nodded and tottered back. With incredible anxiety he watched for her reappearance. His post was becoming perilous. The fire had not yet reached the roof, but it was rapidly undermining its supports, and the heat was unendurable. Would he have to jump to the ground in his own despite? Was it his duty to wait for this girl, possibly already overcome by her fears and lying insensible? Yes; so long as he could hold out against the heat, it was his duty, but – Ah! what was that? Some one was shouting to him. He had been seen at last, and men, half-clad but eager, were rushing up the yard with a ladder. He could see their faces. How they glared in the red light. Help and determination were there, and perhaps when she saw the promise of this support, it would give nerve to her fingers and —

But it was not to be. As he watched their eager approach, he saw them stop, look back, swerve and rush around the corner of the house. Some one had directed them elsewhere. He could see the pointing hand, the baleful face. Quimby had realised his own danger in this prospect of Hammersmith's escape, and had intervened to prevent it. It was a murderer's natural impulse, and did not surprise him, but it added another element of danger to his position, and if this woman delayed much longer – but she is coming; a blanket is thrown out, then a dangling end of cloth appears above the sill. It descends. Another moment he has crawled up the roof to the ridge and grasped it.

"Slowly now!" he shouts. "Take time and hold on tight. I will guide you." He feels the frail support stiffen. She has drawn it into her hands; now she is on the sill, and is working herself off. He clutched his end firmly, steadying himself as best he might by bestriding the ridge of the roof. The strain becomes greater, he feels her weight, she is slipping down, down. Her hands strike a knot; the jerk almost throws him off his balance. He utters a word of caution, lost in the growing roar of the flames whose hungry tongues have begun to leap above the gutter. She looks down, sees the approaching peril, and hastens her descent. He is all astrain, with heart and hand nerved for the awful possibilities of the coming moments when – ping! Something goes whistling by his ear, which for the instant sets his hair bristling on his head, and almost paralyses every muscle. A bullet! The flame is not threatening enough! Some one is shooting at him from the dark.

IV

Well! death which comes one way cannot come another, and a bullet is more merciful than flame. The thought steadies Hammersmith; besides he has nothing to do with what is taking place behind his back. His duty is here, to guide and support this rapidly-descending figure now almost within his reach. And he fulfils this duty, though that deadly "ping" is followed by another, and his starting eyes behold the hole made by the missile in the clap-board just before him.

She is down. They stand toppling together on the slippery ridge with no support but the rapidly heating wall down which she had come. He looks one way, then another. Ten feet either way to the gutter! On one side leap the flames; beneath the other crouches their secret enemy. They cannot meet the first and live; needs must they face the latter. Bullets do not always strike the mark, as witness the two they had escaped. Besides, there are friends as well as enemies in the yard on this side. He can hear their encouraging cries. He will toss down the blanket; perhaps there will be hands to hold it and so break her fall, if not his.

With a courage which drew strength from her weakness, he carried out this plan and saw her land in safety amid half a dozen upstretched arms. Then he prepared to follow her, but felt his courage fail and his strength ooze without knowing the cause. Had a bullet struck him? He did not feel it. He was conscious of the heat, but of no other suffering; yet his limbs lacked life, and it no longer seemed possible for him to twist himself about so as to fall easily from the gutter.

"Come on! Come on!" rose in yells from below, but there was no movement in him.

"We can't wait. The wall will fall," rose affrightedly from below. But he simply clung and the doom of flame and collapsing timbers was rushing mercilessly upon him when, in the glare which lit up the whole dreadful scenery, there rose before his fainting eyes the sight of Miss Demarest's face turned his way from the crowd below, with all the terror of a woman's bleeding heart behind it. The joy which this recognition brought cleared his brain and gave him strength to struggle with his lethargy. Raising himself on one elbow, he slid his feet over the gutter, and with a frantic catch at its frail support, hung for one instant suspended, then dropped softly into the blanket which a dozen eager hands held out for him.

As he did so, a single gasping cry went up from the hushed throng. He knew the voice. His rescue had relieved one heart. His own beat tumultuously and the blood throbbed in his veins as he realised this.

The next thing he remembered was standing far from the collapsing building, with a dozen men and boys grouped about him. A woman at his feet was clasping his knees in thankfulness, another sinking in a faint at the edge of the shadow, but he saw neither, for the blood was streaming over his eyes from a wound not yet accounted for, and as he felt the burning flow, he realised a fresh duty.

"Where is Quimby?" he demanded loudly. "He made this hole in my forehead. He's a murderer and a thief, and I order you all in the name of the law to assist me in arresting him."

With the confused cry of many voices, the circle widened. Brushing the blood from his brow, he caught at the nearest man, and with one glance toward the tottering building, pointed to the wall where he and the girl Huldah had clung.

"Look!" he shouted, "do you see that black spot? Wait till the smoke blows aside. There! now! the spot just below the dangling sheet. It's a bullet-hole. It was made while I crouched there. Quimby held the gun. He had his reasons for hindering our escape. The girl can tell you – "

"Yes, yes," rose up from the ground at his feet. "Quimby is a wicked man. He knew that I knew it and he locked my door when he saw the flames coming. I'm willing to tell now. I was afraid before."

They stared at her with all the wonder of uncomprehending minds as she rose with a resolute air to confront them; but as the full meaning of her words penetrated their benumbed brains, slowly, man by man, they crept away to peer about in the barns, and among the clustering shadows for the

man who had been thus denounced. Hammersmith followed them, and for a few minutes nothing but chase was in any man's mind. That part of the building in which lay hidden the room of shadows shook, tottered, and fell, loading the heavens with sparks and lighting up the pursuit now become as wild and reckless as the scene itself. To Miss Demarest's eyes, just struggling back to sight and hearing from the nethermost depths of unconsciousness, it looked like the swirling flight of spirits lost in the vortex of hell. For one wild moment she thought that she herself had passed the gates of life and was one of those unhappy souls whirling over a gulf of flame. The next moment she realised her mistake. A kindly voice was in her ear, a kindly hand was pressing a half-burned blanket about her.

"Don't stare so," the voice said. "It is only people routing out Quimby. They say he set fire to the tavern himself, to hide his crime and do away with the one man who knew about it. I know that he locked me in because I – Oh, see! they've got him! they've got him! and with a gun in his hand!"

The friendly hand fell; both women started upright panting with terror and excitement. Then one of them drew back, crying in a tone of sudden anguish, "Why, no! It's Jake, Jake!"

Daybreak! and with it Doctor Golden, who at the first alarm had ridden out post-haste without waiting to collect his jury. As he stepped to the ground before the hollow shell and smoking pile which were all that remained to mark the scene of yesterday's events, he looked about among the half-clad, shivering men and women peering from the barns and stables where they had taken refuge, till his eyes rested on Hammersmith standing like a sentinel before one of the doors.

"What's this? what's this?" he cried, as the other quickly approached. "Fire, with a man like you in the house?"

"Fire because I was in the house. They evidently felt obliged to get rid of me somehow. It's been a night of great experiences for me. When they found I was not likely to perish in the flames they resorted to shooting. I believe that my forehead shows where one bullet passed. Jake's aim might be improved. Not that I am anxious for it."

"Jake? Do you mean the clerk? Did he fire at you?"

"Yes, while I was on the roof engaged in rescuing one of the women."

"The miserable cur! You arrested him, of course, as soon as you could lay your hands on him?"

"Yes. He's back of me in this outhouse."

"And Quimby? What about Quimby?"

"He's missing."

"And Mrs. Quimby?"

"Missing, too. They are the only persons unaccounted for."

"Lost in the fire?"

"We don't think so. He was the incendiary and she, undoubtedly, his accomplice. They would certainly look out for themselves. Doctor Golden, it was not for insurance money they fired the place; it was to cover up a crime."

The coroner, more or less prepared for this statement by what Hammersmith had already told him, showed but little additional excitement as he dubiously remarked:

"So you still hold to that idea."

Hammersmith glanced about him and, catching more than one curious eye turned their way from the crowd now rapidly collecting in all directions, drew the coroner aside and in a few graphic words related the night's occurrences and the conclusions these had forced upon him. Doctor Golden listened and seemed impressed at last, especially by one point.

