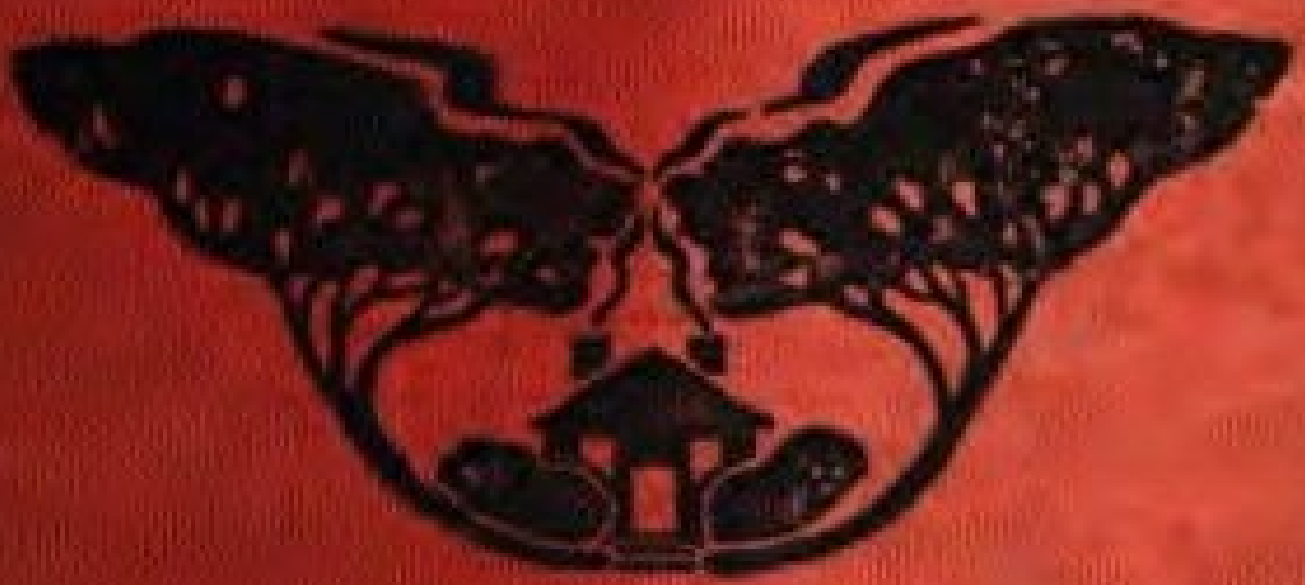
THAT AFFAIR AT ELIZABETH



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THAT AFFAIR AT ELIZABETH

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CHAPTER I

An Urgent Summons

"That seems to be all right, Lester," said Mr. Royce, and handed the papers back to me. "I'll be mighty glad when we get that off our hands."

So, I knew, would the whole force of the office, for the case had been an unusually irritating one, tangling itself up in the most unexpected ways, until, with petitions and counter-petitions and answers and demurrers and what not, we were all heartily tired of it. I slipped the papers into an envelope and shot them into a pigeon-hole with a sigh of relief.

"I think that'll end it," I said. "I don't see how there can be any further delay."

"No," agreed our junior, "neither do I. Are the papers in the Griffin case ready?"

"Not yet; I doubt if they will be ready before this afternoon."

"Well, they can wait," he said, and glanced at his watch. "I want to catch the ten-ten for Elizabeth."

"For Elizabeth?"

"Yes. I know it's a mighty awkward time for me to leave, but it's an engagement I've got to keep. You've heard me speak of Burr Curtiss?"

"Yes," I said; "I seem to remember the name."

"He's been one of my best friends for the past ten years. I met him first at Yale, and a liking sprang up between us, which grew stronger as time went on. I played a sort of second fiddle to him, then, for he was president of the class in his senior year and was voted the most popular man in it. He came to New York, as soon as he was graduated, and got a place on the construction staff of the Pennsylvania road. He was assigned to one of the western divisions, and I didn't see anything of him for two or three years, but finally he was recalled, and we used to hobnob at the University Club. Since my marriage, he comes around to smoke a pipe with me occasionally and talk over old times. He's a social fellow, likes companionship, and, my wife says, is just the man to make a woman

happy; so when he wrote me a note, two months ago, announcing his engagement, we were naturally curious concerning the woman in the case—for his ideals were high—too high, I always told him."

Mr. Royce paused and sat for a moment smiling out the window at the grey wall of the building opposite.

"I remember it was one evening early last winter," he went on at last, "that Curtiss happened in and, as we sat smoking together, our talk somehow turned to women. It was then I learned what an idealist he was. The woman to win his heart must be accomplished, of course; witty, knowing the world, and yet unsoiled by it, capable of original thought, of being her husband's intellectual companion—so much for the mental side. Physically—well, physically he wanted a Venus de Milo or Helen of Troy, nothing less. I laughed at him. I pointed out that beautiful women are seldom intellectual. But he was obdurate. He protested that he would capitulate on no other terms. I retorted that, in that case, he would probably remain a bachelor."

"But," I remarked, "it seems to me that this friend of yours is a trifle egotistical. What has he to offer in exchange for such perfection?"

"Well," said Mr. Royce slowly, "it would be a good bargain on both sides. Given such a woman, I could fancy her longing for such a man as Curtiss, just as he would long for her. I've told you something of his mental calibre—physically, he's the handsomest man I ever saw. And it seems to me he gets handsomer every year. In our college days, he was rather too stout, too girlish-looking, but hard work and contact with the world have rubbed all that away. George!" he added, "the children of such a pair would be fit for Olympus!"

"And did he find her?" I asked, curious for the rest of the story.

"After I got his note," said my companion, "I hunted him up at his apartments as soon as I could. He let me in himself, got out his cigars, and sat down opposite me fairly beaming. I looked him over—I had never before seen a man who seemed so supremely happy.

"'So,' I asked at last, 'you've found her?'

"'Yes,' he said; 'yes.'

"'The woman you were looking for?'

"'The very woman.'

"'That impossible ideal?'

"'An ideal, yes; but not impossible, since she exists in the flesh and I have found her.'

"'Well, you're a lucky dog,' I said. 'Tell me about her.'

"So he told me—quite a Laura Jean Libbey story. She was everything, it seemed, that could be desired in a woman.

"'And beautiful?' I asked him.

"For reply, he brought out a photograph from his desk. I tell you, Lester, it fairly took my breath away. I felt as though I were looking at a masterpiece—say Andrea del Sarto's Madonna. And I would as soon have thought of marrying the one as the other. It was like snatching a star down out of heaven.

"Curtiss was leaning back in his chair watching me, and he smiled as I looked up.

"'Well?' he asked.

"I went over and shook hands with him—I couldn't find words to tell him what I felt.

"'But where has she been?' I demanded. 'How does it happen she was left for you?'

"'She's been abroad for five or six years,' he explained.

"'That's no answer,' I said. 'Why isn't she a queen, then; or a duchess, at least?'

"'She's had chances enough, I dare say,' and he smiled at my enthusiasm. 'I agree with you that she's worthy to wear a crown; but then, you see, she has ideals, too. Perhaps none of the kings she met measured up to them.'

"'And you did?'

"'She's good enough to think so.'

"I had been idling over the photograph, and my eyes happened to fall upon some lines written across the back—I didn't know them, then, but I've looked them up,

since:—

'My days were sunless and my nights were
moonless,
Parched the pleasant April herbage and the lark's heart's
outbreak tuneless,
If you loved me not!'

"I tell you, Lester," and there was a little break in our junior's voice, "I was overwhelmed. You know, love—passion—the real thing the poets write about—has grown mighty rare in this world. We're too commercial for it, I suppose; too much given to calculating chances. But here I was, face to face with it. Well, I was unequal to the situation—I didn't know what to say, but he helped me.

'"The date hasn't been set, yet,' he said, 'but it will be some time in June; and the reason I'm telling you all this is that I'm going to ask a favour of you. It's to be a church wedding and I want you to be best man. I hope you won't refuse.'

"I was glad of the chance to be of service and told him so," concluded Mr. Royce, glancing again at his watch and rising hastily. "The wedding's to be at noon to-day. You see I'm cutting it rather fine. I'd intended to go down yesterday afternoon, but that Barnaby petition upset my plans. I'll be back to-night or in the morning at the latest. In the meantime, if anything imperative turns up, a telegram to the Sheridan House at Elizabeth will catch me."

"Very well," I replied and made a note of the address. "But don't worry about the work here. I'll get along all right."

"Of course you will," he agreed, and an instant later, the door closed behind him.

But more than once in the course of the morning, I was inclined to think that I had spoken too confidently. Mr. Graham, our senior partner, had broken down about a month before, under a stress of work which had been unusual, even for our office, and had been ordered away for a long vacation; one or two members of the office force had resigned to accept other positions, and the task of filling their places was one which required thought and care; so for the time being, we were extremely short-handed.

That morning, perversely enough, it seemed to me that the work piled up even more rapidly than usual, and it was not until the mellow chimes of Trinity, marking the noon hour, floated through the open window, that I succeeded in

clearing away the most pressing portion of the morning's business, and leaned back in my chair with a sigh of satisfaction. That Marjoribanks case was now ours; Mr. Royce would approve....

No doubt, at this very moment, he was before the altar of the Elizabeth church, listening to the low responses. I had only to close my eyes to picture the scene—the dim, flower-decked interior; the handsomely-gowned, sympathetically-expectant audience; the bride, supremely beautiful in her veil and orange blossoms, her eyes downcast, the warm colour coming and going in her cheeks....

"Telegram, sir," said a voice, and I swung around to find the office-boy at my elbow. "For you, sir," he added.

I took the yellow envelope and tore it open absently, my mind still on the vision my fancy had conjured up. Then, as my eyes caught the words of the message, I sat bolt upright with a start. It read:

"Come to Elizabeth by first train. Don't fail us."

"ROYCE."

CHAPTER II

A Bride's Vagary

Two minutes later, I was speeding downward in the elevator, having paused only long enough to give a word of instruction to the head clerk. A glance at my watch showed me that if I would catch the 12.38, I had no time to lose; but luckily a cab was passing at the moment, and I jumped aboard the boat for Jersey City just as the gates were closing.

Not until I was safely aboard the train did I give myself time to conjecture what this imperative summons meant, but during the half-hour run to the little New Jersey city, I had ample time to try to puzzle it out.

One thing was quite certain—it was no ordinary emergency which had moved Mr. Royce to summon me from the office at a time when I was so badly needed there. I got out the telegram again, and read it, word by word. It affected me as a wild cry for help would have done, at midnight, in some lonely place—and it was just that—a wild cry for help! But why had he needed aid, when he himself was so clear-sighted, so ready-witted, so fertile of resource? What was this astounding occurrence which confronted him, this crisis so urgent and overwhelming that it had shaken and startled him out of his self-control? The message itself was proof of his deep excitement. Apparently he had wired for me instinctively, finding himself suddenly in the toils of some dilemma, which left him dazed and nerveless.

Ever since the time when I had succeeded, more by luck than anything else, in discovering the whereabouts of Frances Holladay, and solving the mystery of her father's death, our junior partner had conceived a tremendously exalted opinion of my abilities as an untangler of abstruse problems, and never lost an opportunity of referring to me such as came in his way. Every firm of practising lawyers knows how frequently a case hinges upon some puzzling point of evidence—how witnesses have a way of disappearing—and Graham & Royce had their full share of such perplexing tangles. It had come to be one of the unwritten rules of the office that such points should be referred to me, and while I was by no means uniformly successful in solving them, I always took a lively pleasure in the work. It was no doubt that habit which had caused our junior to

turn to me in this emergency. I could guess how terrifying it must have been to overwhelm so completely a man so well-balanced and self-controlled—I could almost see the trembling hand with which he had penned the message.

So it was with a certain quickening of the pulse that I stepped from the train at the triangular Elizabeth station, and an instant later, Mr. Royce had me by the hand.

"I've a carriage over here, Lester," he said, drawing me toward it, and I noticed that he was fairly quivering with excitement. "I thought you could make this train," he added, as we took our seats and the driver whipped up smartly. "I knew you wouldn't lose any time, and I can't tell you how glad I am to have you here. Curtiss is all broken up—doesn't know which way to turn. Neither do I. I had just sense enough to send you that wire."

"I thought it was a mystery of some sort," I said, beginning to tingle in sympathy with him. "What has happened?"

"The bride-to-be has disappeared," answered Mr. Royce simply; "vanished—skipped out!"

For a moment, I scarcely understood. It seemed preposterous to suppose that I had heard aright.

"Disappeared!" I echoed helplessly. "Skipped out!"

"Yes, skipped out!" and Mr. Royce crushed his unlighted cigar savagely in his fingers and hurled it through the carriage window. "I haven't the slightest doubt that she deliberately ran away."

The sight of his emotion calmed me a little.

"At the last moment?" I questioned.

"Practically at the last moment—less than an hour before the time set for the ceremony. She was getting ready for it—was in her wedding-dress, in fact. I tell you, Lester——"

"Wait," I said, putting out a restraining hand. "Begin at the beginning. What's her name?"

"Marcia Lawrence."

"And she's the 'ideal' Curtiss imagined he'd found?"

"Yes," said Mr. Royce slowly, "and so far as I can judge from what I've seen and heard, she really was as nearly perfect as any woman can be."

"Yet she 'skipped out'!"

"That's why I'm so upset—she was the last woman in the world to do such a thing!"

"Tell me about her," I said.

"I don't know very much; but I do know that she wasn't a mere empty-headed chit. She was an accomplished and cultured woman. I've already told you how her beauty affected me."

I paused a moment to consider it—I was fairly nonplussed. It seemed incredible that such a woman should, under any conceivable circumstances, deliberately desert her lover at the altar!

"And in her wedding-gown!" I murmured, half to myself.

"Yes, in her wedding-gown!" repeated our junior, passing his hand feverishly across his eyes. "It's unbelievable! It's—I can't find any word to describe it. I can scarcely believe I'm awake."

"Perhaps she found she didn't love him," I suggested.

"At the last moment?"

"Stranger things have happened."

"I don't believe it!' A woman like Marcia Lawrence knows her own heart before she goes that far!"

"Suppose we say sudden insanity?"

"Well-balanced women don't go mad merely because they're going to get married."

"Then she didn't run away," I said.

Mr. Royce looked at me quickly.

"You mean——"

But the carriage stopped with a jolt and the driver jerked open the door.

CHAPTER III

The Lover's Story

I paused, as soon as we reached the pavement, for a look about me. We were evidently in the fashionable quarter of the town. The street was wide, well-kept, and shaded by stately elms. The houses which stretched away on either hand had that spaciousness, that air of dignity and quiet, which bespeaks wealth and leisure. Here was no gaudy architecture, no flamboyant flourish of the newly-rich; rather the evidence of families long-settled in their present surroundings and long-accustomed to the luxuries of a cultured and generous existence.

But it was to the house directly before us that I gave the closest scrutiny. It was a large one, two-storied, with a wide veranda running across the entire front. It stood well back from the street, and was sheltered on each side by magnificent trees. The grounds seemed to be very extensive and were beautifully kept. Along the pavement, a curious crowd was loitering, kept in motion by a policeman, but staring at the house as though they expected to read the solution of the mystery in its inexpressive front.

Mr. Royce nodded to the officer, and we passed through the gate. As we went up the walk, I noticed that the blinds were closely drawn, as though it were a house of mourning—and, indeed, dead hopes enough lay there!