"You saw Quimby," he repeated; "saw his face distinctly looking toward your room from one of the stable windows?"

"I can swear to it. I even caught his expression. It was malignant in the extreme, quite unlike that he usually turns upon his guests."

"Which window was it?"

Hammersmith pointed it out.

"You have been there? Searched the room and the stable?"

"Thoroughly, just as soon as it was light enough to see."

"And found – "

"Nothing; not even a clue."

"The man is lying dead in that heap. She, too, perhaps. We'll have to put the screws on Jake. A conspiracy like this must be unearthed. Show me the rascal."

"He's in a most careless mood. *He* doesn't think his master and mistress perished in the fire."

"Careless, eh? Well, we'll see. I know that sort."

But when a few minutes later he came to confront the clerk he saw that his task was not likely to prove quite so easy as his former experience had led him to expect. Save for a slight nervous trembling of limb and shoulder – surely not unnatural after such a night – Jake bore himself with very much the same indifferent ease he had shown the day before.

Doctor Golden surveyed him with becoming sternness.

"At what time did this fire start?" he asked.

Jake had a harsh voice, but he mellowed it wonderfully as he replied:

"Somewhere about one. I don't carry a watch, so I don't know the exact time."

"The exact time isn't necessary. Near one answers well enough. How came you to be completely dressed at near one in a country tavern like this?"

"I was on watch. There was death in the house."

"Then you were in the house?"

"Yes." His tongue faltered, but not his gaze; that was as direct as ever. "I was in the house, but not at the moment the fire started. I had gone to the stable to get a newspaper. My room is in the stable, the little one high in the cock-loft. I did not find the paper at once and when I did I stopped to read a few lines. I'm a slow reader, and by the time I was ready to cross back to the house, smoke was pouring out of the rear windows, and I stopped short, horrified! I'm mortally afraid of fire."

"You have shown it. I have not heard that you raised the least alarm."

"I'm afraid you're right. I lost my head like a fool. You see, I've never lived anywhere else for the last ten years, and to see my home on fire was more than I could stand. You wouldn't think me so weak to look at these muscles."

Baring his arm, he stared down at it with a forlorn shake of his head. The coroner glanced at Hammersmith. What sort of fellow was this! A giant with the air of a child, a rascal with the smile of a humourist. Delicate business, this; or were they both deceived and the man just a good-humoured silly?

Hammersmith answered the appeal by a nod toward an inner door. The coroner understood and turned back to Jake with the seemingly irrelevant inquiry:

"Where did you leave Mr. Quimby when you went to the cock-loft?"

"In the house?"

"Asleep?"

"No, he was making up his accounts."

"In the office?"

"Yes."

"And that was where you left him?"

"Yes, it was."

"Then, how came he to be looking out of your window just before the fire broke out?"

"He?" Jake's jaw fell and his enormous shoulders drooped; but only for a moment. With something between a hitch and a shrug, he drew himself upright and with some slight display of temper cried out, "Who says he was there?"

The coroner answered him. "The man behind you. He saw him."

Jake's hand closed in a nervous grip. Had the trigger been against his finger at that moment it would doubtless have been snapped with some satisfaction, so the barrel had been pointing at Hammersmith.

"Saw him distinctly," the coroner repeated. "Mr. Quimby's face is not to be mistaken."

"If he saw him," retorted Jake, with unexpected cunning, "then the flames had got a start. One don't see in the dark. They hadn't got much of a start when I left. So he must have gone up to my room after I came down."

"It was before the alarm was given; before Mr. Hammersmith here had crawled out of his room window."

"I can't help that, sir. It was after I left the stable. You can't mix me up with Quimby's doings."

"Can't we? Jake, you're no lawyer and you don't know how to manage a lie. Make a clean breast of it. It may help you and it won't hurt Quimby. Begin with the old lady's coming. What turned Quimby against her? What's the plot?"

"I don't know of any plot. What Quimby told you is true. You needn't expect me to contradict it!"

A leaden doggedness had taken the place of his whilom good nature. Nothing is more difficult to contend with. Nothing is more dreaded by the inquisitor. Hammersmith realised the difficulties of the situation and repeated the gesture he had previously made toward the door leading into an adjoining compartment. The coroner nodded as before and changed the tone of his inquiry.

"Jake," he declared, "you are in a more serious position than you realise. You may be devoted to Quimby, but there are others who are not. A night such as you have been through quickens the conscience of women if it does not that of men. One has been near death. The story of such a woman is apt to be truthful. Do you want to hear it? I have no objections to your doing so."

"What story? I don't know of any story. Women have easy tongues; they talk even when they have nothing to say."

"This woman has something to say, or why should she have asked to be confronted with you? Have her in, Mr. Hammersmith. I imagine that a sight of this man will make her voluble."

A sneer from Jake; but when Hammersmith, crossing to the door I've just mentioned, opened it and let in Huldah, this token of bravado gave way to a very different expression and he exclaimed half ironically, half caressingly:

"Why, she's my sweetheart! What can she have to say except that she was mighty fortunate not to have been burned up in the fire last night?"

Doctor Golden and the detective crossed looks in some anxiety. They had not been told of this relation between the two, either by the girl herself or by the others. Gifted with a mighty close mouth, she had nevertheless confided to Hammersmith that she could tell things and would, if he brought her face to face with the man who tried to shoot him while he was helping her down from the roof. Would her indignation hold out under the insinuating smile with which the artful rascal awaited her words? It gave every evidence of doing so, for her eye flashed threateningly and her whole body showed the tension of extreme feeling as she came hastily forward, and pausing just beyond the reach of his arm, cried out:

"You had a hand in locking me in. You're tired of me. If you're not, why did you fire those bullets my way? I was escaping and – "

Jake thrust in a quick word. "That was Quimby's move – locking your door. He had some game up. I don't know what it was. I had nothing to do with it."

This denial seemed to influence her. She looked at him and her breast heaved. He was good to look at; he must have been more than that to one of her restricted experience. Hammersmith trembled for the success of their venture. Would this blond young giant's sturdy figure and provoking smile prevail against the good sense which must tell her that he was criminal to the core, and that neither his principle nor his love were to be depended on? No, not yet. With a deepening flush, she flashed out:

"You hadn't? You didn't want me dead? Why, then, those bullets? You might have killed me as well as Mr. Hammersmith when you fired!"

"Huldah!" Astonishment and reproach in the tone and something more than either in the look which accompanied it. Both were very artful and betrayed resources not to be expected from one of his ordinarily careless and good-humoured aspect. "You haven't heard what I've said about that?"

"What could you say?"

"Why, the truth, Huldah. I saw you on the roof. The fire was near. I thought that neither you nor the man helping you could escape. A death of that kind is horrible. I loved you too well to see you suffer. My gun was behind the barn door. I got it and fired out of mercy."

She gasped. So, in a way, did the two officials. The plea was so specious, and its likely effect upon her so evident.

"Jake, can I believe you?" she murmured.

For answer, he fumbled in his pocket and drew out a small object which he held up before her between his fat forefinger and thumb. It was a ring, a thin, plain hoop of gold worth possibly a couple of dollars, but which in her eyes seemed to possess an incalculable value, for she had no sooner seen it than her whole face flushed and a look of positive delight supplanted the passionately aggrieved one with which she had hitherto faced him.

"You had bought *that*?"

He smiled and returned it to his pocket.

"For you," he simply said.

The joy and pride with which she regarded him, despite the protesting murmur of the discomfited Hammersmith, proved that the wily Jake had been too much for them.

"You see!" This to Hammersmith, "Jake didn't mean any harm, only kindness to us both. If you will let him go, I'll be more thankful than when you helped me down off the roof. We're wanting to be married. Didn't you see him show me the ring?"

It was for the coroner to answer.

"We'll let him go when we're assured that he means all that he says. I haven't as good an opinion of him as you have. I think he's deceiving you and that you are a very foolish girl to trust him. Men don't fire on the women they love, for any reason. You'd better tell me what you have against him."

"I haven't anything against him *now*."

"But you were going to tell us something – "

"I guess I was fooling."

"People are not apt to fool who have just been in terror of their lives."

Her eyes sought the ground. "I'm just a hardworking girl," she muttered almost sullenly. "What should I know about that man Quimby's dreadful doings?"

"Dreadful? You call them dreadful?" It was Doctor Golden who spoke.

"He locked me in my room," she violently declared. "That wasn't done for fun."

"And is that all you can tell us? Don't look at Jake. Look at me."

"But I don't know what to say. I don't even know what you want."

"I'll tell you. Your work in the house has been upstairs work, hasn't it?"

"Yes, sir. I did up the rooms – some of them," she added cautiously.

"What rooms? Front rooms, rear rooms, or both?"

"Rooms in front; those on the third floor."

"But you sometimes went into the extension?"

"I've been down the hall."

"Haven't you been in any of the rooms there, – Number 3, for instance?"

"No, sir; my work didn't take me there."

"But you've heard of the room?"

"Yes, sir. The girls sometimes spoke of it. It had a bad name, and wasn't often used. No girl liked to go there. A man was found dead in it once. They said he killed his own self."

"Have you ever heard any one describe this room?"

"No, sir."

"Tell what paper was on the wall?"

"No, sir."

"Perhaps Jake here can help us. He's been in the room often."

"The paper was blue; you know that; you saw it yourselves yesterday," blurted forth the man thus appealed to.

"Always blue? Never any other colour that you remember?"

"No; but I've been in the house only ten years."

"Oh, is that all! And do you mean to say that this room has not been redecorated in ten years?"

"How can I tell? I can't remember every time a room is repapered."

"You ought to remember this one."

"Why?"

"Because of a very curious circumstance connected with it."

"I don't know of any circumstance."

"You heard what Miss Demarest had to say about a room whose walls were covered with muddy pink scrolls."

"Oh, she!" His shrug was very expressive. Huldah continued to look down.

"Miss Demarest seemed to know what she was talking about," pursued the coroner in direct contradiction of the tone he had taken the day before. "Her description was quite vivid. It would be strange now if those walls had once been covered with just such paper as she described."

An ironic stare, followed by an incredulous smile from Jake; dead silence and immobility on the part of Huldah.

"Was it?" shot from Doctor Golden's lips with all the vehemence of conscious authority.

There was an instant's pause, during which Huldah's breast ceased its regular rise and fall; then the clerk laughed sharply and cried with the apparent lightness of a happy-go-lucky temperament:

"I should like to know if it was. I'd think it a very curious quin – quin – What's the word? quincedence, or something like that."

"The deepest fellow I know," grumbled the baffled coroner into Hammersmith's ear, as the latter stepped his way, "or just the most simple." Then added aloud: "Lift up my coat there, please."

Hammersmith did so. The garment mentioned lay across a small table which formed the sole furnishing of the place, and when Hammersmith raised it, there appeared lying underneath several small pieces of plaster which Doctor Golden immediately pointed out to Jake.

"Do you see these bits from a papered wall?" he asked. "They were torn from that of Number 3, between the breaking out of the fire and Mr. Hammersmith's escape from the room. Come closer; you may look at them, but keep your fingers off. You see that the coincidence you mentioned holds."

Jake laughed again loudly, in a way he probably meant to express derision; then he stood silent, gazing curiously down at the pieces before him. The blue paper peeling away from the pink made it impossible for him to deny that just such paper as Miss Demarest described had been on the wall prior to the one they had all seen and remembered.[1]

"Well, I vum!" Jake finally broke out, turning and looking from one face to another with a very obvious attempt to carry off the matter jovially. "She must have a great eye; a – a – (another hard word! What is it now?) Well! no matter. One of the kind what sees through the outside of things to

[1] Hammersmith's first attempt to settle this fact must have failed from his having chosen a spot for his experiment where the old paper had been stripped away before the new was put on.

what's underneath. I always thought her queer, but not so queer as that. I'd like to have that sort of power myself. Wouldn't you, Huldah?"

The girl, whose eye, as Hammersmith was careful to note, had hardly dwelt for an instant on these bits, not so long by any means as a woman's natural curiosity would seem to prompt, started as attention was thus drawn to herself and attempted a sickly smile.

But the coroner had small appreciation for this attempted display of humour, and motioning to Hammersmith to take her away, he subjected the clerk to a second examination which, though much more searching and rigorous than the first, resulted in the single discovery that for all his specious love-making he cared no more for the girl than for one of his old hats. This the coroner confided to Hammersmith when he came in looking disconsolate at his own failure to elicit anything further from the resolute Huldah.

"But you can't make her believe that now," whispered Hammersmith.

"Then we must trick him into showing her his real feelings."

"How would you set to work? He's warned, she's warned, and life if not love is at stake."

"It don't look very promising," muttered Doctor Golden, "but – "

He was interrupted by a sudden sound of hubbub without.

"It's Quimby, Quimby!" declared Hammersmith in his sudden excitement.

But again he was mistaken. It was not the landlord, but his wife, wild-eyed, dishevelled, with bits of straw in her hair from some sheltering hayrick and in her hand a heavy gold chain which, as the morning sun shone across it, showed sparkles of liquid clearness at short intervals along its whole length.

Diamonds! Miss Thistlewaite's diamonds, and the woman who held them was gibbering like an idiot!

The effect on Jake was remarkable. Uttering a piteous cry, he bounded from their hands and fell at the woman's feet.

"Mother Quimby!" he moaned. "Mother Quimby!" and sought to kiss her hand and wake some intelligence in her eye.

Meanwhile the coroner and Hammersmith looked on, astonished at these evidences of real feeling. Then their eyes stole behind them, and simultaneously both started back for the outhouse they had just left. Huldah was standing in the doorway, surveying the group before her with trembling, half-parted lips.

"Jealous!" muttered Hammersmith. "Providence has done our little trick for us. She will talk now. Look! She's beckoning to us."

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"Speak quickly. You'll never regret it, Huldah. He's no mate for you, and you ought to know it. You have seen this paper covered with the pink scrolls before?"

The coroner had again drawn aside his coat from the bits of plaster.

"Yes," she gasped, with quick glances at her lover through the open doorway. "He never shed tears for me!" she exclaimed bitterly. "I didn't know he could for anybody. Oh, I'll tell what I've kept quiet here," and she struck her breast violently. "I wouldn't keep the truth back now if the minister was waiting to marry us. He loves that old woman and he doesn't love me. Hear him call her 'mother.' Are mothers dearer than sweethearts? Oh, I'll tell! I don't know anything about the old lady, but I do know that room 3 was repapered the night before last, and secretly, by him. I didn't see him do it, nobody did, but this is how I know: Some weeks ago I was hunting for something in the attic, when I stumbled upon some rolls of old wall-paper lying in a little cubby-hole under the eaves. The end of one of the rolls was torn and lay across the floor. I couldn't help seeing it or remembering its colour. It was like this, blue and striped. Exactly like it," she repeated, "just as shabby and old-looking. The rain had poured in on it, and it was all mouldy and stained. It smelt musty. I didn't give two thoughts to it then, but when after the old lady's death I heard one of the girls say something in the kitchen about a room being blue now which only a little while ago was pink, I stole up into the attic to see if those rolls were still there and found them every one gone. Oh, what is happening now?"

"One of the men is trying to take the diamonds from the woman and she won't let him. Her wits are evidently gone – frightened away by the horrors of the night – or she wouldn't try to cling to what has branded her at once as a thief."

The word seemed to pierce the girl. She stared out at her former mistress, who was again being soothed by the clerk, and murmured hoarsely:

"A thief! and he don't seem to mind, but is just as good to her! Oh, oh, I once served a term myself for – for a smaller thing than that and I thought that was why – Oh, sir, oh, sir, there's no mistake about the paper. For I went looking about in the barrels and where they throw the refuse, for bits to prove that this papering had been done in the night. It seemed so wonderful to me that any one, even Jake, who is the smartest man you ever saw, could do such a job as that and no one know. And though I found nothing in the barrels, I did in the laundry stove. It was full of burned paper, and some of it showed colour, and it was just that musty old blue I had seen in the attic."

She paused with a terrified gasp; Jake was looking at her from the open door.

"Oh, Jake!" she wailed out, "why weren't you true to me? Why did you pretend to love me when you didn't?"

He gave her a look, then turned on his heel. He was very much subdued in aspect and did not think to brush away the tear still glistening on his cheek.