A maid admitted us, and when my companion inquired for Mr. Curtiss, led the way silently along the hall. In the dim light, I could see the decorations of palms and wreaths of smilax, relieved here and there by a mass of gorgeous bloom, and through a door to the right I caught a glimpse of many tables, set ready for the luncheon which was never to be eaten. There was something ghostly about the deserted rooms—something chilling in the thought of this arrested gaiety, these hopes for happiness so rudely shattered. It recalled that vision which had so astonished poor Pip—the vision of Miss Havisham, decked in her yellow wedding finery, sitting at her gilded dressing-table in the darkened room, with the bride-cake cobwebbed and mouldy, and the chairs set ready for the guests who were never to arrive. Only here, I reflected, the clocks should be stopped at noon, not at twenty minutes to nine!

We turned into a room which I saw to be the library, and a man sprang up as we entered.

"Royce!" he cried, and there was in his tone such an agony of entreaty that I knew instantly who he was.

"No; no news, Burr," said our junior; "but here's Mr. Lester, and if any one can suggest a solution of this mystery, I'm sure he can. Lester, this is Burr Curtiss."

As I shook hands with him, I told myself that Mr. Royce's description had been well within the truth. I could join with him in saying that I had never seen a handsomer man or a more attractive one, though in his eyes, as I met them, misery and anxiety were only too apparent.

"It was very kind of you to come, Mr. Lester," he said.

"Not at all," I protested. "I only hope I can be of some service."

"Royce has told you——"

"Only the bare facts," I said. "I'd like to have all the details of the story, if you'll be so kind as to give me them."

"Certainly," he assented instantly, as we sat down. "That's what I wish to do—I know how important details are."

He paused for a moment, to be sure of his self-control, and I had the chance to look at him more closely. His face was not only comely, it was strong, magnetic. The black hair and eyes bespoke a vigorous temperament; the full beard, closely cropped, served rather to accentuate the fine lines of mouth and chin. There was no superfluous flesh about the face—no puffiness; it was thin with the healthy thinness which tells of a busy life, and browned by exposure to wind and sun. It was, altogether, a manly face, not the merely handsome one which I had rather expected. My eyes were drawn especially to his hand as he passed it hastily across his forehead—a hand firm, white, with slightly tapering fingers—an artist's hand which one would scarcely connect with an engineer of construction.

"There's really very little I can tell you," he said, at last. "When I saw Marcia this morning——"

His voice choked, and he paused, unable, for the moment, to go on.

"Let us begin farther back than that, Mr. Curtiss," I suggested, knowing that the

beginning was the hardest part. "Mr. Royce tells me you were classmates. When did you graduate from college?"

"Seven years ago."

"And you came at once to New York?"

"Yes, to take the examination for the Pennsylvania road."

"You were given a place on the road at once?"

"Yes—not a very important place, but one with a chance for promotion, which was all I asked. I was stationed at Pittsburg for three years and then called east to work on the division between New York and Philadelphia. A year ago, I was made assistant at the headquarters office."

"Rather a remarkable career," I commented, smiling.

"Not at all," he protested quickly. "I liked the work, and I was well equipped."

I saw that I should have to revise my opinion of him—certainly he was not conceited.

"When did you meet Miss Lawrence?" I asked.

"Last December—the tenth, to be quite accurate—just six months ago to-day ——"

Again his voice trailed away into a sort of hoarse whisper, though he tried desperately to control it.

"Won't you tell me about it?"

"Is it necessary?" he questioned miserably. "I—I don't want to talk."

"I know you don't, and I don't want to make you. But if I'm to help, I must know the whole story."

"Pardon me, Mr. Lester," he said, pulling himself together by a mighty effort. "Of course you must. Only give me time. I'm—I'm——"

"All the time in the world," I assured him, and settled back in my chair to listen.

"We had a bad grade-crossing just east of Elizabeth," he began, after a moment, in a steadier tone. "It was an ugly place, with the driveway coming down a stiff

hill and meeting our tracks at an angle which prevented a clear view of them. We kept a flagman there, of course, but nevertheless accidents happened right along. A skittish horse, once started down the hill and frightened perhaps by the whistle and rumble of the approaching train, would be pretty hard to stop."

I nodded. I had seen just such murderous crossings.

"So the company determined to build a viaduct there, and last December sent me out to look over the ground. I reached there about nine o'clock in the morning, and by noon had all my data and was ready to come back to the city.

"'Can you flag this train for me, John?' I asked the flagman, as I heard a whistle down the line.

"'No, sir,' he answered; 'can't do it, sir. That's the limited, but there'll be a local along ten minutes after it.'

"'All right,' I said, and went up the bank a bit to sit down and wait for it.

"The limited whistled again, just around the curve, and then I heard the flagman give a yell and start up the hill, waving his flag like mad. I jumped up and saw that a buggy containing two women had just started down and that the horse was beyond control. It didn't take me above a minute to run over, get the horse by the bridle, and stop him. I held the track record for everything up to the half-mile while I was at Sheff," he added, with a little apologetic smile.

I nodded again; only, I thought, I should like to hear the flagman tell the story.

"The horse had knocked me about a bit," he went on, "and kicked me on the legs once or twice, so when I let go the bridle I was a little wobbly—made a fool of myself, I suppose. Anyway, I was bundled into the buggy and taken back to Elizabeth, where the women lived."

"Yes," I encouraged him, for he seemed to have come to a full stop; "and then?"

"Well, they took me home with them and fixed me up as though I were a plaster baby. The elder woman introduced herself as Mrs. Lawrence and the younger as her daughter Marcia. They made me stay for tea——"

He stopped again.

"I don't know how to tell the rest, Mr. Lester," he blurted out. "Only Marcia Lawrence was the divinest woman I ever met. Royce used to laugh at me for

having an ideal."

"Yes, he told me," I said.

"Well, I knew instantly that I'd found her. And she was very good to me—better than I knew how to deserve. Three months ago, she promised to be my wife—we were to have been married at noon to-day——"

He sat with bowed head and working face, unable to go on.

"We were happy—she was happy, I know it!" he cried fiercely, after a moment. "There wasn't a cloud—not a single cloud! It was too perfect, I suppose—too perfect for this world. I've heard that perfect things don't last. But I don't understand—I can't understand!"

"Mr. Royce told me she'd disappeared," I said gently.

"Disappeared utterly!" He was on his feet now and striding madly up and down the room, his self-control gone from him. "There wasn't a cloud, I tell you; not the slightest breath of suspicion or distrust or unhappiness. Last night, some of her friends here gave a little reception for her, and she was the gayest of the gay. This morning, about ten o'clock, I called to see her; she seemed very happy—kissed me good-bye until we should meet at the church."

A convulsive shudder shook him. I saw how near he was to breaking down.

"Let me tell the rest, Burr," said a low voice from the door, and I turned to see a woman standing there—a woman dressed in black, with a face of unusual sweetness, but shadowed by a great sorrow.

CHAPTER IV

A Strange Message

I guessed in a breath who she was, and my heart went out to her in instant pity. Yet a second glance told me that it was not the shadow of this recent sorrow which lay across her face. Time alone could grave those lines of calm endurance, could give to the eyes that look of quiet resignation, to the mouth that curve of patient suffering; and only a deep spiritual faith could preserve and heighten the sweetness and gentleness of a countenance so marked.

"This is Mr. Lester, Mrs. Lawrence," said our junior, quickly, and placed a chair for her. "We've asked Mr. Lester to help us," he added.

She closed the door behind her and came forward as we rose, acknowledging the introduction with the faintest of bows.

"Thank you," she said. "Lucy told me you had returned, Mr. Royce," she went on, a little tremulously, "and I was anxious to know if you had any news."

"Not yet. Mr. Curtiss was just telling Mr. Lester——"

"Yes," she interrupted, "I saw how he was suffering and I wished to spare him, if I could."

"My dear Mrs. Lawrence," broke in Curtiss, "you must think only of sparing yourself."

"Still," I suggested, "it's possible that Mrs. Lawrence can help us a great deal, if she will."

She was holding herself admirably in hand, and I thought her in much less danger of breaking down than Curtiss himself. Perhaps the old sorrow had taught her how to bear the new one.

"I shall be glad to help you all I can," she said, and smiled a faint encouragement.

It seemed brutal to question her at such a time, but I saw it must be done and I

nerved myself to do it.

"Mrs. Lawrence," I began, "has any possible explanation of your daughter's flight occurred to you?"

"No," she answered quickly, and with an emphasis that rather startled me. "It seems to me utterly unexplainable. Even yet, I can scarcely believe it!"

"She left no message for you?"

"Not a word; she simply disappeared."

"And you had no warning?"

"Warning?" she repeated, facing around upon me. "No!"

"Nor suspected that there was anything amiss?"

"Not for an instant."

"Since there *was* something amiss, why did your daughter not confide in you?"

"I have asked myself the same question. I am utterly unable to answer it."

"She was in the habit of coming to you with her troubles?"

"Always. There was the most perfect confidence between us."

"And yet she concealed this?"

"She did not conceal it!" she protested. "She could not have concealed it from my eyes, even had she wished to. There was nothing to conceal. There was absolutely nothing wrong the last time I saw her."

"And that was?"

"Only a few minutes before she disappeared."

"Will you tell me just what happened?" I suggested, as gently as I could. "Every detail you can remember."

She sat for a moment with compressed lips, steadying herself.

"There's very little to tell," she began. "She was quite her usual self this morning, so far as I could see, and very happy. Two or three of her girl friends came in to

see her for a moment, to talk over the final arrangements, and she was giving some directions about the decorations when Mr. Curtiss called. After he had gone, she made a last trip through the house to see that all was right, and then started upstairs to dress. Half an hour later, she came to my room in her wedding-gown to ask how she looked, and I had never seen her looking more beautiful. Only perfect happiness can give such beauty to a woman. I remember thinking what a joy it was to me that she had found a man whom she could love as she loved——"

A half-stifled, choking sob from Curtiss interrupted her. She turned and stretched out her hand to him, with a gesture of infinite affection.

"I finished dressing," she continued, "and then went to Marcia's room, but she wasn't there. Her maid said she'd been called downstairs for a moment. I came down, and found that the decorator had wanted her opinion of the final touches. She had left him, to go upstairs again, as he supposed. It was then nearly half-past eleven, and the bridesmaids began to arrive. I supposed Marcia was in the grounds somewhere, and sent two of the servants to look for her and to tell her it was time to start for the church. They came back saying she was not to be found. Then I began to be alarmed, thinking that she had perhaps been taken suddenly ill, and we searched the house and grounds systematically, but found no trace of her. At last, it seemed just possible that she had gone on to the church, and the bridesmaids hurried into the carriages and drove away—but she wasn't there—only Burr waiting for her——"

She stopped with a sudden tremulousness.

"Thank you," I said. "There's one question I must ask, Mrs. Lawrence, before I can go to work intelligently. You will pardon it. Had your daughter ever had any attachment previous to this one?"

I saw Curtiss glance at her quickly. That solution of the problem had occurred to him, then, too!

"Not the shadow of one," answered Mrs. Lawrence instantly, and perhaps it was only my fancy that the accent of sincerity was a trifle forced. "I have been Marcia's companion and confidante all her life, and I am sure that no man ever distinctly interested her until she met Mr. Curtiss."

"But she no doubt interested many men," I suggested.

"Yes, but never with intention."

"That only makes the case more desperate sometimes."

"I don't believe there were any desperate cases. You will remember," she added, "that we lived much abroad, and so had few intimate acquaintances. Besides, Marcia was—well—extremely patriotic. She often said that she would marry only an American—and an American who lived at home and was proud of his country. One doesn't meet many of that kind in Europe."

"No," I agreed. Whatever my doubts might be, it was clearly impossible at present to proceed any further along that line of inquiry.

And what other line lay open? It seemed to me that I had come to an impasse—a closed way—which barred further progress.

I sat silent a moment, pondering the problem. Perhaps Mrs. Lawrence held the key to it, and I turned to look at her. She was seemingly sunk in reverie, and her lips moved from time to time, as though she were repeating to herself some fragmentary words. She seemed more self-possessed in the presence of this catastrophe than one would have expected. Perhaps she knew where her daughter was; perhaps Miss Lawrence had not really fled. There was nothing to show that she had left the house. It seemed impossible that a woman clad as she had been could have fled, in broad day, without attracting some one's notice. But whether she had fled or not, I reflected, the mystery remained the same. Certainly, she had not appeared at the altar to keep her promise to Burr Curtiss.

"Mrs. Lawrence," I asked, "what reason have you to believe that your daughter left the house?"

She started from her reverie, and sat staring at me as though scarce understanding.

"Why," she said at last, "what else could she have done? She has disappeared ____"

"You're sure she isn't concealed somewhere about the place?"

"Concealed?" and she paled a little under my eyes. "Oh, no; that's impossible! We've searched everywhere!"

"And you think she went of her own free will?"

"She could scarcely have been abducted," she retorted. "Marcia is a strong girl, and a single scream would have alarmed the house."

"That's true," I agreed. "Your room is near hers?"

"Just across the hall."

The wish flashed into my brain to look through the house; perhaps I should be able to arrange it.

"There's no pit or hole or trap or anything of that sort into which she could have fallen?"

"Oh, no; nothing of the sort."

"Nor closet nor chest into which she could have accidentally locked herself?" I went on, remembering the fate of the bride in the old song.

"No; besides, we've looked in them all. We've searched everywhere—every corner. She's not in the house—I'm quite sure of that."

"And yet you say she loved Mr. Curtiss?"

"Loved him devotedly."

"Then what possible reason could she have for deserting him? Why should she ——"

A knock at the door interrupted me. Mrs. Lawrence, who was sitting nearest it, rose quickly and opened it. I caught a glimpse, in the semi-darkness of the hall, of a woman in a maid's cap and apron. She gave her mistress a letter, whispering, as she did so, a swift sentence in her ear.

I heard Mrs. Lawrence's low exclamation of surprise, as she held the letter up to the light and read the superscription. Then she turned swiftly toward us, her face pale with emotion.

"It's a note!" she cried. "A note from Marcia! It will explain!" and she handed the envelope to Curtiss.

"A note?" he stammered. "Addressed to me?"

"In Marcia's writing. Read it. It will explain," she repeated.

He took it with trembling hand, went to the window, and tore it open. I saw his lips quivering as he read it; I saw the white intensity with which Mrs. Lawrence watched his face; I was conscious, too, of another presence in the room, and I glanced around to see that the maid stood leaning forward in the open doorway, her eyes sparkling with eagerness, her mouth working, her hands clasping and unclasping convulsively. There was something sinister in her dark, expressive face, in her attitude—something almost of exulting, of triumph——

Curtiss crushed the letter in his hand with a quick movement of despair, and turned to us distraught, flushed, astounded.

"It tells nothing," he faltered; "nothing. It—it—I can't believe it! Read it, Mr. Lester," and he held the sheet of paper toward me.

There were only a few lines upon it:—

> "Dearest: I cannot be your wife—how shall I tell you? It is quite, quite impossible. Oh, believe me, sweetheart, nothing but the certainty of that could keep me from you. I am fleeing; I cannot see you, cannot speak to you; there can be no explanation; only I shall love you always! Is it wrong to write that now, I wonder? Please do not attempt to follow me, to seek me out; that will only mean sorrow for us both—sorrow and shame. Perhaps some day, when the wound heals—will it ever heal?—I can tell you, can bear to see you. But oh, not now!
>
> "MARCIA LAWRENCE."

CHAPTER V

Deeper in the Maze

I sat for a moment half-dazed, with this astonishing note in my fingers. Then I read it through again—there could be no doubting the sincerity of the writer, her passionate earnestness. "I cannot be your wife ... it is quite, quite impossible." But why was it impossible? Clearly not from any lack of affection. If the note proved anything, it proved that Marcia Lawrence loved Burr Curtiss far beyond the usual application of the word.