"I've said my last word to *you*," he quietly declared, then stood silent a moment, with slowly labouring chest and an air of deepest gloom. But, as his eye stole outside again, they saw the spirit melt within him and simple human grief take the place of icy resolution. "She was like a mother to me," he murmured. "And now they say she'll never be herself again as long as she lives." Suddenly his head rose and he faced the coroner.

"You're right," said he. "It's all up with me. No home, no sweetheart, no missus. *She* [there was no doubt as to whom he meant by that tremulous *she*] was the only one I've ever cared for and she's just shown herself a thief. I'm no better. This is our story."

I will not give it in his words, but in my own. It will be shorter and possibly more intelligible.

The gang, if you may call it so, consisted of Quimby and these two, with a servant or so in addition. Robbery was its aim; a discreet and none too frequent spoliation of such of their patrons as lent themselves to their schemes. Quimby was the head, his wife the soul of this business, and Jake

their devoted tool. The undermining of the latter's character had been begun early; a very dangerous undermining, because it had for one of its elements good humour and affectionate suggestion. At fourteen he was ready for any crime, but he was mercifully kept out of the worst till he was a full-grown man. Then he did his part. The affair of the old woman was an unpremeditated one. It happened in this wise: Miss Demarest's story had been true in every particular. Her mother *was* with her when she came to the house, and he, Jake, was the person sitting far back in the shadows at the time the young lady registered. There was nothing peculiar in the occurrence or in their behaviour except the decided demand which Miss Demarest made for separate rooms. This attracted his attention, for the house was pretty full and only one room was available in the portion reserved for transients. What would Quimby do? He couldn't send two women away, and he was entirely too conciliatory and smooth to refuse a request made so peremptorily. Quimby did nothing. He hemmed, hawed, and looked about for his wife. She was in the inner office back of him, and, attracted by his uneasy movements, showed herself. A whispered consultation followed, during which she cast a glance Jake's way. He understood her instantly and lounged carelessly forward. "Let them have Number 3," he said. "It's all fixed for the night. I can sleep anywhere, on the settle here or even on the floor of the inner office."

He had whispered these words, for the offer meant more than appeared. Number 3 was never given to guests. It was little more than a closet and was not even furnished. A cot had been put in that very afternoon, but only to meet a special emergency. A long-impending conference was going to be held between him and his employers subsequent to closing up time, and he had planned this impromptu refuge to save himself a late walk to the stable. At his offer to pass the same over to the Demarests, the difficulty of the moment vanished. Miss Demarest was shown to the one empty room in front, and the mother – as being the one less likely to be governed by superstitious fears if it so happened that some rumour of the undesirability of the haunted Number 3 should have reached them – to the small closet so hastily prepared for the clerk. Mrs. Quimby accompanied her, and afterward visited her again for the purpose of carrying her a bowl and some water. It was then she encountered Miss Demarest, who, anxious for a second and more affectionate good-night from her mother, had been wandering the halls in a search for her room. There was nothing to note in this simple occurrence, and Mrs. Quimby might have forgotten all about it if Miss Demarest had not made a certain remark on leaving the room. The bareness and inhospitable aspect of the place may have struck her, for she stopped in the doorway and, looking back, exclaimed: "What ugly paper! Magenta, too, the one colour my mother hates." This Mrs. Quimby remembered, for she also hated magenta, and never went into this room if she could help it.

The business which kept them all up that night was one totally disconnected with the Demarests or any one else in the house. A large outstanding obligation was coming due which Quimby lacked the money to meet. Something must be done with the stolen notes and jewelry which they had accumulated in times past and had never found the will or courage to dispose of. A choice must be made of what was salable. But what choice? It was a question that opened the door to endless controversy and possibly to a great difference of opinion; for in his way Quimby was a miser of the worst type and cared less for what money would do than for the sight and feeling of the money itself, while Mrs. Quimby was even more tenacious in her passion for the trinkets and gems which she looked upon as her part of the booty. Jake, on the contrary, cared little for anything but the good of the couple to whom he had attached himself. He wished Quimby to be satisfied, but not at Mrs. Quimby's expense. He was really fond of the woman and he was resolved that she should have no cause to grieve, even if he had to break with the old man. Little did any of them foresee what the night really held for them, or on what a jagged and unsuspected rock their frail bark was about to split.

Shutting-up time came, and with it the usual midnight quiet. All the doors had been locked and the curtains drawn over the windows and across the glass doors of the office. They were determined to do what they had never done before, lay out the loot and make a division. Quimby was resolved to see the diamonds which his wife had kept hidden for so long, and she, the securities, concerning the

value of which he had contradicted himself so often. Jake's presence would keep the peace; they had no reason to fear any undue urging of his claims. All this he knew, and he was not therefore surprised, only greatly excited, when, after a last quiet look and some listening at the foot of the stairs, Mr. Quimby beckoned him into the office and, telling him to lock the door behind him, stepped around the bar to summon his wife. Jake never knew how it happened. He flung the door to and locked it, as he thought, but he must have turned the key too quickly, for the bolt of the lock did not enter the jamb, as they afterward found. Meanwhile they felt perfectly secure. The jewels were brought out of Mrs. Quimby's bedroom and laid on the desk. The securities were soon laid beside them. They had been concealed behind a movable brick at the side of the fireplace. Then the discussion began, involving more or less heat and excitement.

How long this lasted no one ever knew. At half-past eleven no change of attitude had taken place either in Quimby or his wife. At twelve the only difference marked by Jake was the removal of the securities to Quimby's breast pocket, and of the diamond-studded chain to Mrs. Quimby's neck. The former were too large for the pocket, the latter too brilliant for the dark calico background they blazed against. Jake, who was no fool, noted both facts, but had no words for the situation. He was absorbed, and he saw that Quimby was absorbed, in watching her broad hand creeping over those diamonds and huddling them up in a burning heap against her heart. There was fear in the action, fierce and overmastering fear, and so there was in her eyes which, fixed and glassy, stared over their shoulders at the wall behind, as though something had reached out from that wall and struck at the very root of her being. What did it mean? There was nothing in the room to affright her. Had she gone daft? Or —

Suddenly they both felt the blood congeal in their own veins; each turned to each a horrified face, then slowly and as if drawn by a power supernatural and quite outside of their own will, their two heads turned in the direction she was looking, and they beheld standing in their midst a spectre – no, it was the figure of a living, breathing woman, with eyes fastened on those jewels, – those well-known, much-advertised jewels! So much they saw in that instant flash, then nothing! For Quimby, in a frenzy of unreasoning fear, had taken the chair from under him and had swung it at the figure. A lamp had stood on the bar top. It was caught by the backward swing of the chair, overturned and quenched. The splintering of glass mingled its small sound with an ominous thud in the thick darkness. It was the end of all things; the falling of an impenetrable curtain over a horror half sensed, yet all the greater for its mystery.

The silence – the terror – the unspeakable sense of doom which gripped them all was not broken by a heart-beat. All listened for a stir, a movement where they could see nothing. But the stillness remained unbroken. The silence was absolute. The figure which they had believed themselves to have seen had been a dream, an imagination of their overwrought minds. It could not be otherwise. The door had been locked, entrance was impossible; yet doubt held them powerless. The moments were making years of themselves. To each came in a flash a review of every earthly incident they had experienced, every wicked deed, every unholy aspiration. Quimby gritted his teeth. It was the first sound which had followed that thud and, slight as it was, it released them somewhat from their awful tension. Jake felt that he could move now, and was about to let forth his imprisoned breath when he felt the touch of icy fingers trailing over his cheek, and started back with a curse. It was Mrs. Quimby feeling about for him in the impenetrable darkness, and in another moment he could hear her smothered whisper:

"Are you there, Jake?"

"Yes; where are you?"

"Here," said the woman, with an effort to keep her teeth from striking together.

"For God's sake, a light!" came from the hollow darkness beyond.

It was Quimby's voice at last. Jake answered:

"No light for me. I'll stay where I am till daybreak."

"Get a light, you fool!" commanded Quimby, but not without a tremble in his usually mild tone.

Hard breathing from Jake, but no other response, Quimby seemed to take a step nearer, for his voice was almost at their ears now.

"Jake, you can have anything I've got so as you get a light now."

"There ain't nothing to light here. You broke the lamp."

Quiet for a moment, then Quimby muttered hoarsely:

"If you ain't scared out of your seven senses, you can go down cellar and bring up that bit of candle 'longside the ale-barrels."

Into the cellar! Not Jake. The moving of the rickety table which his fat hand had found and rested on spoke for him.

Another curse from Quimby. Then the woman, though with some hesitation, said with more self-control than could be expected:

"I'll get it," and they heard her move away from *it* toward the trap-door behind the bar.

The two men made no objection. To her that cold, black cellar might seem a refuge from the unseen horror centred here. It had not struck them so. It had its own possibilities, and Jake wondered at her courage, as he caught the sound of her groping advance and the sudden clatter and clink of bottles as the door came up and struck the edge of the bar. There was life and a suggestion of home in that clatter and clink, and all breathed easier for a moment, but only for a moment. The something lying there behind them, or was it almost under their feet, soon got its hold again upon their fears, and Jake found himself standing stock-still, listening both ways for that dreaded, or would it be welcome, movement on the floor behind, and to the dragging sound of Mrs. Quimby's skirt and petticoat as she made her first step down those cellar-stairs. What an endless time it took! He could rush down there in a minute, but she – she could not have reached the third step yet, for that always creaked. Now it did creak. Then there was no sound for some time, unless it was the panting of Quimby's breath somewhere over by the bar. Then the stair creaked again. She must be nearly up.

"Here's matches and the candle," came in a hollow voice from the trap-stairs.

A faint streak appeared for an instant against the dark, then disappeared. Another; but no lasting light. The matches were too damp to burn.

"Jake, ain't you got a match?" appealed the voice of Quimby in half-choked accents.

After a bit of fumbling a small blaze shot up from where Jake stood. Its sulphurous smell may have suggested to all, as it did to one, the immeasurable distance of heaven at that moment, and the awful nearness of hell. They could see now, but not one of them looked in the direction where all their thoughts lay. Instead of that, they rolled their eyes on each other, while the match burned slowly out: Mrs. Quimby from the trap, her husband from the bar, and Jake. Suddenly he found words, and his cry rang through the room:

"The candle! the candle! this is my only match. Where is the candle?"

Quimby leaped forward and with shaking hand held the worn bit of candle to the flame. It failed to ignite. The horrible, dreaded darkness was about to close upon them again before – before – But another hand had seized the candle. Mrs. Quimby has come forward, and as the match sends up its last flicker, thrusts the wick against the flame and the candle flares up. It is lighted.

Over it they give each other one final appealing stare. There's no help for it now; they must look. Jake's head turned first, then Mrs. Quimby, and then that of the real aggressor.

A simultaneous gasp from them all betrays the worst. It had been no phantom called into being by their overtaxed nerves. A woman lay before them, face downward on the hard floor. A woman dressed in black, with hat on head and a little satchel clutched in one stiff, outstretched hand. Miss Demarest's mother! The little old lady who had come into the place four hours before!

With a muttered execration, Jake stepped over to her side and endeavoured to raise her; but he instantly desisted, and looking up at Quimby and his wife, moved his lips with the one fatal word which ends all hope:

"Dead!"

They listened appalled, "Dead?" echoed the now terrified Quimby.

"Dead?" repeated his no less agitated wife.

Jake was the least overcome of the three. With another glance at the motionless figure, he rose, and walking around the body, crossed to the door and seeing what he had done to make entrance possible, cursed himself and locked it properly. Meanwhile, Mrs. Quimby, with her eyes on her husband, had backed slowly away till she had reached the desk, against which she now stood with fierce and furious eyes, still clutching at her chain.

Quimby watched her fascinated. He had never seen her look like this before. What did it portend? They were soon to know.

"Coward!" fell from her lips, as she stared with unrelenting hate at her husband. "An old woman who was not even conscious of what she saw! I'll not stand for this killing, Jacob. You may count me out of this and the chain, too. If you don't – " a threatening gesture finished the sentence and the two men looking at her knew that they had come up against a wall.

"Susan!" Was that Quimby speaking? "Susan, are you going back on me now?"

She pointed at the motionless figure lying in its shrouding black like an ineffaceable blot on the office floor, then at the securities showing above the edge of his pocket.

"Were we not close enough to discovery, without drawing the attention of the police by such an unnecessary murder? She was walking in her sleep. I remember her eyes as she advanced toward me; there was no sight in them."

"You lie!" It was the only word which Quimby found to ease the shock which this simple statement caused him. But Jake saw from the nature of the glance he shot at his poor old victim that her words had struck home. His wife saw it, too, but it did not disturb the set line of her determined mouth.

"You'll let me keep the chain," she said, "and you'll use your wits, now that you have used your hand, to save yourself and myself from the charge of murder."

Quimby, who was a man of great intelligence when his faculties were undisturbed by anger or shock, knelt and turned his victim carefully over so that her face was uppermost.

"It was not murder," he uttered in an indescribable tone after a few minutes of cautious scrutiny. "The old lady fell and struck her forehead. See! the bruise is scarcely perceptible. Had she been younger – "

"A sudden death from any cause in this house at just this time is full of danger for us," coldly broke in his wife.

The landlord rose to his feet, walked away to the window, dropped his head, thought for a minute, and then slowly came back, glanced at the woman again, at her dress, her gloved hands, and her little satchel.

"She didn't die in this house," fell from his lips in his most oily accents. "She fell in the woods; the path is full of bared roots, and there she must be found to-morrow morning. Jake, are you up to the little game?"

Jake, who was drawing his first full breath, answered with a calm enough nod, whereupon Quimby bade his wife to take a look outside and see if the way was clear for them to carry the body out.

She did not move. He fell into a rage; an unusual thing for him.

"Bestir yourself! do as I bid you," he muttered.

Her eyes held his; her face took on the look he had learned to dread. Finally she spoke:

"And the daughter! What about the daughter?"

Quimby stood silent; then with a sidelong leer, and in a tone smooth as oil, but freighted with purpose, "The mother first; we'll look after the daughter later."

Mrs. Quimby shivered; then as her hand spread itself over the precious chain sparkling with the sinister gleam of serpent's eyes on her broad bosom, she grimly muttered:

"How? I'm for no more risks, I tell you."

Jake took a step forward. He thought his master was about to rush upon her. But he was only gathering up his faculties to meet the new problem she had flung at him.

"The girl's a mere child; we shall have no difficulty with her," he muttered broodingly. "Who saw these two come in?"

Then it came out that no one but themselves had been present at their arrival. Further consultation developed that the use to which Number 3 had been put was known to but one of the maids, who could easily be silenced. Whereupon Quimby told his scheme. Mrs. Quimby was satisfied, and he and Jake prepared to carry it out.

The sensations of the next half-hour, as told by Jake, would make your flesh creep. They did not dare to carry a lamp to light the gruesome task, and well as they knew the way, the possibilities of a stumble or a fall against some one of the many trees they had to pass filled them with constant terror. They did stumble once, and the low cry Jake uttered caused them new fears. Was that a window they heard flying up? No; but something moved in the bushes. They were sure of this and guiltily shook in their shoes; but nothing advanced out of the shadows, and they went on.

But the worst was when they had to turn their backs upon the body left lying face downward in the cold, damp woods. Men of no compassion, unreached by ordinary sympathies, they felt the furtive skulking back, step by step, along ways commonplace enough in the daytime, but begirt with terrors now and full of demoniac suggestion.

The sight of a single thread of light marking the door left ajar for them by Mrs. Quimby was a beacon of hope which was not even disturbed by the sight of her wild figure walking in a circle round and round the office, the stump of candle dripping unheeded over her fingers, and her eyes almost as sightless as those of the form left in the woods.

"Susan!" exclaimed her husband, laying hand on her.

She paused at once. The presence of the two men had restored her self-possession.

But all was not well yet. Jake drew Quimby's attention to the register where the two names of mother and daughter could be seen in plain black and white.

"Oh, that's nothing!" exclaimed the landlord, and, taking out his knife, he ripped the leaf out, together with the corresponding one in the back. "The devil's on our side all right, or why did she pass over the space at the bottom of the page and write their two names at the top of the next one?"