Why, then, had she fled? "There can be no explanation." There was nothing left but flight; the marriage was impossible. But why should it be impossible? Was not that too strong a term? Yet she no doubt believed it. Something had happened; there had been some sudden and startling revelation—the revelation of a secret so hideous that, rather than betray it, rather than risk an explanation, she had fled. But that was such a desperate thing to do; such a suicidal thing; and a woman does not throw away her happiness thoughtlessly!

I glanced at Curtiss, who had sunk down again into his chair and sat staring straight before him. Was there in his past some unnamable stain which had lain hidden till this last moment; which this stainless woman had shrunk from, horrified?

Or was there, after all, another man? A man, perhaps, whom she had never intentionally encouraged, yet who had fallen thrall to her, none the less, who had determined to possess her, and who, by some trick, some desperate throw, had managed, at the last moment, to snatch her away from Curtiss? Had she fled from the house of her own volition? Was there any possible explanation of such a flight? None, except that she had suddenly found herself face to face with the fact that she no longer loved the man she was about to marry—face to face with a future so intolerable that any shame, any disgrace, was preferable to it. Yet as I looked again at the note's wording, I recognised anew the absurdity of such a theory. Whatever the solution of the mystery, there could be no doubting Marcia Lawrence's love for Burr Curtiss; whomever she had loved in the past, it was certain that now she loved only him. And even in Mrs. Lawrence's attitude, I seemed to discern an affection for him more intense than is usually bestowed

upon a son-in-law—at least, until he has been tested in the crucible of marriage.

There could be, I told myself, only one other explanation. Marcia Lawrence had been abducted. It was true, as her mother had pointed out, that a single scream would have alarmed the house; but perhaps that scream had never been uttered. It could have been prevented easily enough. And there had been no one with her at the time except her maid. Her maid! And I sat suddenly upright; I felt that I had found the key!

"It was your daughter's maid gave you this, Mrs. Lawrence?" I asked.

"Yes," she answered, turning toward me with a start which told me that she had again sunk into reverie. "She said she had just found it on Marcia's dresser."

"It's strange," I said, "that it wasn't found before this. You were in your daughter's room, I suppose, after she disappeared?"

"Yes; several times."

"And you didn't see this note?"

"No; I did not notice it."

"Is the maid an old servant?"

"Yes," she said; "Lucy has been in the family for many years."

"And you've always found her perfectly trustworthy?"

"I have no cause of complaint against her," she answered, and though her voice showed no sign of emotion, I saw a sudden trembling seize her and shake her convulsively for a moment. Was it fear? Was it anger? Was it——?

Curtiss saw it, too, and, attributing it to a very different cause, moved impatiently in his chair. I felt that I was hampered by these witnesses. I must get rid of them, if I was to have freedom of action—and without freedom of action I could do nothing.

I turned again to the sheet of paper in my hand and examined it with care. It was an ordinary linen, unruled. I held it to the light and tried to decipher the watermark, but only two letters were on the sheet, "Re." The remainder of the word had been cut away when the sheet was trimmed to its present size. It seemed to me scarcely to possess the quality which one would expect in Miss

Lawrence's writing-paper. The writing was in a woman's hand, a little irregular; but haste and stress of emotion would account for that. As I examined the writing more closely, I thought the ink seemed strangely fresh—scarcely dry, in fact; and yet, if the maid's story were true, the note had been lying upon the dresser for nearly three hours. And lying there unnoticed!

"There's no doubt that Miss Lawrence wrote this?" I asked.

"None whatever," answered Curtiss, with a quick shake of the head. "It's her writing—I knew it instantly."

I read the note again, and, satisfied that I had it almost by heart, handed it back to him.

"Of course, Mr. Curtiss," I said, "you must decide one thing before we go any farther. Will you try to follow her, even though she expressly forbids it?"

He sat with knitted brow and quivering mouth, reading the note word by word.

"Yes," he said brokenly, at last. "Yes, I'll try to follow her. I'll do everything I can to find her. I can't live without her!"

"But if the marriage be really impossible?" I suggested.

"Impossible!" and he turned upon me hotly. "How could it be? What could make it impossible? I tell you, sir, there's nothing on earth can keep us apart."

"But this," and I leaned forward and tapped the note.

"Yes—that—I can't explain it. At least, the only explanation I can give is that it's a hideous mistake."

"A mistake? But Miss Lawrence wasn't an emotional woman?" I questioned. "Not a woman to be carried away by a moment's passion?"

"Oh, no! Quite the contrary."

"Not a woman who would jump at a conclusion?" I persisted. "Not a woman who would condemn a man unheard—who would overlook the possibility of mistake and be convinced by what we lawyers call circumstantial evidence?"

"She was not such a woman at all," he said decidedly. "She was just the opposite of all that."

"That makes it more difficult," I pointed out.

"I know; I've thought it all out, as well as I'm able—only there's a blank wall I can't get past. Besides, if there's a reason, I have the right to know it."

"Yes," I assented heartily. "Undoubtedly you have the right to know it. There we're on solid ground. Well, that point is settled, then. And now I must ask you another question, Mr. Curtiss, which you may resent, but which it is absolutely necessary I should ask if I'm to be of any help to you."

"I think I can guess what it is, Mr. Lester," and he smiled grimly. "Since Marcia disappeared, I've reviewed carefully my whole past life, and I can find nothing in it which would justify, in the slightest degree, such an action. I've not been a saint, but at least I've never been dishonourable nor dissolute. Does that answer the question?"

"Perfectly," I said. There could be no doubting his utter truthfulness. "And your family history?"

"Is neither long nor brilliant. My father and mother both died when I was a baby. I was raised by my grandparents."

"They lived in New York?"

"No; on Long Island. My grandfather's name was John Curtiss. He managed an estate belonging to a New York banker. He was an honest and honourable man."

"And he is dead?"

"Yes; he and his wife have been dead ten years and more."

"You have no brothers or sisters?"

"No; nor any other near relatives."

That was the end of that theory, then. If the secret did not concern Curtiss, it must concern Miss Lawrence herself. More and more I felt that she was the victim of a plot. Of the maid's complicity, I had not the shadow of a doubt—but was Mrs. Lawrence a party to it, too?

I turned back to her. She was, apparently, so busy with her own thoughts that she paid no heed to what was passing. How explain her calmness, her lack of interest? How, except on the theory that she knew where her daughter was, had

assisted in her disappearance and approved of it? I felt my blood warm suddenly in Curtiss's behalf. If he had been the victim of an adventuress, it should be my business to expose her!

But a second glance at Mrs. Lawrence's face showed me the folly of such a thought. She was no adventuress—she was a gentle, cultured Christian woman, who had suffered, as all mortals must, but had still preserved her sweetness and serenity, as few mortals do. Yet more and more was I perplexed by that indefinable abstraction in her behaviour, which seemed somehow out of tune with the circumstances. Perhaps she was really more moved than she seemed to be; perhaps her apparent indifference was in reality only an admirable self-control. I fancied that it had given way for an instant when she was telling us the story of her daughter's disappearance. If I could only hit upon some way to startle her out of her self-possession, I might yet learn——

She turned suddenly and met my eyes. She flushed painfully—perhaps she read my thought; and instantly I blamed myself for my clumsiness in permitting my suspicion to appear in my face. It was a mischance not easily retrieved.

"I have told you all I know," she said, rising quickly, and answering the question I had not uttered. "I feel the need of rest. If I can help you in any way, command me."

"Thank you," I answered, and opened the door for her.

She paused on the threshold—glanced around—her eyes rested on Burr Curtiss's dreary face. In an instant, she was beside him, bending over him with infinite tenderness.

"Dear boy," she said, so low I could scarcely hear her, and smoothed back his hair with a gesture almost motherly, "dear boy, don't worry so. I'm sure it will all come right."

He looked up and smiled at her tremulously. With a quick impulsiveness, she stooped and kissed him, then went rapidly from the room, leaving me, at least, more puzzled than before at this sudden glimpse of unsuspected depths of tenderness.

I closed the door after her and turned back to Curtiss.

"Has Mrs. Lawrence favoured your suit for her daughter's hand?" I asked.

"Favoured it?" he repeated. "Yes, from the very first."

"Then, in your opinion, she couldn't have had anything to do with this disappearance—advised it, perhaps assisted in it?"

"No," he said decidedly; "that's absurd."

"And yet——" I began.

"If you knew her," he interrupted, "you would see its absurdity. She has always been most kind to me. You saw——"

"Yes," I nodded.

"She has always been like that. She has treated me as a dearly beloved son ever since we told her of our engagement."

"There has been no cloud?"

"Not the slightest! She seemed to share in her daughter's happiness and in mine. She has told me more than once that she thought fate had made us for each other."

"And she helped on the wedding-day?"

"In a thousand ways. She and Marcia worked together upon the trousseau. She helped with all the plans. Surely, Mr. Lester, if she objected, she wouldn't have waited till the last minute to make her objection known."

"Most certainly she would not," I agreed.

"Besides," Curtiss added hoarsely, "I don't believe that even her mother could have kept Marcia from me."

"She's a widow?" I asked.

"Yes. Her husband has been dead ten or twelve years. Marcia is the only child."

"She seems to have had her share of sorrow," I remarked. "Her face shows it."

"She has not been quite well lately; but she was always a little—well—sad, it seemed to me; serious, you know; smiling sometimes, but rarely laughing. I've fancied she grieved for her husband; but I really know nothing about it."

"She doesn't look very strong," I hazarded, in the hope that Curtiss really knew

more than he supposed.

"She isn't strong; but I've never seen her really ill. She is subject to spells of depression, so Marcia told me. Of course, I've known her only six months."

So there *was* an old trouble, as I had thought, beside which this new one seemed of little moment. She had been schooled by suffering; perhaps I had misjudged her in thinking her indifferent. But it was evident that I could get no further information from Curtiss.

"You were at the church," I asked, "when you heard that Miss Lawrence had disappeared?"

"Yes," he answered hoarsely. "Royce brought me word."

"And you came straight here?"

"Yes."

"And searched for her?"

"Where could I search? I was utterly at sea. I—I don't remember just what I did at first."

"But you didn't search the house nor the grounds?"

"Why should I have done that when Mrs. Lawrence had already done it thoroughly?" he demanded.

"True," I assented. After all, I had no right to shake his faith in her upon a mere suspicion.

"I was overwhelmed," he added. "I was too dazed to think. Royce said he'd wire for you. I'm glad he did, for I'm utterly unable to decide what to do. I should like you to advise me."

"Well, Mr. Curtiss," I said, "there's plainly only one thing to be done—that is, to find Miss Lawrence and demand an explanation from her own lips. Whether or not this is the wisest course, may be open to question—but if I were in your place, I think I'd do just as you are doing and take the risk."

"But to find her—how can I do that? I can't set a detective on her track."

"No, of course not," I agreed; "but I think we can get along without a detective."

"We must. Detectives talk too much, and this thing mustn't get into the papers."

"I don't see how you can prevent that. It was to have been a church wedding, wasn't it?"

"Yes; a church wedding."

"With an invited list of guests?"

"Certainly."

"And they were present at the church, weren't they?"

Curtiss groaned and I saw the perspiration start out across his forehead.

"Present!" echoed Mr. Royce. "I should say they were—the church was crowded. And we were waiting there in the minister's study, worrying because it was so late, when word came——"

"Don't!" protested Curtiss, with a despairing gesture. "I'd never thought of that. I've been thinking only of myself. Of course the papers will have it!" and he groaned again.

"Well, there's no use worrying about it," interposed Mr. Royce. "What is done is done. The thing is to find Miss Lawrence, and if anybody can find her, Lester can. I'm sure that five minutes' talk with her will straighten out the whole tangle. There's been an absurd mistake of some sort."

"No doubt," I assented, though in my heart I did doubt it very much. At any rate, the five minutes' talk could do no harm.

"Now you go away somewhere for a day or two, and leave this thing in our hands," added our junior. "What you need is rest. Don't worry any more than you can help. Let us know where you are, and we'll wire you as soon as we have any information. That's good advice, isn't it, Lester?"

"Very good," I said. "I hope Mr. Curtiss will follow it."

"No, no," he protested. "I can't go away—I must stay here—I couldn't stand it to go away."

"May I speak to you frankly, Mr. Curtiss?" I asked quietly.

"Please do," he said. "Speak as frankly as you like."

"Well, then," I began, "you'll pardon me for saying it, but I don't believe you can help us any, just at present. Besides, you need to pull yourself together."

"That's true," he agreed, and glanced at his trembling hands.

"Take my advice," I went on earnestly, "and Mr. Royce's advice. Leave Elizabeth for a little while. There isn't much chance of my finding Miss Lawrence for a day or two. You must get your calmness and self-possession back, for you'll need them."

"Yes," he said hoarsely; "yes, I'll need them. Very well, I'll do as you say, Mr. Lester. Only it's deuced selfish of me to throw my troubles on your shoulders this way."

"Selfish nothing!" cried our junior. "Where will you go?"

"I don't know," answered Curtiss helplessly.

"Go to one of the beaches near New York. The sea-air and surf will do you good. Let us know where you are; then, if we want you, we won't have any trouble finding you, and you can get back here in an hour or two."

"There's one thing Mr. Curtiss can do," I said. "A photograph of Miss Lawrence might prove a great help."

"Why, of course," he assented, and thrust his hand into an inner pocket. But, after an instant's hesitation, he drew it out empty. "I can't give you that one," he said; "I must keep that one. I'll send you another. You're at the Sheridan?"

"Yes."

"I'll leave it there for you. But please don't use it unless you absolutely have to."

"I won't use it at all, if I can avoid it," I assured him. "I promise you that it won't go out of my hands."

"Thank you," he said. "I knew you'd understand. As soon as you have any news you'll wire me?"

"The very moment. I want you to rely on us."

"I will."

"And not worry."

"I'll try not to," and he was gone.

As the door closed behind him, Mr. Royce looked at me with a somewhat guilty countenance.

"You see, I've got you into it again, Lester," he began. "I hope you don't mind."

"I don't. Rather the contrary."

"It's a little out of our line," he added. "But for a friend—and I certainly pity the poor fellow—we lawyers have to do peculiar things sometimes."

"I've done more peculiar ones than this," I said. "This is, at bottom, merely a matter of finding an important witness who is missing."

"Thank you, Lester," he said, and held out his hand. "I didn't want to seem to be imposing on you."

"You're not," I assured him again, and rose. "Now I think I'd better be getting to work."

"Can I be of any help?" he asked, rising too. "If not, I'll take the four-ten back to New York. I think Curtiss needs a little looking after. I'll hunt him up and take him with me. Besides, my wife is so wrought-up over this affair that she wants to get home."

"Very well," I assented. "Curtiss will need some one to protect him from the reporters. It's a wonder they haven't treed him before this."

"They tried to," said Mr. Royce, smiling grimly. "I succeeded in keeping them off. He was too preoccupied to notice. There's nothing else I can do?"

"No, I think not. If I need you, I'll wire."

"You won't need me," and he smiled again. "You know I'm no good at this kind of work."

"I know you'll be working harder than I will, keeping up with things at the office."

"Don't worry about that. You intend to stay here?"

"Yes; but only for a day or two, I trust. I can't think it a very difficult task to find a young woman who has run away in broad daylight in her wedding finery.

Somebody must have seen her—that is, if she ran away at all."

"No doubt," he agreed. "Of course you'll find her—it's not about that I'm worrying so much; it's about her motive for doing such a thing. It seems preposterous to suppose that any woman in her right mind would run away half an hour before her wedding. Curtiss saw her at ten o'clock and found her happy, yet an hour later she had taken this desperate step. I wonder, Lester, if you realise just how desperate it was?"

"Yes," I said; "I think I do."

"Well, I'm free to confess I didn't until I saw its effect on my wife. Why, Lester, it was suicidal—it means social ostracism—no less. Even if it doesn't altogether ruin her life, it will always shadow it. It's something she can never outlive."