He started, for his wife had clutched his arm.

"Yes, the devil's on our side thus far," said she, "but here he stops. I have just remembered something that will upset our whole plan and possibly hang us. Miss Demarest visited her mother in Number 3 and noticed the room well, and particularly the paper. Now if she is able to describe that paper, it might not be so easy for us to have our story believed."

For a minute all stood aghast, then Jake quietly remarked: "It is now one by the clock. If you can find me some of that old blue paper I once chucked under the eaves in the front attic, I will engage to have it on those four walls before daylight. Bring the raggedest rolls you can find. If it shouldn't be dry to the touch when they come to see it to-morrow, it must look so stained and old that no one will think of laying hand on it. I'll go make the paste."

As Jake was one of the quickest and most precise of workers at anything he understood, this astonishing offer struck the other two as quite feasible. The paper was procured, the furniture moved back, and a transformation made in the room in question which astonished even those concerned in it. Dawn rose upon the completed work and, the self-possession of all three having been restored with the burning up of such scraps as remained after the four walls were covered, they each went to their several beds for a half-hour of possible rest. Jake's was in Number 3. He has never said what that half-hour was to him!

The rest we know. The scheme did not fully succeed, owing to the interest awakened in one man's mind by the beauty and seeming truth of Miss Demarest. Investigation followed which roused the landlord to the danger threatening them from the curiosity of Hammersmith, and it being neck or nothing with him, he planned the deeper crime of burning up room and occupant before further discoveries could be made. What became of him in the turmoil which followed, no one could tell, not even Jake. They had been together in Jake's room before the latter ran out with his gun, but beyond that the clerk knew nothing. Of Mrs. Quimby he could tell more. She had not been taken into their confidence regarding the fire, some small grains of humanity remaining in her which they feared might upset their scheme. She had only been given some pretext for locking Huldah in her room, and it was undoubtedly her horror at her own deed when she saw to what it had committed her which unsettled her brain and made her a gibbering idiot for life.

Or was it some secret knowledge of her husband's fate, unknown to others? We cannot tell, for no sign nor word of Jacob Quimby ever came to dispel the mystery of his disappearance.

And this is the story of Three Forks Tavern and the room numbered 3.

MIDNIGHT IN BEAUCHAMP ROW

It was the last house in Beauchamp Row, and it stood several rods away from its nearest neighbour. It was a pretty house in the daytime, but owing to its deep, sloping roof and small bediamonded windows it had a lonesome look at night, notwithstanding the crimson hall-light which shone through the leaves of its vine-covered doorway.

Ned Chivers lived in it with his six months' married bride, and as he was both a busy fellow and a gay one there were many evenings when pretty Letty Chivers sat alone until near midnight.

She was of an uncomplaining spirit, however, and said little, though there were times when both the day and evening seemed very long and married life not altogether the paradise she had expected.

On this evening – a memorable evening for her, the 24th of December, 1911 – she had expected her husband to remain with her, for it was not only Christmas eve, but the night when, as manager of a large manufacturing concern, he brought up from New York the money with which to pay off the men on the next working day, and he never left her when there was any unusual amount of money in the house. But with the first glimpse she had of his figure coming up the road she saw that for some reason it was not to be thus to-night, and, indignant, alarmed almost, at the prospect of a lonesome evening under such circumstances, she ran hastily down to the gate to meet him, crying:

"Oh, Ned, you look so troubled I know you have only come home for a hurried supper. But you cannot leave me to-night. Tennie" (their only maid) "has gone for a holiday, and I never can stay in this house alone with all that." She pointed to the small bag he carried, which, as she knew, was filled to bursting with bank notes.

He certainly looked troubled. It is hard to resist the entreaty in a young bride's uplifted face. But this time he could not help himself, and he said:

"I am dreadfully sorry, but I must ride over to Fairbanks to-night. Mr. Pierson has given me an imperative order to conclude a matter of business there, and it is very important that it should be done. I should lose my position if I neglected the matter, and no one but Hasbrouck and Suffern knows that we keep the money in the house. I have always given out that I intrusted it to Hale's safe over night."

"But I cannot stand it," she persisted. "You have never left me on these nights. That is why I let Tennie go. I will spend the evening at The Larches, or, better still, call in Mr. and Mrs. Talcott to keep me company."

But her husband did not approve of her going out or of her having company. The Larches was too far away, and as for Mr. and Mrs. Talcott, they were meddlesome people, whom he had never liked; besides, Mrs. Talcott was delicate, and the night threatened storm. Let her go to bed like a good girl, and think nothing about the money, which he would take care to put away in a very safe place.

"Or," said he, kissing her downcast face, "perhaps you would rather hide it yourself; women always have curious ideas about such things."

"Yes, let me hide it," she entreated. "The money, I mean, not the bag. Every one knows the bag. I should never dare to leave it in that." And begging him to unlock it, she began to empty it with a feverish haste that rather alarmed him, for he surveyed her anxiously and shook his head as if he dreaded the effects of this excitement upon her.

But as he saw no way out of the difficulty, he confined himself to using such soothing words as were at his command, and then, humouring her weakness, helped her to arrange the bills in the place she had chosen, and restuffing the bag with old receipts till it acquired its former dimensions, he put a few bills on top to make the whole look natural, and, laughing at her white face, relocked the bag and put the key back in his pocket.

"There, dear; a notable scheme and one that should relieve your mind entirely!" he cried. "If any one should attempt burglary in my absence and should succeed in getting into a house as safely

locked as this will be when I leave it, then trust to their being satisfied when they see this booty, which I shall hide where I always hide it – in the cupboard over my desk."

"And when will you be back?" she questioned, trembling in spite of herself at these preparations.

"By one o'clock if possible. Certainly by two."

"And our neighbours go to bed at ten," she murmured. But the words were low, and she was glad he did not hear them, for if it was his duty to obey the orders he had received, then it was her duty to meet the position in which it left her as bravely as she could.

At supper she was so natural that his face rapidly brightened, and it was with quite an air of cheerfulness that he rose at last to lock up the house and make such preparations as were necessary for his dismal ride over the mountains to Fairbanks. She had the supper dishes to wash up in Tennie's absence, and as she was a busy little housewife she found herself singing a snatch of song as she passed back and forth from dining-room to kitchen. He heard it, too, and smiled to himself as he bolted the windows on the ground floor and examined the locks of the three lower doors, and when he finally came into the kitchen with his greatcoat on to give her his final kiss, he had but one parting injunction to urge, and this was for her to lock and bolt the front door after him and then forget the whole matter till she heard his double knock at midnight.

She smiled and held up her ingenuous face.

"Be careful of yourself," she begged of him. "I hate this dark ride for you, and on such a night too." And she ran with him to the door to look out.

"It is certainly very dark," he responded, "but I'm to have one of Brown's safest horses. Do not worry about me. I shall do well enough, and so will you, too, or you are not the plucky little woman I have always thought you."

She laughed, but there was a choking sound in her voice that made him look at her again. But at sight of his anxiety she recovered herself, and pointing to the clouds said earnestly:

"It's going to snow. Be careful as you ride by the gorge, Ned; it is very deceptive there in a snowstorm."

But he vowed that it would not snow before morning and giving her one final embrace he dashed down the path toward Brown's livery stable. "Oh, what is the matter with me?" she murmured to herself as his steps died out in the distance. "I never knew I was such a coward." And she paused for a moment, looking up and down the road, as if in despite of her husband's command she had the desperate idea of running away to some neighbour.

But she was too loyal for that, and smothering a sigh she retreated into the house. As she did so the first flakes fell of the storm that was not to have come till morning.

It took her an hour to get her kitchen in order, and nine o'clock struck before she was ready to sit down. She had been so busy she had not noticed how the wind had increased or how rapidly the snow was falling. But when she went to the front door for another glance up and down the road she started back, appalled at the fierceness of the gale and at the great pile of snow that had already accumulated on the doorstep.