"Yes," I said again; "it's all that."

"And yet she was a thoughtful, self-controlled, well-balanced woman, who would foresee all this—who would realise the consequences more clearly than we can do. Lester—what was it drove her to it?"

"Ah, if I only knew! But I'm going to find out!"

"I hope you will—and yet I fear it, too. I'm afraid to think of it—I'm afraid to try to guess the secret—I'm afraid I'll unearth some grisly, loathsome skeleton, which should never have seen the light! But I'm sure of one thing," he added, his face hardening. "I think you suspected, too."

"What was that?"

"Whatever the secret is, Mrs. Lawrence knows it."

"Yes," I agreed, "I believe she does."

"And had a hand in her daughter's disappearance."

"Yes," I said again, "I think that very likely."

He stood for a moment longer, looking at me as though half-inclined to say something more; then he shook hands abruptly and left the room.

As I turned to sit down again, I noticed, in the chair from which I had arisen, something white crushed into one corner of the seat. I picked it up. It was a handkerchief of dainty lace and it was damp—with tears?

CHAPTER VI

An Astonishing Request

I sat down again and examined my find more closely. I am no connoisseur of lace, yet even I could appreciate the handkerchief's exquisite beauty. But how came it here, crushed into a corner of this chair? Whose was it? Some instinct—or was it merely a delusive hope?—told me that it belonged to Marcia Lawrence—that it was she who had left it here—that the tears which dampened it were her tears, tears of bitter, bitter sorrow for dead hopes and a future which had changed from gold to grey. She had stolen into the library for a moment's peace, that she might face her sorrow and decide what she must do. She had left it——

But I shook myself together impatiently. All this was merely theorising; I must lay my foundation first, get my facts; then perhaps it might be possible to build a theory which would prove the right one. Thus far in the investigation, I felt that I had been met with evasion rather than with frankness; I suspected that an attempt was being made to puzzle and bewilder me; I could see that my presence in the house was unwelcome to Mrs. Lawrence. Well, my stay would be a short one; I dropped the handkerchief into my pocket, opened the door, and stepped out into the hall.

The front door was open and two men were tugging an immense palm through it. Another was engaged in taking down the wreaths of smilax. By the tenderness with which he handled them I recognised the decorator. He stopped and looked at me inquiringly as I went toward him.

"I've come down from New York," I explained, "at the request of Mr. Curtiss to assist him in finding Miss Lawrence. You, I believe, are the last person who is known to have seen her. I'd like to ask you a few questions."

"Go ahead," he said, beaming with self-importance. "I'll be glad to tell you anything I know, sir."

"Do you remember what time it was when you called Miss Lawrence down to have a last look at the decorations?"

"It must have been nearly half-past eleven, sir. I remember hearing a clock strike

eleven and thinking it'd take me about half an hour to get through."

"Did you notice anything peculiar in her behaviour?"

"Peculiar? No, sir. She was very kind and said some nice things about my work."

"She did not seem sad nor depressed?"

"Oh, no, sir; quite the contrary."

"When she left you, did she return upstairs?"

"I think so, sir. At least, she started for the stairs. I stepped into the dining-room for a moment to make sure everything was all right, and when I came out again she was gone."

"Was there any one else in the hall?"

"No, sir; I think not; not just at that moment, though of course people were passing back and forth through it all the time."

"Did you notice a man loitering about—a stranger—middle-aged, dark-complexioned, with a dark beard or moustache—rather striking in appearance—perhaps a little dissolute?"

"No, sir," he answered, with a stare of surprise. "I didn't see any stranger about the whole morning—nobody I didn't know."

I confess I was rather disappointed; I had hoped that my shot would tell.

"And you heard no unusual noise—no scream, nor anything of that sort."

"No, sir; though I was so busy and worried I dare say I wouldn't have heard a cannon-shot."

"When did you learn that something was wrong?"

"I heard Mrs. Lawrence asking if any one had seen her daughter. Then she sent some of the servants to look for her."

"What time was that?"

"About ten minutes after I had spoken to her."

"Yes—what then?"

"Well, I didn't pay much attention, at first; but when the bridesmaids came, they raised such a hullabaloo that I couldn't help but take notice."

"What did Mrs. Lawrence do?"

"Why, she tried to quiet them—I must say she was the coolest one in the house—except one."

"Who was that?"

"Miss Lawrence's maid. She just sat there on the stairs and glowered and grinned and chewed her nails and never said a word. She gave me the creeps. I could swear she knew all about it and was glad of it."

I repressed a chuckle of satisfaction. Here was better luck than I had expected.

"How was Miss Lawrence dressed when you saw her?" I asked.

"All in rustly white. I judged it was her wedding-dress."

"And you say she seemed quite as usual?"

"Yes, sir; only, of course, excited, as any woman would be—though calm, too, and with a sort of deep glow in her eyes when she looked at you. I can't describe it, sir; but I remember thinking that the man who was to get her was a mighty lucky fellow. Did you know her, sir?"

"No," I said; "I've never seen her."

"Ah," he added, closing his eyes for an instant, "if you'd seen her then, you'd never forget it. I never will. I never saw another woman to touch her!" and he turned away to his work, with the vision he had conjured up evidently still before him.

As I started along the hall, I saw through the open front door a mail-carrier coming up the walk. I hastened to meet him—this was another fortunate chance.

"How many deliveries do you make a day out here?" I asked, as he came up the steps with a bundle of letters in his hand—I could guess the belated congratulations which were among them!

"Only two—morning and afternoon," he answered.

"What time in the morning?"

"About nine o'clock, usually."

"It was about that time this morning?"

"Yes, sir; maybe ten minutes after nine."

"Who took the mail?"

"I put it in the box here in the vestibule, as I always do," he said, and suited the action to the word.

I watched him as he walked away. So it had not been a letter which had caused Miss Lawrence's sudden panic. That reduced the possibilities to two. Either she had received a visitor or a telegram. I must endeavour to——

A voice at my elbow aroused me.

"Mrs. Lawrence wishes to see you, sir," it said.

I turned, to find standing beside me the woman who had brought the note to Mrs. Lawrence in the library—the woman whose attitude of malignant triumph had so startled me. I blessed the chance which made it possible for me to question her alone.

"Very well," I said. "Are you Mrs. Lawrence's maid?"

"No, sir; I'm Miss Marcia's maid."

"Ah!" I said, and permitted myself to look at her more closely. She was a woman apparently somewhat over thirty. She had very black hair and eyes, and her face, while not actually repellent, had in it a certain fierceness and hardness far from attractive. A fiery and emotional nature was evident in every line of it—a sinister nature, too, it seemed to me—and I remembered her as I had seen her standing in the library door, exulting in another's misery. I pictured her as the decorator had described her, sitting on the stair, grinning and biting her nails in a kind of infernal triumph. Why should Miss Lawrence have chosen such a woman to attend her? As I looked at her, I saw the folly of attempting to win her confidence—the whip was the only weapon that could touch her—and it must be wielded mercilessly.

"Mrs. Lawrence wishes to see you," she said again, and I fancied there was defiance in the eyes she turned upon me for the merest instant.

"In a moment. Was it you who found the note your mistress left for Mr. Curtiss?"

"Yes, sir," and she glanced at me again, this time with a quick suspicion.

"It was on her dressing-table, I believe?"

"Yes, sir."

"How did you happen to find it?"

"I just happened to see it, sir."

"It was lying in plain sight?"

"Yes, sir."

"Not concealed in any way—nothing lying over it?"

She hesitated an instant, and shot me another quick glance before she answered.

"I believe not, sir," she said at last.

"Of course it wouldn't be concealed," I said reassuringly. "Miss Lawrence probably left it where she thought it would be most quickly seen, don't you think so?"

"Yes, sir; I suppose so."

"And her dressing-table was a very conspicuous place?"

"Yes, sir; very conspicuous."

"In that case," I said slowly, "it seems most peculiar that the letter wasn't discovered at once."

She flushed hotly under my gaze and opened her lips to reply, but thought better of it and started hastily up the stair. I followed her in silence; but I had much to think about. What connection had she with Miss Lawrence's disappearance? What connection could she have? Miss Lawrence would scarcely make a confidante of her maid, more especially of such a maid as this! At the stairhead I held her back for a final question.

"When did you see your mistress last?"

"When she left her room to go downstairs to look at the decorations," she

answered, so docilely that I was inclined to believe her former defiance wholly my imagination.

"You remained behind in the room?"

"Yes, sir."

"And she did not return?"

"No, sir."

"Then how do you explain the presence of the letter on the dresser?"

She flushed again, more hotly than before; she realised that I had caught her in a lie.

"I—I can't explain it, sir," she stammered. "I didn't consider it any of my business," she added fiercely.

"I think you'll find it difficult to explain," I said, with irony; "even more difficult than how it came to lie there unperceived for nearly three hours. You'll pardon me if I find the story hard to believe."

"It's nothing to me whether or not you believe it!" she retorted and made a motion to go on again.

"No," I said; "wait a moment. Which is her room?"

"This one here," and she pointed to a half-open door just beside us.

Ignoring her gesture of protest, I pushed the door back and stepped inside.

The room was a large and pleasant one, well lighted and looking out upon the grove at the east side of the house. There was some little disorder apparent, and over a chair at the farther side of the room I saw a veil lying—no doubt the bridal veil. For the moment I did not seek to see more, but turned back into the hall.

"Nothing there," I said, as though my inspection of the room was ended. "I suppose you helped Miss Lawrence to dress?"

"Yes, sir."

"And she had on her wedding-gown when she went downstairs?"

"Yes, sir, all but the veil."

"What was the colour of the gown?"

"White, sir," she answered, with evident contempt. "White satin made very plain."

"With a train?"

"Yes, sir, with a train."

"Thank you," I said. Plainly, a woman garbed in that fashion must be a marked object, wherever she went. Then, seeing that the maid waited for further questions, I added, "That is all, I believe."

She opened a door just across the hall and motioned me to precede her. I found myself in a pleasant sitting-room, and looked about for Mrs. Lawrence, but she was not there. The maid went to an inner door which stood half-open, and knocked.

"In a moment," called a low voice, and I heard a rustle of draperies. Instinctively I knew that Mrs. Lawrence had been upon her knees.

But I was not prepared for the deep distress which I saw in her countenance the instant she appeared upon the threshold. So worn and drawn was it, so changed even in the brief time since I had seen her last, that I scarcely knew her. What had happened? Was her self-control giving way under the strain, or had there been some new shock, some more poignant blow which she had been unable to withstand?

She came straight to me where I stood staring, perhaps a little brutally, and lifted tear-dimmed eyes to mine.

"Mr. Lester," she said, in a choked voice, "I must ask that this search for Marcia cease."

CHAPTER VII

Tangled Threads

I stared at her a moment without replying—so she *was* guilty! So she *did* know! I heard the opening of the door as the maid left the room, and the sound somehow restored me a portion of my self-control.

"Cease? But why?" I asked. "Surely——"

"Marcia has said that the marriage is impossible," she interrupted. "Is not that enough?"

"Mr. Curtiss does not think so. And if it is impossible, he, at least, has a right to know why."

"Marcia has decided not; she has no wish to bring reproach to the memory of a respected man, who——"

She checked herself—but she had already said too much.

"Then you know why your daughter left so suddenly?" I questioned. "But an hour ago, you said you didn't know."

"I did not then," she murmured.

"I have no wish to know," I went on rapidly, noting her sudden pallor. "I have no right to know. But I'm here to find Miss Lawrence so that Mr. Curtiss can, at least, have a last talk with her. That seems a reasonable demand. Do you know where she is?"

"No!" she answered explosively.

"She is not in this house?"

"Assuredly not; I have already told you she is not here."

"I fancied perhaps she had returned."

"Such a suspicion is absurd."

"You've had no word from her?"

"Not a single word."

"Then it wasn't she who told you the cause of her disappearance?"

"She told me nothing."

I had no need to ask who it was; some instinct told me it was the maid.

"And you saw her last——"

"When she left me to dress, as I've already told you. I've been speaking the truth, Mr. Lester."

"Pardon me," I said; "I hadn't the least doubt of it; but I'm sure you can appreciate my position, can look at it from Mr. Curtiss's side. Perhaps you suspect where Miss Lawrence is, without being absolutely certain. If you would tell me——"

She stopped me with a sudden gesture; I saw that I had touched the truth.

"Or, at least," I persisted, pressing my advantage, "if you know why your daughter fled, you might yourself tell Mr. Curtiss——"

Again she stopped me.

"The secret is not mine," she said hoarsely.

"Whose is it? Who has the right to tell?"

"No one!"

"And you will let it wreck two lives?"

I saw the spasm of pain which crossed her face. She must yield; a moment more, and I should know the secret!

"To-morrow—give me till to-morrow!" she cried. "Perhaps you're right—I must think—I cannot decide now—instantly. There are so many things to consider—the dead as well as the living."

"Very well," I agreed. "I will call to-morrow morning——"

"At eleven—not before."

"To-morrow at eleven, then. And I hope you'll decide, Mrs. Lawrence, to help me all you can. The living come before the dead."

She bowed without replying, and seeing how deadly white she was, I checked the words which rose to my lips and let myself out into the hall.

The maid was standing just outside the door. I wondered how much she had heard of what had passed within.

"One moment," I said, as she started for the stairway, and I stepped again into Miss Lawrence's room.

It had grown too dark there to see anything distinctly, for this room was not flooded, as her mother's had been, by the last rays of the sun, but in a moment I switched on the light. The maid stared from the threshold, her face dark with anger, but not daring to interfere.

"This is the dressing-table, isn't it?" I asked, walking toward it.

"Yes, sir," she answered sullenly.

"It was here you found the letter?"

"Yes, sir."

"You persist in that farce?" I demanded, wheeling round upon her.

She did not answer, only stared back without flinching. I realised that here was a will not easily overcome.

"Very well," I said quietly at last, "I shall get along, then, in spite of you," and I returned to my inspection of the room.

There was a writing-desk in one corner, with pens, ink, and paper. I picked up a sheet of paper and looked at it; I dipped a pen in the ink and wrote a few words upon it; then I blotted it, folded it, and placed it in my pocket.

"Now we can go," I said, and switched off the light.

She led the way down the stairs without replying.

"My hat is in the library," I said, as we reached the foot, and I turned down the lower hall.

The library was even darker than the room upstairs had been, for the trees around the house seemed to shadow especially the windows of this wing. I noted how the windows extended to the floor and opened upon a little balcony. One of the windows was open, and I went to it and looked out. A flight of steps connected one end of the balcony with the ground, and I fancied from the steps I could discern a faint path running away among the trees.

A convulsive sob at the door brought me around. It was the maid, who had entered and was glaring at me with a face to which the growing darkness gave an added repulsiveness. The sob, which had more of anger than of sorrow in it, had burst from her involuntarily, called forth, no doubt, by her inability to hinder me in my investigations, to show me the door, to kick me out. I could see her growing hatred of me in her eyes, in the grip of the hands she pressed against her bosom; and a certain reciprocal anger arose within me.

"Here is a handkerchief of your mistress," I said, plunging my hand into my pocket and drawing forth the square of lace. "Please return it to her wardrobe. It's valuable," I added, with a sudden burst of inspiration; "especially so, since it's her bridal handkerchief."

The shot told. She took the handkerchief with a hand that shook convulsively, and I determined to risk a second guess.

"She left it here," I said. "She left it here when she went out by yonder window and ran through the grove. Shall I tell you where she went? But you know!"

"I do not!" burst from her. "It's a lie!"

"You know," I repeated remorselessly. "You followed her there. It was there she wrote that note which you brought back with you and which you *found* on her dresser."

"No, no!" The words were two sobs rather than two articulate sounds.