Too delicate to breast such a wind, she saw herself robbed of her last hope of any companionship, and sighing heavily she locked and bolted the door for the night and went back into her little sitting-room, where a great fire was burning. Here she sat down, and determined, since she must pass the evening alone, to do it as cheerfully as possible, she began to sew. "Oh, what a Christmas eve!" she thought, as a picture of other homes rose before her eyes, – homes in which husbands sat by wives and brothers by sisters; and a great wave of regret poured over her and a longing for something, she hardly dared say what, lest her unhappiness should acquire a sting that would leave traces beyond the passing moment.

The room in which she sat was the only one on the ground floor except the dining-room and kitchen. It therefore was used both as parlour and sitting-room, and held not only her piano, but her husband's desk.

Communicating with it was the tiny dining-room. Between the two, however, was an entry leading to a side entrance. A lamp was in this entry, and she had left it burning, as well as the one in the kitchen, that the house might look cheerful and as if the whole family were at home.

She was looking toward this entry and wondering what made it seem so dismally dark to her, when there came a faint sound from the door at its further end.

Knowing that her husband must have taken peculiar pains with the fastenings of this door, as it was the one toward the woods and therefore most accessible to wayfarers, she sat where she was, with all her faculties strained to listen. But no further sound came from that direction, and after a few minutes of silent terror she was allowing herself to believe that she had been deceived by her fears when she suddenly heard the same sound at the kitchen door, followed by a muffled knock.

Frightened now in good earnest, but still alive to the fact that the intruder was as likely to be a friend as foe, she stepped to the door, and with her hand on the lock stooped and asked boldly enough who was there. But she received no answer, and more affected by this unexpected silence than by the knock she had heard, she recoiled farther and farther till not only the width of the kitchen, but the dining-room also, lay between her and the scene of her alarm, when to her utter confusion the noise shifted again to the side of the house, and the door she thought so securely fastened, swung violently open as if blown in by a fierce gust, and she saw precipitated into the entry the burly figure of a man covered with snow and shaking with the violence of the storm that seemed at once to fill the house.

Her first thought was that it was her husband come back, but before she could clear her eyes from the snow which had rushed tumultuously in, he had thrown off his outer covering and she found herself face to face with a man in whose powerful frame and cynical visage she saw little to comfort her and much to surprise and alarm.

"Ugh!" was his coarse and rather familiar greeting. "A hard night, missus! Enough to drive any man indoors. Pardon the liberty, but I couldn't wait for you to lift the latch; the wind drove me right in."

"Was – was not the door locked?" she feebly asked, thinking he must have staved it in with his foot, which was certainly well fitted for such a task.

"Not much," he chuckled. "I s'pose you're too hospitable for that." And his eyes passed from her face to the comfortable firelight shining through the sitting-room.

"Is it refuge you want?" she demanded, suppressing as much as possible all signs of fear.

"Sure, missus – what else! A man can't live in a gale like that, specially after a tramp of twenty miles or more. Shall I shut the door for you?" he asked, with a mixture of bravado and good nature that frightened her more and more.

"I will shut it," she replied, with a half notion of escaping this sinister stranger by a flight through the night.

But one glance into the swirling snowstorm deterred her, and making the best of the alarming situation, she closed the door, but did not lock it, being now more afraid of what was inside the house than of anything left lingering without.

The man, whose clothes were dripping with water, watched her with a cynical smile, and then, without any invitation, entered the dining-room, crossed it, and moved toward the kitchen fire.

"Ugh! ugh! But it is warm here!" he cried, his nostrils dilating with an animal-like enjoyment, that in itself was repugnant to her womanly delicacy. "Do you know, missus, I shall have to stay here all night? Can't go out in that gale again; not such a fool." Then with a sly look at her trembling form and white face he insinuatingly added, "All alone, missus?"

The suddenness with which this was put, together with the leer that accompanied it, made her start. Alone? Yes, but should she acknowledge it? Would it not be better to say that her husband was

upstairs? The man evidently saw the struggle going on in her mind, for he chuckled to himself and called out quite boldly:

"Never mind, missus; it's all right. Just give me a bit of cold meat and a cup of tea or something, and we'll be very comfortable together. You're a slender slip of a woman to be minding a house like this. I'll keep you company if you don't mind, leastwise until the storm lets up a bit, which ain't likely for some hours to come. Rough night, missus, rough night."

"I expect my husband home at any time," she hastened to say. And thinking she saw a change in the man's countenance at this she put on quite an air of sudden satisfaction and bounded toward the front of the house. "There! I think I hear him now," she cried.

Her motive was to gain time, and if possible to obtain the opportunity of shifting the money from the place where she had first put it into another and safer one. "I want to be able," she thought, "to swear that I have no money with me in this house. If I can only get it into my apron I will drop it outside the door into the snowbank. It will be as safe there as in the vaults it came from." And dashing into the sitting-room she made a feint of dragging down a shawl from a screen, while she secretly filled her skirt with the bills which had been put between some old pamphlets on the bookshelves.

She could hear the man grumbling in the kitchen, but he did not follow her front, and taking advantage of the moment's respite from his none too encouraging presence she unbarred the door and cheerfully called out her husband's name.

The ruse was successful. She was enabled to fling the notes where the falling flakes would soon cover them from sight, and feeling more courageous, now that the money was out of the house, she went slowly back, saying she had made a mistake, and that it was the wind she had heard.

The man gave a gruff but knowing guffaw and then resumed his watch over her, following her steps as she proceeded to set him out a meal, with a persistency that reminded her of a tiger just on the point of springing. But the inviting look of the viands with which she was rapidly setting the table soon distracted his attention, and allowing himself one grunt of satisfaction, he drew up a chair and set himself down to what to him was evidently a most savoury repast.

"No beer? No ale? Nothing o' that sort, eh? Don't keep a bar?" he growled, as his teeth closed on a huge hunk of bread.

She shook her head, wishing she had a little cold poison bottled up in a tight-looking jug.

"Nothing but tea," she smiled, astonished at her own ease of manner in the presence of this alarming guest.

"Then let's have that," he grumbled, taking the bowl she handed him, with an odd look that made her glad to retreat to the other side of the room.

"Jest listen to the howling wind," he went on between the huge mouthfuls of bread and cheese with which he was gorging himself. "But we're very comfortable, we two! We don't mind the storm, do we?"

Shocked by his familiarity and still more moved by the look of mingled inquiry and curiosity with which his eyes now began to wander over the walls and cupboards, she hurried to the window overlooking her nearest neighbour, and, lifting the shade, peered out. A swirl of snowflakes alone confronted her. She could neither see her neighbours, nor could she be seen by them. A shout from her to them would not be heard. She was as completely isolated as if the house stood in the centre of a desolate western plain.

"I have no trust but in God," she murmured as she came from the window. And, nerved to meet her fate, she crossed to the kitchen.

It was now half-past ten. Two hours and a half must elapse before her husband could possibly arrive.

She set her teeth at the thought and walked resolutely into the room.

"Are you done?" she asked.

"I am, ma'am," he leered. "Do you want me to wash the dishes? I kin, and I will." And he actually carried his plate and cup to the sink, where he turned the water upon them with another loud guffaw.

"If only his fancy would take him into the pantry," she thought, "I could shut and lock the door upon him and hold him prisoner till Ned gets back."

But his fancy ended its flight at the sink, and before her hopes had fully subsided he was standing on the threshold of the sitting-room door.

"It's pretty here," he exclaimed, allowing his eye to rove again over every hiding-place within sight. "I wonder now – " He stopped. His glance had fallen on the cupboard over her husband's desk.

"Well?" she asked, anxious to break the thread of his thought, which was only too plainly mirrored in his eager countenance.

He started, dropped his eyes, and, turning, surveyed her with a momentary fierceness. But, as she did not let her own glance quail, but continued to meet his gaze with what she meant for an ingratiating smile, he subdued this outward manifestation of passion, and, chuckling to hide his embarrassment, began backing into the entry, leering in evident enjoyment of the fears he caused.

However, once in the hall, he hesitated for a long time; then slowly made for the garment he had dropped on entering, and stooping, drew from underneath its folds a wicked-looking stick. Giving a kick to the coat, which sent it into a remote corner, he bestowed upon her another smile, and still carrying the stick, went slowly and reluctantly away into the kitchen.

"Oh, God Almighty, help me!" was her prayer.