"Don't lie to me! If the note was written here, why did she use a writing-paper different from her own? You're playing with fire! Take care that it doesn't burn you!"

But I had touched the wrong note.

"Burn me!" she cried. "You think you can frighten me! Well, you can't! I'm not that kind."

And, indeed, as I looked at her, I saw that she spoke the truth.

"Very well," I said; "do as you think best. I've warned you," and without waiting for her to answer, I passed before her down the hall, not without the thought that she might plunge a knife into my back—she was certainly that kind! I opened the door myself and closed it behind me, then started down the walk. But in a moment, I dodged aside among the trees and hastened around the house. I was determined to follow that path which started from the library balcony—I must see whither it led.

CHAPTER VIII

The Path through the Grove

I had no trouble in finding the path and in following it through the grove, noting how the trees screened it from the street. I reached a hedge enclosing a garden which the path skirted, and finally a second hedge, which seemed to be the one bounding the estate. The path led to a gate which opened upon the grounds of a cottage just beyond. I could see that there was a garden and that the cottage was covered with vines, but no further details were discernible.

Suddenly a light flashed out from one of the windows, and I saw a woman moving about within, no doubt preparing supper. But at that moment, I caught the sound of hurried footsteps along the path behind me and shrank aside into the shadow of the trees just in time to avoid another woman whom, as she dashed past, I recognised as the dark-faced maid. She crossed the garden without slackening her pace and entered the house. I saw her approach the other woman, pause apparently to speak a word to her, and then the two disappeared together.

What was happening within this house? Was it here that Miss Lawrence had found refuge? And as I turned this question over and over in my mind, staring reflectively at the lighted window before me, it seemed to me more and more probable that I had already reached the end of my search. The fugitive must have escaped by some avenue screened from the public gaze, else she would surely have been noticed. She must have known a place of refuge before she started; a woman of her self-poise would not rush wildly forth with no goal in view. And, lastly, that goal must have been close at hand, or she could not have escaped discovery.

The house before me answered all of these conditions; but how could I make certain that Miss Lawrence was really there? Suppose I burst in upon her, what could I say? I could not ask her to tell *me* the story—indeed, I would not even know her if I met her face to face. I must see the photograph, first, which Curtiss had promised to leave for me at the hotel.

Besides, I asked myself—and in this matter, I confess, I was very willing to be convinced—would it not be wiser, more merciful, to wait till morning, till the

first shock was past, till she had time to rally a little, to get her calmness back? Then, I could dare to approach her, to show her how she had wronged Burr Curtiss, to persuade her to see him. It were better for both her and Curtiss that they should not meet for a day or two; they would have need of all their courage; all their self-control, for that meeting must reveal a secret which it chilled me to think of. At least, I would try to force no entrance to the cottage now. I shrank from any show of violence. Curtiss would countenance nothing of that sort.

To approach the cottage now, while the maid was within, would be a tactical error—would be to court failure. She could easily prevent my seeing her mistress—she would, no doubt, shut the door in my face. Why should I show her that I suspected Miss Lawrence's place of refuge? Why put her on her guard and urge the fugitive to farther flight? How much wiser to wait until the maid was absent, till I could make sure of seeing Miss Lawrence, and then calmly and clearly lay the case before her. Yes, decidedly, I would wait. I even found it in my heart to regret that I had already showed the maid so much of my suspicions. I would better have kept them to myself.

Convinced by this last argument, I made my way back to the street; and as I passed the Lawrence grounds I was impressed again by their extent and excellent order. At the front gate a curious crowd still lingered, staring at the silent, darkened house, whose drawn blinds gave no hint of life within, or listening to the knowing gossip of three or four alert young fellows whom I recognised as reporters. There was still a policeman there, and he was quite willing to be drawn into talk—to tell all he knew, and much that he did not know.

"Who lives in that cottage back yonder?" I asked, after an unimportant question or two.

"The Kingdon sisters," he answered. "The youngest one works in the Lawrence house—a maid or something."

The crowd had collected about us and was listening with ears intent; I caught a quick glitter of interest in the eyes of the reporters; so I ended the talk abruptly by asking the way to the Sheridan House.

"Right down this street, sir," he said. "You can't miss it—a big square building on the corner."

As I thanked him and turned away, I caught the cry of newsboys down the street, and in a moment they were among the crowd and were selling their papers right

and left. Both the *Leader* and the *Journal*, stirred to unusual enterprise by the day's events, had evidently made use of the largest and blackest type at their command to add emphasis to their headlines. I bought copies of both papers, and hurried on to the Sheridan, for I was becoming disagreeably conscious that I had eaten no lunch that day. I found the hotel without difficulty, and after registering, sat down in the office and opened the papers. The reporters, no doubt, would save me a lot of trouble.

The scene at the church had been even more sensational than I had pictured it, for evidently the Lawrences were a more important family socially than I had imagined, and the list of guests had been correspondingly large. They had gathered, had gossiped, had admired the decorations and criticised each other's gowns; a murmur of satisfaction had greeted the whispered announcement that the groom and his best man were waiting in the study; the organist played a selection or two and then stopped, expectant, ready to begin the wedding march. The ringing of bells and blowing of whistles announced the noon hour, but the bride had not arrived. Then, from somewhere, came the sudden whisper that something was wrong. A shiver ran through the crowd as two carriages drew up at the church door. Heads were craned and a sigh of relief ran around as the bridesmaids were seen to alight. But where was the bride? There was no bride! The bride had disappeared!

Uneasiness changed to wonder, wonder to astonishment, as the details were gradually gleaned from the exclamations of the excited young women; tongues began to wag, innocently at first, then, inevitably, with a touch of malice, for the bride's action had been a direct affront to all these people. Many of them, usually well-bred, waited in the hope of catching a glimpse of the groom's face as he hurried away. Both he and Mrs. Lawrence had been protected from the reporters, but the decorator and some of the Lawrence servants had evidently made the most of their opportunities, for the papers had the details of the disappearance substantially as I had learned them. And nobody had been found who had seen the bride leave the house, or had caught a glimpse of her during her flight.

That was the gist of the information contained in the papers. Both of them gave space to much speculation as to the reason for this remarkable event, but plainly both were wholly at sea and had no theory to fit the facts. So, finally, I folded them up, put them in my pocket, made a hasty toilet, and went in to dinner. That over, I again sought the reading-room and lighted a reflective cigar.

I had said to Mrs. Lawrence that the cause of her daughter's disappearance—the

mystery underlying it—did not concern me; yet that was by far the most interesting feature of the case. To trace the girl must prove an easy task—indeed, I fancied it already as good as accomplished. But to probe the secret—ah, that would not prove so easy! There was no reason why I should attempt it, and yet I could not keep my mind from dwelling on it with a sort of fascination. For I knew it was no ordinary secret—it was something dark and terrifying—something beside which a woman's happiness and reputation had seemed a little thing.

Before I could hope to make any further progress in that direction, I realised that I needed to know more of the family—of its history and social standing. Besides, I must be armed cap-à-pie before I went to that interview which I had determined to seek, in the morning, with Marcia Lawrence.

"Beg pardon, sir," said a voice at my elbow, and looking up, I saw the hotel clerk standing there. "This is Mr. Lester, isn't it?"

"Yes," I answered.

"I have a package here for you," he went on, and handed me a square envelope. "It was left here for you this afternoon."

"Oh, yes," I said; "thank you," and I slipped the envelope into my pocket. "You've had rather an exciting time here to-day," I added.

"You mean the wedding that didn't come off?" he asked, smiling. "It *has* torn the town wide open, and no mistake."

"So I judged from the papers. The Lawrences are pretty prominent, aren't they?"

"Yes; top-notchers; especially in church circles. I'll bet Dr. Schuyler is all broken up."

"Dr. Schuyler?"

"Pastor of their church—First Presbyterian—that big church just down the street yonder. They've been great pets of his."

"He was to have performed the ceremony?"

"Sure. They wouldn't have had anybody else. Nice old fellow, too. Besides, he's been their pastor for years."

Here was the source I had been looking for—the source from which I might draw detailed and accurate information, if I could only reach it.

"I suppose that house next to the church is the parsonage," I ventured. I had never seen the church, but it seemed a safe shot.

"Yes; the one this side of it."

I nodded.

"I thought so. Thank you for giving me the package," I added, and glanced at my watch and rose.

"Oh, that's all right, sir," he answered, and turned away to his desk.

As for me, I lost no time in starting out upon my errand. I would see Dr. Schuyler—I would put the case before him, and ask his help. It was nearly eight o'clock, doubtless well past his dinner hour, and I resolved to seek the interview at once.

Lights had sprung up along the street, casting long shadows under the trees which edged either side. The windows of the houses gleamed through the darkness, and here and there, where the blinds had not been drawn, I caught glimpses of families gathered together about a paper, with heads eagerly bent. From the dim verandas, I heard the murmur of excited gossip—and I knew too well what it was all about. To-night, this city, from end to end, could have but a single all-absorbing subject to discuss—to wonder at and chatter over with that insatiable curiosity which we inherit from the monkeys.

But I had not far to go. The tall, straight spire of a church told me that I had reached my destination, and I turned in at the gate of a house which was unmistakably the parsonage. The maid who took my card at the door returned in a moment to say that Dr. Schuyler was in his study and would see me. I followed her and found the clergyman seated beside a table upon which were lying the evening papers. A glance at them showed me what he had been reading, and his perturbed face bespoke great inward agitation. He was a small man of perhaps sixty years, with snow-white hair and beard and a delicate, intellectual face. He arose to greet me, my card still in his fingers, and then motioned me to a chair.

"Candidly, Mr. Lester," he said, "I was half-inclined to excuse myself. This has been a trying day for me. But I saw that you had come from New York."

"Yes, and on an errand which, I fear, may not be very welcome to you, Dr. Schuyler."

"Not connected with the deplorable affair of to-day, I hope?"

"Yes, sir; connected with that."

"But," and he glanced again at my card apprehensively, "you are not a—reporter?"

"Oh, no," I laughed. "I can easily guess how they've been harassing you. I'm acting for Mr. Curtiss," I added, resolving quickly that the best thing I could do was to tell him the whole story so far as I knew it, which I did, as briefly as possible. He heard me to the end with intent, interested face. "I think you'll agree with me, Dr. Schuyler," I concluded, "that my client is quite right in deciding to demand an explanation."

"Yes," he answered, after a moment's thought, "I suppose he is—I'm sure he is. It's the most extraordinary thing I ever heard of—and the most deplorable. Until this moment, I had hoped that they had gone away to be married elsewhere."

"Hoped?" I asked.

"Yes, hoped. I've seen them together, Mr. Lester, and it seemed to me an ideal attachment. I can conceive of nothing which could keep them apart. Has any explanation of it occurred to you?"

"Only one," I said, "that Miss Lawrence has been married before, but thought her husband dead, and discovered that he was still alive only at the last moment."

But the clergyman shook his head.

"You don't know Miss Lawrence?" he asked.

"No," I answered.

"You would see the absurdity of such a theory if you did."

"I fancied it might have happened when she was very young," I explained; "when she was abroad, perhaps. I've even pictured the man to myself as an adventurer, French or Italian, a man of the world, polished, without heart, perhaps even base at bottom—a man who would not hesitate to take advantage of her girlish innocence."

My companion smiled faintly.

"I see you have a lively imagination, Mr. Lester," he said. "Don't let it run away with you."

"She would not be the first to succumb to such a one," I retorted.

"No, nor the last, I fear. Have you worked out the rest of the story?"

"Granting the premises, the rest is easy enough. She soon found him out and took refuge with her mother. The scoundrel was bought off and disappeared. She supposed him dead; but at the last moment, he appeared again."

Dr. Schuyler had listened with half-closed eyes. Now he opened them and looked at me amusedly.

"It sounds like some of the yellow-backs I used to read in my unregenerate youth," he commented. "I fancy you must have read them too, Mr. Lester. Now I want you to dismiss that theory," he went on, more earnestly. "I tell you, once for all, it's ridiculous and untrue. Rest assured that whatever the secret is, it does not in any way reflect upon her."

"Then that leaves us all at sea," I pointed out. "There can be no question of her love for Curtiss."

"None whatever. As I said, I've seen them together, and I'm sure she loved him devotedly. Of his feeling for her you have, of course, been able to judge for yourself. I've looked forward to the wedding with much pleasure, for it seemed to me the least worldly one that I had ever been asked to consecrate. It is a singular coincidence, though——" He stopped suddenly and glanced about the room. "Of course, this conversation is between ourselves, Mr. Lester?"

"Certainly," I assented. "I would wish to have it so."

"With that understanding, I shall be glad to help you, if I can. I was about to say that it is a very singular coincidence that something of the same sort happened many years ago to Mrs. Lawrence."

CHAPTER IX

The Old Sorrow

"To Mrs. Lawrence?" I repeated. Here was a coincidence, indeed! Could it be, I asked myself again, that this thing had been deliberately arranged? But I dismissed the thought as ridiculous.

"I will tell you the story so far I know it," said the clergyman. "It is no breach of trust to do so, for it was public property at the time, though long since forgotten. I should not recall it now but for the fact that it may shed some light upon to-day's occurrence."

"Perhaps it will," I agreed.

"Mrs. Lawrence," began my companion, "was born at Scotch Plains about fifty years ago. Her father's name was Hiram Jarvis. He had made a comfortable fortune in the dry-goods business in New York, and had built himself a country-house at Scotch Plains, going in to New York every morning and returning every evening. Scotch Plains is a very small place—a mere village—but has a number of handsome country homes. It is not on the railroad, but lies about a mile back of Fanwood, which is its station. It has a little Presbyterian church, and when I graduated in '65 from Princeton seminary, I received a call to it, which I accepted. Mr. Jarvis and his daughter were members of my congregation—the former, indeed, being the president of the board of trustees."

I nodded my interest. Plainly I had done well in coming to Dr. Schuyler.

"Jarvis was a tall, straight, austere Scotchman of the old school," continued the clergyman, "with a belief in predestination and eternal punishment, which was—well—rather fanatical, even for those days. His daughter was a beautiful girl of seventeen or eighteen. Her mother had died some years before and she was left solely in her father's care, without brothers or sisters. There was an aunt in New York City, a younger sister of her father, and married to a banker named Heminway, but she seemingly took little interest in the girl. Her character—or so I judged the few times I saw her—was much like her brother's, tempered, perhaps, with a little more worldliness. I think she's still living; at least, I've never heard of her death. She has been a widow for many years.

"So the girl grew up in the lonely house, with only her father to care for. I sometimes thought his treatment of her a little severe—he would rarely permit her to take part in even the most innocent merry-making—and I often found myself pitying her. But I concluded it was none of my business—a conclusion which was cowardly, perhaps; but that was my first charge, and Jarvis was quite a terrifying man."

I could well believe it, and said so.

"There was another member of my congregation," went on Dr. Schuyler, "concerning whom I had doubts of quite an opposite character—that was young Boyd Endicott. The Endicott place lay just beyond the Jarvis house, which it quite overshadowed, for the Endicotts were very wealthy. The father did not belong to my church—nor, indeed, to any church—and I seldom met him. He had been associated with Jim Fisk in some operations which seemed to me of questionable honesty—though Fisk's reputation may have prejudiced me unduly. But his wife was a lovely Christian woman, and devoted to her children."

"Her children?" I repeated. The story interested me so intensely that I wanted every detail.

"There were two, a girl of seventeen or eighteen, named Ruth; and Boyd, who was about nineteen, and a junior at Princeton. I had heard something of his college escapades while I was at the seminary, but the first time I saw him was when he came home for the holidays. He was a handsome boy, dark, with a face that showed his breeding; but he was the wildest, most untamable I ever knew. When he came walking into church with his mother, it used to amuse me to see how Mr. Jarvis would glare at him; he considered him a firebrand of hell, and didn't scruple to say so. And young Endicott would stare back—at Jarvis, as I thought, but I saw my mistake afterwards.

"There was more or less trouble of a personal kind between the two. Endicott's dog killed some of the Jarvis chickens, and Jarvis shot the dog. Endicott rode over the Jarvis land, and Jarvis swore out a warrant against him for trespass—mere persecution, the villagers thought it,—and there were other differences of a similar nature, which were ended only when the boy went back to school.

"Of course, Mr. Lester, I don't know all the steps in the affair; but on Christmas Eve, just a year later, there came a great knocking at my door, and when I opened it, there on the step stood Jarvis, with such a face as I had never seen on a man before. He stamped in and flung a sheet of paper down on the table.

"'Read that!' he said, in a stifled voice. 'Read that, man! Oh, that I should have bred a harlot!'

"I was too astonished to reply, but I picked up the paper and read it. It was a note from his daughter—I forget the exact words—but she told him that she had secretly married Boyd Endicott, knowing that she could never win his consent, and prayed for his forgiveness. They were going far away, she said; she would not see him again for a long time, and hoped he would think kindly of her. It was a touching note, Mr. Lester."

The good man's voice choked and he paused to regain control of it. As for me, I thought of that other note I had read a few hours since.

"He was like a man crazed," continued Dr. Schuyler, at last. "He wouldn't listen to reason; he demanded only that I accompany him, while he sought his daughter out and made sure that she and young Endicott were really married. He swore that he would follow them to the ends of the earth that he might see them wedded with his own eyes. A heavy storm was raging, but I could not deny him; he had his buggy at the door, and we drove away to the Fanwood station. There the agent told us that Miss Jarvis had taken the afternoon train for New York. There was no other train for an hour, so we waited. Jarvis tramped up and down the station like a wild thing. And then, just before the train was due, there came a telegram for him. It was from his sister and stated that Mary had reached her home unattended and was very ill.

"That settled the matter, so far as I was concerned. I drove back home again and Jarvis went on to New York. Unfortunately, in the first rage of his discovery of his daughter's flight, he had given the servants some hint of the affair, and it leaked out, but was gradually forgotten. Mary Jarvis, after a long illness, went with her father for a visit to Scotland, and did not return to her home at Scotch Plains for nearly three years. She was greatly changed—older and with an air of sadness which never quite left her.

"Her father was changed, too. He had left his daughter at his old home in Scotland and hurried back—why I didn't guess till afterwards. He became more crabbed and irritable than ever; he seemed to be withering away, and his face grew to haunt me, it was so harried and anxious. I suspected that he had become involved in business troubles of some sort, for the country was on the verge of a panic, and once I tried to approach the subject to offer him any help I could, but he stopped me with such ferocity that I never tried again. Then, suddenly, came

the news that Endicott had been caught with Fisk in the ruin of Black Friday; but while Fisk saved himself by repudiating his obligations, Endicott had been bound in such a way that he could not repudiate—and the man who had bound him was Hiram Jarvis."

The speaker paused and leaned back for a moment in his chair, his face very stern.

"That was his revenge," he added. "But I doubt if he foresaw how bitter it was to be. For Endicott shot himself; the place was sold, and the widow and her daughter came to live here in Elizabeth, where they had relatives."

"But the boy," I asked; "where was he?"

"He was killed two days after that Christmas Eve in a railroad wreck somewhere in the West—I have forgotten exactly where. His body was brought home to Scotch Plains and buried there."

"In the West?" I repeated. "What was he doing in the West?"

"I don't know," answered Dr. Schuyler. "I've never been able to understand it."

"Were he and Miss Jarvis already married? Or did they expect to be married afterwards?"

"Well," said Dr. Schuyler slowly, "I inferred from the note that they were already married. But I may have been mistaken in thinking so. I know that her father did not believe it."

"And you say that you've never been able to understand why, after all, they did not go away together—why Miss Jarvis went to New York and Endicott to the West?"

Dr. Schuyler hesitated.

"Of course," he said, after a moment, "the most obvious explanation is that Endicott deserted her; and yet that would have been so unlike him, for he was not a vicious or selfish fellow, Mr. Lester, but generous, honourable, warm-hearted, despite his other faults, which were merely, I think, faults of youth. I've never believed that he deserted her. Perhaps, at the last moment, her courage failed; or perhaps there was a mistake of some sort, a misunderstanding which kept them apart."

I pondered it for a moment, then put it aside. That was not the mystery I had set myself to solve.

"Well, Miss Jarvis evidently got over it," I remarked, "since she afterwards became Mrs. Lawrence."

"That is one way of looking at it," he assented; "but I've always thought that she was so far from getting over it that she never greatly cared what became of her afterwards."

"Was it so bad as that?"

"It was as bad as it could possibly be. She did not return from Scotland for two years and more. It was about a year later that she married Lawrence, who was a business associate of her father, and lived here at Elizabeth. I had been called to the pastorate of the church here and performed the ceremony."

"Lawrence must have been considerably older than she, then," I suggested.

"Oh, much older. He was a widower, without children. I always fancied that her father had arranged the match. He had completely broken down, and knew he hadn't long to live."

"And there was only one child of this marriage?"

"Only one—Marcia."

"How long has Mrs. Lawrence been a widow?"

"Oh, for twenty years and more."

"She has lived here ever since?"

"She has kept her home here, but she was abroad with her daughter for a long time—six or seven years, at least. She was very fond of France—and so was Marcia, perhaps because she was born there."

"Born there?" I repeated, in some surprise.

"Yes. Mr. Lawrence had a very severe illness a few months after his marriage—I don't remember just what it was—and his doctor ordered him to the south of France for a long rest. His wife, of course, accompanied him, and Marcia was born there. I think that is all the story, Mr. Lester."

"Not quite all," I said. "There is still a loose end. What became of Mrs. Endicott and her daughter—I think you said there was a daughter?"

"Yes—Ruth. One of the loveliest girls I ever knew. They came here from Scotch Plains, as I've said, to make their home with Mrs. Endicott's sister, Mrs. Kingdon."

He noticed my start of astonishment, and paused to look at me inquiringly.

"I beg your pardon," I said, "but the name struck me. Miss Lawrence's maid is named Kingdon."

"Yes; she's a niece of Mrs. Endicott. I've sometimes thought that it was because of this relationship that Mrs. Lawrence was so kind to her and to her sister."

"Kind to them?" I repeated. "In what way?"

"She gave them the cottage they live in," he explained, "and has helped them in many other ways. The younger girl, Lucy, has a place in her household, where her duties, I fancy, are purely nominal. Her sister is supposed to take in sewing, but she really does very little."

"And they are Mrs. Endicott's nieces?"

"Yes—her sister's children."

"And Boyd Endicott's cousins?"

"Precisely."

I felt a little glow of excitement, for here was a clue which might lead me out of the labyrinth—a loose end, which, grasped firmly, might serve to unravel this tangled skein.

"Please go on," I said. "You have not yet told me what became of Mrs. Endicott and her daughter."

"They made their home with Mrs. Kingdon, who was also a widow. Mrs. Kingdon had had much trouble—her husband had died in an asylum for the insane—and they had a hard time to get along. But Mrs. Endicott died within a year."

"And Ruth?" I questioned.

"Ruth was a lovely girl—I shall never forget her—with the same dark, passionate beauty her brother had. She possessed artistic talent which seemed to me of an unusual order, and she fancied that she could make a living by painting portraits. But she soon found that there was no market for her work here in Elizabeth, and that she needed years of training before she could hope to be successful elsewhere. So she was forced to give it up."

"And then?" I prompted, for I saw by his hesitation that there was still something coming, and I was determined to have the whole story.

"I have already told you that Mr. Lawrence was a widower. His first wife was an invalid for a long time before her death, and when Ruth Endicott found she could not make a living with her brush, she accepted the position of companion to Mrs. Lawrence. I do not fancy the place was a pleasant one, but she kept it until Mrs. Lawrence's death."

I leaned back in my chair and closed my eyes for an instant in the effort to straighten out this story, which was always turning back upon itself. What mystery was there—what mystery could there be—in the lives of the Kingdons and the Lawrences and the Endicotts, which had led up to the tragedy for which I was seeking an explanation?

"Well, and after that?" I asked, giving it up with a sigh of despair and turning back to the clergyman.

"There isn't much more to tell. After Mrs. Lawrence's death, Ruth Endicott remained for a time as Lawrence's housekeeper. But she had overworked herself—she seemed the very embodiment of health, and taxed her strength too heavily. She broke down very suddenly, and died, if I remember rightly, in Florida, where the elder Kingdon girl had taken her. She was the last of the Endicotts."

"The last of the Endicotts. The last of the Endicotts." I repeated the words over and over to myself. It may have been a presentiment, or merely an idle fancy, but something whispered in my ear—some impalpable presence warned me—that I had not yet heard the last of her. "Ruth Endicott." There was a something in the name—a melody, the vision it evoked of a dark and brilliantly beautiful woman—which haunted me.

And yet, what possible connection could she have with the mystery which I had started to investigate? Thirty years dead—how could any fact connected with her drive Marcia Lawrence forth into hiding at the hour of her wedding? The utter

absurdity of the thought was so apparent that I put it impatiently from me.

"You knew Mr. Lawrence, of course?" I asked, at last.

"Oh, yes," and he hitched uneasily in his chair, as though approaching an unwelcome topic. "But I did not know him well. He was what the world calls a hard man—somewhat harsh and cold, though perfectly free from positive vice. He was thoroughly respected."

"He seems to have left a large property."

"Yes; one of the largest in Elizabeth. Mrs. Lawrence, of course, inherited her father's, also."

"Both she and her daughter are members of your church?"

"Two of the most faithful. They give largely to charity; they are really Christian women."

We sat silent for a moment. To me, at least, the mystery seemed deeper than ever.

"Has it occurred to you, Mr. Lester," asked the clergyman hesitatingly, "that perhaps Miss Lawrence discovered something in Mr. Curtiss's past——"

"Yes," I interrupted. "I put that before Curtiss squarely, and he assured me there was nothing she could discover. I'm sure he spoke the truth. Besides, in that case, why should Miss Lawrence flee? Why not merely dismiss him? Her flight seems to argue some guilt on her part."

"Yes," nodded my companion; "yes."

"Some guilt, too," I added, "of a very remarkable kind, which she was not conscious of until this morning, and which then appeared suddenly before her in such hideous shape that flight was her only resource. That seems inconceivable, doesn't it?"

Dr. Schuyler dropped his head back against his chair with a little sigh which bespoke utter fatigue.

"Yes," he said, "inconceivable—the whole thing is inconceivable. It's a kind of horrible nightmare. I can't make anything of it. My brain is in a whirl."

"I'm taxing your patience too long," I protested, rising instantly. "You need rest.

Only let me thank you for your kindness."

He held out his hand with a smile.

"I seem only to have made dark places darker," he said. "If you succeed in untangling the snarl, I should like to hear about it."

"You shall," I promised and took myself back to the hotel. I felt that there was nothing more to be done that night, and so mounted to my room.

As I started to undress, I remembered suddenly the envelope Curtiss had sent me. I got it out and opened it, and my heart leaped with a sudden suffocating sympathy as I looked at the photograph within. A Madonna, indeed! Mr. Royce had chosen the right word, had paid a fitting tribute not only to her beauty but to the spotless soul behind it. For the face was essentially girlish, virginal—there was no shameful secret back of that clear, direct gaze. It was sweet, frank, winning—a strong face, too, showing intellect and training; no ordinary woman, I told myself; not one, certainly, to be swayed by momentary passion, to yield to an unreasoning impulse. No, nor one to fall victim to an adventurer; for this was a woman with ideals and high ones—a woman whose clear eyes could detect any specious imposture at a glance. A fitting mate for Burr Curtiss—the appointed mate—and yet not his! Not his! Snatched from him by a desperate act. Desperate! If I, a man hardened by contact with the world, could feel that, how much more poignantly must she have felt it—with what horror must she have shrunk from it—with what agony yielded!

As I gazed at her, it seemed to me that there was something familiar in the face—in the set of the eyes, the shape of the forehead—something familiar in the expression, in the poise of the head, which puzzled and eluded me. A resemblance to her mother, I decided at last, and so put the photograph away and went to bed.

But sleep did not come easily. Ever before my eyes there danced a vision of that vine-embowered cottage opening from the Lawrence grounds. There, I felt, lay the key to the mystery; it was to it I must turn for the clue which would lead me out of this labyrinth. There was some secret about these Kingdon sisters which defied and worried me. Dr. Schuyler's explanation of their connection with Mrs. Lawrence did not in the least satisfy me. That she should keep them near her, shower them with gifts, merely because of an old fondness for a cousin of theirs, seemed to me exceedingly improbable. There must be some other reason, some more compelling one than that.

It was much more likely, I told myself, remembering the passionate fierceness of the younger sister, that the gifts were intended to placate, not to reward; that they were the outgrowth of fear, not of affection. Fear of what? I could not even guess. Fear of the exposure of some secret, perhaps—and the thought stung me to a sudden attention.

Had the gifts been in vain? Had the secret been exposed? Was it they who had whispered in Marcia Lawrence's ear the story which had broken the marriage, caused her flight, ruined her future? Was that their revenge for some old injury? Had they waited till the last moment to make it more complete, more crushing? But if they, indeed, had so avenged themselves, would she have fled to them for refuge? Would she not rather have fled from them with loathing?

I felt that I was entangling myself in a web of my own weaving. I put the problem from me, but it pursued me even past sleep's portals. I dreamed that I was staring over the hedge at the Kingdon cottage, at a lighted window. Three women were in the room, as I could see from the shadows thrown upon the blind. They were walking up and down, seemingly in great excitement. I fancied that I could hear the sound of voices, but I could distinguish no words. Then suddenly, two of the women sprang upon the third. She struggled desperately, but their hands were at her throat, choking her life away. She turned toward me, the curtain seemed to lift, and I beheld the agonised face of Marcia Lawrence.

I tried to leap the hedge, but could not stir. Some power beyond me seemed to hold me fast; some mighty weight bound me to the spot. A moment longer the struggle lasted, while I stood staring; I felt her eyes on mine, I knew that she had seen me. She held out an imploring hand; then, when I made no sign in answer, despair swept across her face, she seemed to realise her helplessness, and collapsed into the arms of her assailants with a scream so shrill, so terrible that it startled me awake.

CHAPTER X

The Mysterious Light

It was some moments before I could think clearly, so real and vivid had that vision been. I threw out my arms to assure myself that I was still in bed; I could scarcely believe that I was not really shivering behind the hedge, staring across at that lighted window and the dreadful drama it revealed. I was bathed in perspiration and yet felt chilled to the very marrow.

Indeed, my teeth were chattering as I groped my way to the light, turned it on, and looked at my watch. It was nearly one o'clock. The night was clear and pleasant, with a faint breeze stirring. There was no moon, but the stars were shining so brightly that one looked for it instinctively.

I knew it was no use to return to bed until my nerves were quieter; and, indeed, that vision had banished all desire for sleep; so I filled my pipe, lighted it, drew up a chair and sat down by the open window. The street below was deserted; and for an instant I found myself wondering that it was not thronged with people, roused by the scream which had awakened me. Then I remembered that there had been no scream, that I had simply dreamed it.

But I had only to close my eyes to see again that lighted window and the shadows on the blind. It seemed even clearer to me than it had been in the dream. I could see every detail of the struggle, and I opened my eyes abruptly so that I might escape the end. There was something supernatural about it; I had never dreamed a dream like that before—a dream which, waking, I could rehearse at pleasure. Perhaps it was not wholly a vision; perhaps it had some foundation in reality, some telepathic origin. I had read of such things, sceptically; but some of the phenomena of thought transference had, I knew, been accepted, reluctantly enough, even by the scientific world.