There was nothing left for her now but to endure, so throwing herself into a chair, she tried to calm the beating of her heart and summon up courage for the struggle which she felt was before her. That he had come to rob and only waited to take her off her guard she now felt certain, and rapidly running over in her mind all the expedients of self-defence possible to one in her situation, she suddenly remembered the pistol which Ned kept in his desk.

Oh, why had she not thought of it before! Why had she let herself grow mad with terror when here, within reach of her hand, lay such a means of self-defence? With a feeling of joy (she had always hated pistols before and scolded Ned when he bought this one) she started to her feet and slid her hand into the drawer. But it came back empty. Ned had taken the weapon away with him.

For a moment, a surge of the bitterest feeling she had ever experienced passed over her; then she called reason to her aid and was obliged to acknowledge that the act was but natural, and that from his standpoint he was much more likely to need it than herself. But the disappointment, coming so soon after hope, unnerved her, and she sank back in her chair, giving herself up for lost.

How long she sat there with her eyes on the door through which she momentarily expected her assailant to reappear, she never knew. She was conscious only of a sort of apathy that made movement difficult and even breathing a task. In vain she tried to change her thoughts. In vain she tried to follow her husband in fancy over the snow-covered roads and into the gorge of the mountains. Imagination failed her at this point. Do what she would, all was misty to her mind's eye, and she could not see that wandering image. There was blankness between his form and her, and no life or movement anywhere but here in the scene of her terror.

Her eyes were on a strip of rug covering the entry floor, and so strange was the condition of her mind that she found herself mechanically counting the tassels finishing off its edge, growing wroth over one that was worn, till she hated that sixth tassel and mentally determined that if she ever outlived this night she would strip them all off and be done with them.

The wind had lessened, but the air had grown cooler and the snow made a sharp sound where it struck the panes. She felt it falling, though she had cut off all view of it. It seemed to her that a pall was settling over the world and that she would soon be smothered under its folds.

Meanwhile no sound came from the kitchen. A dreadful sense of doom was creeping upon her – a sense growing in intensity till she found herself watching for the shadow of that lifted stick on the wall of the entry and almost imagined she saw the tip of it appearing.

But it was the door which again blew in, admitting another man of so threatening an aspect that she succumbed instantly before him and forgot all her former fears in this new terror.

The second intruder was a negro of powerful frame and lowering aspect, and as he came forward and stood in the doorway there was observable in his fierce and desperate countenance no attempt at the insinuation of the other, only a fearful resolution that made her feel like a puppet before him, and drove her, almost without her volition, to her knees.

"Money? Is it money you want?" was her desperate greeting. "If so, here's my purse and here are my rings and watch. Take them and go."

But the stolid wretch did not even stretch out his hands. His eyes went beyond her, and the mingled anxiety and resolve which he displayed would have cowed a stouter heart than that of this poor woman.

"Keep de trash," he growled. "I want de company's money. You've got it – two thousand dollars. Show me where it is, that's all, and I won't trouble you long after I close on it."

"But it's not in the house," she cried. "I swear it is not in the house. Do you think Mr. Chivers would leave me here alone with two thousand dollars to guard?"

But the negro, swearing that she lied, leaped into the room, and tearing open the cupboard above her husband's desk, seized the bag from the corner where they had put it.

"He brought it in this," he muttered, and tried to force the bag open, but finding this impossible he took out a heavy knife and cut a big hole in its side. Instantly there fell out the pile of old receipts with which they had stuffed it, and seeing these he stamped with rage, and flinging them at her in one great handful, rushed to the drawers below, emptied them, and, finding nothing, attacked the bookcase.

"The money is somewhere here. You can't fool me," he yelled. "I saw the spot your eyes lit on when I first came into the room. Is it behind these books?" he growled, pulling them out and throwing them helter-skelter over the floor. "Women is smart in the hiding business. Is it behind these books, I say?"

They had been, or rather had been placed between the books, but she had taken them away, as we know, and he soon began to realise that his search was bringing him nothing. Leaving the bookcase he gave the books one kick, and seizing her by the arm, shook her with a murderous glare on his strange and distorted features.

"Where's the money?" he hissed. "Tell me, or you are a goner."

He raised his heavy fist. She crouched and all seemed over, when, with a rush and cry, a figure dashed between them and he fell, struck down by the very stick she had so long been expecting to see fall upon her own head. The man who had been her terror for hours had at the moment of need acted as her protector.

She must have fainted, but if so, her unconsciousness was but momentary, for when she woke again to her surroundings she found the tramp still standing over her adversary.

"I hope you don't mind, ma'am," he said, with an air of humbleness she certainly had not seen in him before, "but I think the man's dead." And he stirred with his foot the heavy figure before him.

"Oh, no, no, no!" she cried. "That would be too fearful. He's shocked, stunned; you cannot have killed him."

But the tramp was persistent. "I'm 'fraid I have," he said. "I done it before. I'm powerful strong in the biceps. But I couldn't see a man of that colour frighten a lady like you. My supper was too warm in me, ma'am. Shall I throw him outside the house?"

"Yes," she said, and then, "No; let us first be sure there is no life in him." And, hardly knowing what she did, she stooped down and peered into the glassy eyes of the prostrate man.

Suddenly she turned pale – no, not pale, but ghastly, and cowering back, shook so that the tramp, into whose features a certain refinement had passed since he had acted as her protector, thought she had discovered life in those set orbs, and was stooping down to make sure that this was so, when he saw her suddenly lean forward and, impetuously plunging her hand into the negro's throat, tear open the shirt and give one look at his bared breast.

It was white.

"O God! O God!" she moaned, and lifting the head in her two hands she gave the motionless features a long and searching look. "Water!" she cried. "Bring water." But before the now obedient tramp could respond, she had torn off the woolly wig disfiguring the dead man's head, and seeing the blond curls beneath had uttered such a shriek that it rose above the gale and was heard by her distant neighbours.

It was the head and hair of her husband.

They found out afterwards that he had contemplated this theft for months; that each and every precaution necessary to the success of this most daring undertaking had been made use of and that but for the unexpected presence in the house of the tramp, he would doubtless not only have extorted the money from his wife, but have so covered up the deed by a plausible alibi as to have retained her confidence and that of his employers.

Whether the tramp killed him out of sympathy for the defenceless woman or in rage at being disappointed in his own plans has never been determined. Mrs. Chivers herself thinks he was actuated by a rude sort of gratitude.

THE RUBY AND THE CALDRON

As there were two good men on duty that night, I did not see why I should remain at my desk, even though there was an unusual stir created in our small town by the grand ball given at The Evergreens.

But just as I was preparing to start for home, an imperative ring called me to the telephone, and I heard:

"Halloo! Is this the police-station?"

"It is."

"Well, then, a detective is wanted at once at The Evergreens. He cannot be too clever or too discreet. A valuable jewel has been lost, which must be found before the guests disperse for home. Large reward if the matter ends successfully."

"May I ask who is speaking to me?"

"Mrs. Ashley."

It was the mistress of The Evergreens and giver of the ball.

"Madam, a man shall be sent at once. Where will you see him?"

"In the butler's pantry at the rear. Let him give his name as Jennings."

"Very good. Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

A pretty piece of work! Should I send Hendricks or should I send Hicks? Hendricks was clever and Hicks discreet, but neither united both qualifications in the measure demanded by the sensible and quietly resolved woman with whom I had just been talking. What alternative remained? But one: I must go myself.

It was not late – not for a ball-night, at least – and as half the town had been invited to the dance, the streets were alive with carriages. I was watching the blink of their lights through the fast-falling snow when my attention was drawn to a fact which struck me as peculiar. These carriages were all coming my way instead of rolling in the direction of The Evergreens. Had they been empty this would have needed no explanation; but, so far as I could see, most of them were full, and that, too, of loudly-talking women and gesticulating men.

Something of a serious nature must have occurred at The Evergreens. Rapidly I paced on, and soon found myself before the great gates.

A crowd of vehicles of all descriptions blocked the entrance. None seemed to be passing up the driveway; all stood clustered at the gates; and as I drew nearer I perceived many an anxious head thrust forth from their quickly-opened doors, and heard many an ejaculation of disappointment as the short interchange of words went on between the drivers of these various turnouts and a man drawn up in quiet resolution before the unexpectedly barred entrance.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.