Was it not possible that Marcia Lawrence had been lured to the Kingdon cottage or taken there against her will? Who could say how that old injury done the Endicotts would flower and fruit? Who could say what hatred, what desire for vengeance, rankled in the hearts of the Kingdons? I remembered how the face of the maid had darkened with malice, how her eyes had blazed with infernal joy,

as she stood there in the door of the library, thinking herself unseen. Her sister I knew nothing of, but if they resembled each other as sisters usually do, I could well believe them capable of any cruelty. Was it not possible that Marcia Lawrence was in their hands? Was it not possible that my dream possessed a basis of reality? I had been thinking of her all the evening; I had gone to sleep with the problem of her disappearance still on my mind; I had been studying her photograph—I was, in a word, in spiritual touch with her, responsive to any suggestion emanating from her—we were tuned to the same pitch. Such, I fancied, was the explanation of the phenomena which a telepathist would give. She had sent that cry into the night, and I, being en rapport with her, had heard it—had witnessed the tragedy which called it forth. Perhaps the struggle was not yet ended; perhaps, even at this moment——

I sprang to my feet, hurried into my clothes, caught up my hat, opened my door and ran noiselessly down the stair. I would solve this problem to-night, if it could be solved. I had been wrong in turning away from the Kingdon cottage the evening before; I should, at least, have made an effort to discover if Marcia Lawrence were really there. But it had not occurred to me then that she could be in any danger. I had thought too much of what Curtiss would wish me to do; too little of what the necessities of the case required. Well, I would not make that mistake a second time.

As I look back upon my frame of mind at that moment and consider the impulse which sent me forth from my room at that hour of the night, I realise how overwrought I was. At a distance, in cold blood, it seems an absurd thing to have done; yet, under the same conditions, I should no doubt behave again in much the same way. And even admitting its absurdity, I am not prepared to say, in view of the event, that there was not back of it some instinct worth following. There are forces in nature not yet explained or recognised, and I am still inclined to think that it was one of these which drew me forth upon that midnight errand.

In a very fever of impatience, I hurried along the street, under the trees, meeting no one except a patrolman. I heard him stop, as I passed him, and knew that he was looking back after me, but I kept on without pausing, and heard him finally start on again. In a minute more I reached the Lawrence place, and stopped in the shadow of a tree for a look around. The house loomed through the darkness grim and gloomy, with no light showing anywhere. I leaped the fence, assured that I was unseen, and pushed my way forward through the grove toward the path which led to the cottage.

Beneath the trees, the darkness was absolute and I could go forward but slowly; yet, starting from the library steps, I found the path without difficulty, and felt my way cautiously along it, until I came to the hedge which marked the limits of the Kingdon place. I examined the house with care, but there was fronting me no lighted window upon which a tragedy could be pictured. Indeed, I saw no vestige of a light and was about to conclude that my midnight pilgrimage had been in vain, when my eye was caught by a faint glimmer near the ground. At first, I was not sure it was a light at all; then I decided that it was a reflection of some sort, or perhaps a phosphorescent glow. But as I stared at it, with eyes contracted, it suddenly took shape in the darkness, and I saw that the light proceeded from a small ventilator set in the foundation of the house.

Trembling with excitement, I softly opened the gate and entered the grounds. Here, with nothing between me and the stars, I suddenly found myself in what seemed a veritable blaze of light. I was seized with panic lest I be seen and scurried into the shadow of the house, then dropped beside the ventilator and examined it.

It was of the ordinary type—a plate of iron some six or eight inches square, perforated with holes perhaps half an inch in diameter, and set in the foundation about six inches from the ground.

I applied an eye to one of the holes and endeavoured to see what lay beyond. For a moment, I saw absolutely nothing; then I perceived in front of me a stretch of clay, which ended abruptly at a distance of six or eight feet. A few inches above the level of my eye were the beams supporting the floor of the cottage. But it was only a glance I gave to these details, though I found them afterwards photographed upon my brain; it was the space beyond which fixed my attention —the space where the clay bank before me dropped abruptly to what was no doubt the cellar of the cottage.

It was from this space that the light proceeded, but of what lay within it I could see almost nothing—only enough, indeed, to fire my curiosity. For from time to time a shadow moved between me and the light—a shadow which showed that the cellar was not empty. The light, I judged, had been placed on a stool or table on the opposite side of the cellar. From the way it varied, now bright, now dim, I decided it was a candle, and that the motions of the person working near it caused the flame to flicker. These motions would continue for a time with considerable regularity; then they would cease while the worker evidently stopped to rest, and then begin again.

Who was this person and what was this work which must be done at such an hour? In vain I sought an answer. I pressed my ear to the ventilator, but could hear nothing; nothing, at least, beyond the faintest of faint sounds, which gave me no clue to what was happening within. I peered through the little orifice moment after moment, until the shadows grew confused and blurred and my eyes ached under the strain.

I rose to rest myself. Then it suddenly occurred to me that the cellar must have a window. Skirting the house cautiously, I at last came to it. But it was closed and curtained so effectually that only a faint glimmer here and there betrayed the light within. I listened, but could hear no sound.

Fairly nonplussed, I returned to the hedge and sat down against it to consider. The shadow had given me no indication of whether the worker was man or woman; yet to the first question I had asked myself there could be only one answer. It was one or both of the Kingdon women who were working in the cellar—both, I finally decided, since it was improbable that one could spend the night there without the knowledge of the other. But what were they doing?

To this I could find no answer. It was not merely an errand, because the light remained. Minute after minute I sat there, until I heard a clock somewhere strike two, and still the light remained. I crept forward to the ventilator and peered through again. The shadows were moving backward and forward, just as they had been an hour before. There was something uncanny about them, and I shivered as I watched. It seemed to me that they were made by some person alternately rising and stooping, but why should any one do that for hours at a time? Some subtle association of ideas brought before my eyes the vision which had confronted Jean Valjean on that night when he had peered through the grated window into the Convent of Little Picpus—the dim light, the vast hall, the motionless figure on the floor before the cross. Was some such explanation to be sought here? Were these long-continued risings and stoopings a series of genuflexions before some shrine—a penance, perhaps, imposed for some transgression? The thought seemed absurd. But I could think of no other explanation of these singular motions.

At last, weary with long staring, I went back to my seat beside the hedge and waited. Half an hour passed, then I saw the glimmer at the ventilator suddenly disappear, and a moment later, a light gleamed through the kitchen window. It went on toward the front of the house, and I saw the shadow of a woman's figure on the blind as it passed the window in front of me. Only one shadow—there

was only one woman in the house, or, at least, only one awake and moving about. There had been only one in the cellar.

My resolution was taken. I went straight forward to the door at the side of the house and knocked sharply. At the same instant, the light vanished. I waited a moment, then knocked again, more loudly.

"Who's there?" called a voice, so harsh, so fierce, that it fairly startled me.

"Open the door," I said. "I wish to see Miss Lawrence."

"This is not Miss Lawrence's home," cried the voice.

"I know it; but she's here."

"She's not here!" and the voice rose to a scream. "Be off, or I'll fire through the door!"

What sort of fury was this, I asked myself, and I stepped to one side to be out of range of a possible bullet.

"Be off!" screamed the voice again. "I'll fire, I swear it! The law will justify me."

There could be no question of that; it would be worse than folly to attempt to force an entrance with this fury opposing me, so I retreated again to the hedge and sat down to see what would happen. But nothing happened, and deciding at last that Miss Kingdon, or whoever it was had answered me, had gone to bed, I turned my steps toward the hotel just as the dawn was tingeing the east with grey.

And one thing I determined on—I would purchase a revolver. Only a fool ventures unarmed into the tiger's den.

CHAPTER XI

An Old Acquaintance

I arose betimes in the morning, despite the fact that I had been up most of the night, for I was determined to gain entrance to the Kingdon cottage and force an interview with Marcia Lawrence before I went to my appointment with her mother. Day had taken from my dream nothing of its vividness, but my nerves were normal again, and I could approach the task with a coolness which had not been possible the night before. That Marcia Lawrence had taken refuge with the Kingdons, I did not for an instant doubt; it was my business to prove it—to gain entrance to her presence and persuade her to grant Burr Curtiss a final interview.

There was another mystery about the cottage which piqued and puzzled me. What was the meaning of that light in the cellar? What work had been going forward there, hour after hour? Whose was that shrill and violent voice which had threatened me through the door? And how had it been possible for the other inmates of the house to sleep on undisturbed through all that commotion? If Miss Lawrence were really there, would she not have heard me?

I descended to the dining-room, revolving this problem in my mind, so intent upon it that I brushed into a man at the door. I turned to apologise and saw his face light up at sight of me.

"Why, hello, Lester," he cried, holding out his hand. "This is luck!"

"Hello, Godfrey," I answered, returning his clasp with interest. "Glad to see you."

"Not half so glad as I am to see you. Come over here to this side-table where we can talk in peace. Quite like the Studio, isn't it?"

I laughed responsively at the memory of that night when Jim Godfrey, of the *Record*, for purposes of his own, had kidnapped me and entertained me with a superb dinner at the famous Sixth Avenue resort. I had met him occasionally since, and had found him always the same genial, generous, astute fellow he had proved himself then. Trained on the detective force, he had been for some years the *Record's* star reporter, and was employed only on what the newspapers love

to call *causes célèbres*. Of course, I knew instantly what "*cause*" it was had brought him to Elizabeth.

"Here on business?" he asked, as we sat down.

"Yes. And you?"

"Oh, I came down last night to write up this Lawrence-Curtiss affair. You've heard about it?"

He was looking at me keenly.

"Yes," I answered steadily, determined to keep him from guessing my connection with it; "I read about it in the papers last night. Queer affair, wasn't it?"

"Mighty queer. You haven't happened to form a theory about it, have you?"

I laughed outright. He had come to me for a theory once before, and here he was at his old trick.

"I haven't enough data to form a theory," I said.

"Well, maybe I can furnish you with more. I did some pretty lively work last night, and covered all the details I could think of."

"I haven't seen this morning's *Record*," I said. "Of course it's all there."

"Not quite all. I don't want to give the other fellows too much rope. They're all tied up in a knot, now, and I want them to stay that way."

"The 'other fellows,' I suppose, are your esteemed contemporaries?"

"In plain English, my hated rivals. But I don't mind telling you. You treated me square in the Holladay case. The boys told me afterwards how you refused to give me away."

"All right; fire ahead," I said, and cut my steak.

"Well," he began, "I saw at once, after I'd looked over the field and found out that it was impossible to see either Curtiss or Mrs. Lawrence, that the persons who could probably tell me most about the inside workings of this affair were the servants in the Lawrence house. Evidently there must have been trouble of some sort there; and it probably would not escape the servants' notice. So I went after them."

I nodded, but kept my eyes on my plate. Here was luck, indeed!

"There are five of them," he went on; "an outside man, who takes care of the grounds and horses; a cook, two house-girls, and a maid. The outside man is the husband of the cook; they and the house-girls stay at the place, and the maid lives with her sister in a cottage just off the grounds."

"And could they tell you anything?" I asked.

"Neither the man, the cook, nor the house-girls could tell me a thing. They'd all been busy preparing for the wedding, and didn't know anything was wrong until the maid, whose name is Lucy Kingdon, told them Miss Lawrence had disappeared. The house-girls had been passing back and forth all the time, and had caught a glimpse of Miss Lawrence now and then, but had noticed absolutely nothing unusual, had seen no stranger about the place, nor heard any outcry. One of them passed Miss Lawrence in the hall as she was talking with the decorator, and says that she was radiant with happiness.

"But the maid?" I asked, anxious to hear what he had got from her.

"Ah, she was different. She's been with the family a long time. She seems to be a kind of privileged character—a trusted confidante; though why any one should wish to trust her is beyond me—she's not an attractive woman, rather the reverse."

"And what did she tell you?"

"She didn't tell me anything," answered Godfrey, with some heat. "She beat about the bush and finally got angry. But I'm sure of one thing, and that is that she knows where Miss Lawrence is. Indeed," he added, "I'm pretty certain that Miss Lawrence passed the night in the Kingdon cottage."

"Why?" I asked, with lively interest at this confirmation of my own belief.

"I don't know—just a sort of intuition. And then—they wouldn't let me in to see."

"Oh—you tried to get in, did you?"

"I certainly did—tried my level best, but couldn't make it. Those Kingdon sisters are a pair of Tartars. Both of them were there. The elder one was a beauty when she was young, I fancy, but she's seen some trying times since, to judge from her

face. She's got mighty handsome eyes, even yet—and my! how they can flash. Well, they sent me to the right-about as soon as they learned my errand. I tried all my wiles," he added, with a little rueful smile, "and in vain."

"But intuition's hardly enough to go on," I suggested.

"Of course there's more than that. It's the only house she could have reached without being seen. There's a path leads to it through a grove which screens it from the street. If she'd gone in any other direction, she'd have had to venture out into the open, where somebody would have been sure to see her. Remember, she was in her wedding-dress, and there were probably a good many people standing around watching the house, as they always do at these fashionable weddings."

Perhaps something in my face betrayed me; at any rate, he looked at me with a sudden intent interest.

"See here, Lester," he said, "I believe you're in on this thing yourself."

"Not for publication."

"Agreed. Now let's have it."

"Well," I explained, "I'm working for Curtiss. I'm trying to find Miss Lawrence. He thinks he's entitled to an explanation."

Godfrey nodded quickly.

"Any man would think so," he said. "How are you going about it?"

"I'm going to take advantage of the hint you just gave me."

"And go to the Kingdon house?"

"Yes. I believe Miss Lawrence is there, myself. I thought so last night when I came to it after following that path through the grove."

"So you'd discovered it, too! Well, I wish you luck. Of course, we may be all wrong. I don't believe there are any other pointers I can give you," he added, "or I'd be glad to. I suppose you saw Mrs. Lawrence?"

"Oh yes."

"How was she affected?"

"Not so deeply as you'd expect," I said.

He gazed at me with narrowed eyes.

"Has it occurred to you, Lester," he said, at last, "that Miss Lawrence may not have gone away of her own accord at all; that there may be a plot against her; that she was forced to go, or perhaps even shut up in some room in the Lawrence house?"

"Yes; I'd thought of it. I even put it to Mrs. Lawrence."

"And what did she say?"

"She laughed at me. She said her daughter was a strong girl, who wouldn't let herself be abducted without a struggle, and that a single scream would have alarmed the house."

"But suppose she'd been drugged," suggested Godfrey. "Then she would have neither screamed nor struggled."

"Last night," I said, "I was half-inclined to believe that something of the sort had happened. I'd forgotten one fact which absolutely disproves it. She left a note behind her—or, at least, wrote it and sent it back after she ran away."

"Ah—she did?"

"Yes—a note saying the marriage was impossible, though her love was unaltered, and that Curtiss wasn't to attempt to find her."

Godfrey sat suddenly upright with grim countenance.

"Then there's only one explanation of it," he said. "There's only one thing could make a girl drop everything and run away like that—only one thing in the world. She's already married, and her first husband's turned up."

"I'd thought of that, too; but her mother swears her daughter never had a love affair previous to this one."

"Of course she'd say so. Has any other possible explanation occurred to you?"

"No," I answered frankly. "And I've tried mighty hard to find another."

"Let's go back a bit. The discovery—whatever it was—was made at the last moment."

"Yes—at the moment she left the decorator and started upstairs to get her veil."

"Was it made accidentally?"

"I don't know."

"But I do. It was *not* accidentally—it was by design. Things don't happen accidentally, just in the nick of time."

"No," I agreed, "they don't."

"It was his revenge," continued Godfrey, with growing excitement. "He wanted to get even, and he waited till the last moment. It was certainly artistic."

"If he really wanted to crush her," I suggested, my lips trembling with the horror of the thought, "he'd have waited a little longer."

Godfrey stared at me with glittering eyes.

"You're right," he agreed, after a moment. "He didn't want to get even, then; he wanted her back. So he sent a letter——"

"It wasn't a letter. Perhaps it was a telegram."

"No, it wasn't a telegram—I looked that up. Are you sure it wasn't a letter?"

"Yes. The morning mail was delivered shortly after nine. She was happy as usual until the moment of her disappearance, two hours later. If it wasn't a letter or a telegram, he must have come in person."

Godfrey sat for a moment with intent face.

"I hardly think so," he said, at last. "Some one would have noticed a stranger, and I made special inquiries on that point, though it was a lover I was looking for, not a husband. I rather imagined that there was another man in the case, and that, at the last moment, she decided to marry him and ran away to do it."

"No," I said decidedly, "she was in love with Curtiss—passionately in love with him."

"Well, lover or husband, I don't believe he came in person. I think it much more probable that the warning came from inside the house."

"From the maid," I suggested.

"Precisely," he nodded. "From the maid."

Then, suddenly, I recalled the sweet face, the clear gaze——

"It's a pretty theory, Godfrey," I said; "but I don't believe it. Have you ever seen Miss Lawrence?"

"No—not even her photograph. I tried to get one and failed," he added, with rueful countenance.

"She's a beautiful woman—she's more than that—she's a good woman. There's something Madonna-like about her."

"Most of the famous Madonnas," he said, smiling, "however virginal in appearance, were anything but Madonna-like in behaviour—Andrea del Sarto's, for instance."

With a little shiver, I remembered Mr. Royce's phrase—it was to the del Sarto Madonna he had compared her! Could I be wrong in my estimate of her, after all?

"There's no other theory will explain her flight," he repeated. "Presuming, of course, that she was sane."

"She was very sane," I said, in a low voice. "She was a self-controlled, well-balanced woman."

"And that she still loves Curtiss."

"I'm sure she does."

"Then you'll find I'm right. But come," he added, rising, "I've got some work to do. I'll try to meet you as you come away from the Kingdon cottage. I'm curious to know what luck you'll have."

He left me at the hotel door and hurried away toward the business part of the town, while I turned in the opposite direction. Godfrey's confidence in his theory weighed upon me heavily. He was right in saying that it seemed the only tenable one, and yet, with the memory of Miss Lawrence's pure face before me, I could not believe it. I could not believe that those clear eyes sheltered such a secret. I could not believe that anything shameful had ever touched her. She had kept herself unspotted from the world. And I would prove it!

As I reached the Kingdon house and turned in at the gate, I remembered with a smile the resolution I had made the night before to buy a revolver. It seemed absurd enough in the light of the clear day—that I should arm myself against two women!

There was a flower-bed on either side the walk, well-kept and in a riot of bloom, and along the hedges and about the house were others. Evidently the women who lived here not only loved flowers, but had ample time to tend them. As I approached the house, I saw that the blinds were drawn, and there seemed no sign of life about the place, but the door was opened almost instantly in answer to my knock.

The woman who opened it, I knew at once for the elder Miss Kingdon, and my eyes were caught and my attention held by the bold, virile beauty of her face—a beauty which had, in a way, burnt itself out by its very fierceness. She resembled her sister, and yet there was something higher and finer about her. She gave me the impression of one who had passed through a fiery furnace—and not unscathed! I wondered, as Godfrey had, at the dark splendour of her eyes; I could fancy how they would burn and sparkle once she was roused to anger.

"This is Miss Kingdon?" I asked.

She bowed.

"I'm going to ask a favour, Miss Kingdon," I said, "the favour of a few moments' conversation."

"Are you a reporter?" she demanded, without seeking to soften the harshness of the question, and in an instant I knew that it was she who had threatened me through the door the night before, for the voice was the same and yet not the same. Then it had been edged and broken by a kind of frenzy; now it was almost domineering in its cool insolence. What was it had so shaken her? Fear at my knock at that hour of the night? Yet she seemed anything but a woman easily alarmed.

"No, I'm not a reporter," I answered, smiling as well as I could to hide the tumult of my thoughts. "My name is Lester, and I'm acting for Mr. Curtiss. I hope you'll grant my request."

She looked at me more closely, and her lips curved derisively.

"I've heard of you," she said.

"From your sister, no doubt. I had the pleasure of meeting her yesterday afternoon."

I could not wholly keep the irony out of my tone.

"I guess you didn't find out much from her," she retorted.

"Not half as much as she knew. I hope you'll be more frank with me."

She hesitated a moment longer, then stood aside.

"Very well; come in," she said, and as I entered, she pointed the way into a room at the right.

It was a large, pleasant room, well furnished and in excellent taste. On my first glance around, my eyes were caught and held by a portrait which occupied the place of honour on the wall opposite the front windows. It was a woman's head, life-size, evidently done from life, crude enough in execution, but of a woman so brilliantly beautiful that her face seemed to glow through the canvas, to rise superior to the lack of skill with which the artist had depicted her. There was something familiar about it, too—at least, I fancied so—and then I shook the thought away impatiently.

"Well?" asked a voice, and I turned to see that Miss Kingdon was waiting for me to speak. "Sit down," she added abruptly, and herself sat down opposite me, and gazed at me with fierce eyes that never wavered.

"Mr. Curtiss is naturally anxious," I began, "to find Miss Lawrence and to hear from her own lips the reason for her flight. He even thinks he has a certain right to know that reason. I'm trying to find where Miss Lawrence is."

"And why do you come here?" she asked with compressed lips.

"Because," I answered boldly, "I believe that Miss Lawrence came here when she left her home. She went first into the library, where she sat for a while until she decided what to do; then she opened the library window, descended from the balcony, and ran here along the path which leads through the trees to that gate out yonder. You received her and refused to allow any one to see her."

"I refused to allow the reporters to see her!" she cried. "Surely, you would have done as much!"

"Yes," I said, repressing as well as I could the sudden burst of triumph which

glowed within me. "Yes—perhaps I should. But you'll not refuse me?"

She smiled grimly.

"That was cleverly done, Mr. Lester," she said. "Fortunately it's no longer a question of my consent or refusal."

"Miss Lawrence isn't here?"

"No; Miss Lawrence left here late last night."

"And went——"

"Ah, that I shall not tell."

I looked at her again and saw that by arguing I should be simply wasting my time. I saw something else, too—this woman also knew the reason for Marcia Lawrence's flight.

But she was looking at me with a sudden white intensity.

"It was you," she said hoarsely, "who knocked at the door in the middle of the night."

"Yes," I admitted, fascinated by her burning gaze, "it was I."

"Why did you do that?"

"I don't exactly know," I answered lamely, not daring to tell the truth. "I was passing the house and saw a light——"

"Where?" she demanded, her face contracting in a quick spasm.

"In the window yonder," and I heard her deep breath of relief. "I thought perhaps it was Miss Lawrence."

"It was I," she said, and I saw she was visibly forcing herself to go on. "I had been putting away some fruit in the cellar. Your knock at that hour startled me."

"Quite naturally," I assented. "I wonder at myself now for knocking."

"How did you happen to be passing the house at that time?" she asked suddenly.

"I'd been awakened by a bad dream and found I couldn't go to sleep again, so decided to walk a little. I walked in this direction, I suppose, because I was

thinking about Miss Lawrence."

She was looking at me keenly, but saw that I spoke the truth and again gave a quick sigh of relief.

"Miss Lawrence was not here then?" I questioned, deciding to become the inquisitor in my turn.

"Oh, no; she had left several hours earlier. I was alone in the house—which rendered your knock all the more disquieting. My sister remained with Mrs. Lawrence last night," and she rose to indicate that my audience was at an end.

I rose somewhat reluctantly. I felt that she could tell me so much more, if she would. It was provoking to be so near success, and yet not to succeed.

"I'm sorry," I said, "that you refuse to tell me where Miss Lawrence has gone. I don't believe you're acting wisely—nor is she in running away. She should be brave enough to stay and face Mr. Curtiss. He has a right——"

"There are others who have rights," she cried, her self-control suddenly deserting her. "There are others who have waived their rights, and torn their hearts, and withered in silence——"

She stopped abruptly, and I saw the tremor which swept through her as she controlled herself.

"That is all," she said more calmly, but with working face. "Your parrot-like talk of Mr. Curtiss's rights provoked me," and she moved toward the door.

I paused for a last glance at the portrait, and again I was struck by its likeness to some one I knew.

"That is a most remarkable picture," I said. "The person who painted it seems to have been clumsy enough, and yet there is something vital and bewitching about it."

There was a signature scrawled in one corner, and I bent closer to decipher it.

"It was painted by a cousin of mine," said Miss Kingdon indifferently.

And suddenly the scrawl became intelligible.

"'Ruth Endicott,'" I read, with a quick glow of interest.

"What do you know of her?" she demanded, looking at me sharply.

"Nothing," I answered, as indifferently as I could. "Only, I should be interested to know how she developed. She seems to have had great talent."

"That was the last picture she ever painted," said Miss Kingdon shortly; then her eyes flamed suddenly and her face darkened, as she stepped close to the portrait and stared at it. "She was beautiful—beautiful!" she murmured hoarsely, and I knew that Ruth Endicott's last painting had been a portrait of herself.

And yet it was scarcely a portrait, either, for the features were barely indicated. But, gazing at it, one saw a woman there—a woman real and vital—and knew instinctively that she was beautiful. It was what I suppose would be called an impressionistic picture, but it differed from most impressionistic pictures in showing imagination in the artist instead of demanding it from the observer.

But why should that pictured face seem so familiar? Not in lineament, but in poise and expression it recalled some one vividly. There was no doubting the resemblance, but grope in my memory as I might, I could not place it.

"When you are quite ready," said Miss Kingdon, in a voice quivering with impatience, "I shall be glad to show you out."

I turned to find her glaring at me almost like a beast at bay. With an imperious gesture, which checked on my lips any questions I would have asked, she led the way out into the hall.

"You are at liberty to search the house," she said coldly, intercepting the glance I shot about me, "if you doubt my statement that Miss Lawrence is no longer here."

The thought flashed through my mind that I would welcome a chance to take a look into the cellar, and inspect the fruit which it had taken hours to arrange, but I did not dare suggest it.

"No," I protested; "I believe you," and in another moment I was in the street.

Godfrey was awaiting me.

"Well?" he asked.

"Not there," I said.

"But she was there?"

"Yes; it was there she took refuge—you were right about that; but she left late last night. I don't know how or where. Miss Kingdon refused to tell me."

He pondered this an instant with half-closed eyes.

"I don't think she can slip through our fingers," he said, at last. "Every one about here knows her."

"If she took the train," I suggested, "the agent may remember."

"Yes," he agreed. "And by the way," he added suddenly, "it *was* a letter which caused all this trouble."

"A letter?"

"Yes; a special-delivery letter. It was delivered at 11.15 o'clock yesterday morning. The boy mounted the steps and was going to ring the bell, when Miss Lawrence herself, who was just starting up the stairs, saw him and came to the door, which was open, and took the letter. It was addressed to her and she signed for it."

"Where was it from?" I asked.

"It was from New York, and across the front, in a bold hand, was written, 'Important—read at once.'"

CHAPTER XII

Word from the Fugitive

I glanced at my watch; it wanted still half an hour of eleven o'clock.

"Let's walk on together," I said; "this needs talking over. A special-delivery letter from New York, then, causes Marcia Lawrence, a well-poised, self-possessed, happy woman, to flee from the man she loves, to wreck her life, throw away her future——" I stopped in despair. Really, I felt for the moment like tearing my hair.

"It seems incredible, doesn't it?" asked Godfrey, smiling at my bewildered countenance.

"Incredible? Why, it's more than that—it's—it's—I don't know any word strong enough to describe it. Godfrey, what is this secret?"

"I know what it isn't."

"Well, what isn't it, then?"

"It isn't about Curtiss. We've looked into his life—I just got a report from Delaney—and he's as straight as a string."

"And the women?"

"With the women it isn't so easy. You see, they were in Europe for six or seven years, and it's hard to follow them. However, we're on their track, and I have hopes."

"Hopes?"

"Of proving my theory the right one. Depend upon it, Lester, there's either a lover or a husband in the background somewhere."

But again I remembered the photograph.

"A lover, perhaps," I admitted, "but not a husband, Godfrey. There's no stain like that on her—there's no stain at all. She's spotless—I'll stake my soul upon it!"

He was gazing at me curiously.

"You seem mighty certain about it," he commented.

For an instant, I had an impulse to show him the photograph. But I stifled it.

"I *am* certain," I answered lamely. "Certain your theory's all wrong."

"Well, I'm going to stick to it till I find a better one."

"Are you going to make it public?"

"No, not till we've something more to back it. We've wired our European correspondents to look up the record of the women while they were abroad. We'll wait till we get reports from them, which will be to-morrow or the day after. Let's see if we can find out which way Miss Lawrence went last night."

We had reached the hotel, and, as he spoke, Godfrey turned into it.

"The ticket agent boards here," he said, "and I took care to make friends with him. I thought perhaps he might be able to help me. Ah, there he is now. Wait a moment."

He hurried forward and intercepted a well-dressed man who was just leaving the office. I saw them stop for a moment's low-toned conversation; then Godfrey turned back towards me.

"No," he said, "no luck. Miss Lawrence bought no ticket at the station here last night, nor did either of the Kingdons. The agent was on duty from six o'clock till midnight. But he suggests a very simple way in which she could have escaped notice, had she wished. She had merely to enter the train without buying a ticket, and pay her fare direct to the conductor. I'm inclined to think that's what she did —providing, of course, that she left town at all."

"I think she's left," I said; "and that's no doubt the way she did it."

"Now, I'll have to say good-bye," he added. "I don't think I shall stay here much longer—the case isn't worth it. When do you go back?"

"I don't know, yet," I answered. "I've got to have something to take to Curtiss. I can't go back empty-handed."

"I'll let you know if I hear anything," he said. "Our correspondent here will be on the lookout for developments. My sympathies are all with Curtiss. I want to help

you."

"Thank you," I said. "Good-bye."

I watched him for a moment, as he hurried down the street; then I turned back towards the Lawrence house. Yes, Godfrey evidently wished to help me; and yet, while he had given me a lot of what he called "interesting information," and had treated me to a no-less-interesting theory, he had only made the mystery more impenetrable than ever.

"Beg pardon, sir," said a voice, and somebody ran into me.

I glanced up to see that it was a pert-looking boy, wearing a cap with "W. U." on the front. We were just at the Lawrence gate.

"All right," I said. "No harm done," and entered.

Not till I was half-way up the walk, did it occur to me that the boy had probably come out of the gate—that he had brought a message—from whom? for whom?

I rang the bell, and a girl admitted me; but it was not Lucy Kingdon, whom I had hoped to see. She showed me into the library, and took my card. She must have met her mistress in the hall, for it was only a moment before the rustle of approaching skirts announced her. As she entered, I noticed with a quick leap of the heart that she held crushed in her hand a sheet of yellow paper.

"Good-morning, Mr. Lester," she said, quite composedly, and it was evident that she had entirely conquered the agitation which had racked her the evening before. "Sit down, please," and she herself sank into a chair. "I've been thinking over what you said to me yesterday afternoon," she continued, "and I believe that you were right. Mr. Curtiss unquestionably has the right to know what it is that takes his promised wife away from him, and to decide if he shall permit it to take her away forever."

"Then it's not *impossible* that she should be his wife?" I questioned quickly. "Your daughter was mistaken?"

"She perhaps thought it impossible at first; but I don't see it so. She has been moved, I should say, by a sense of faithfulness to the dead. I don't think—I can't think—that he will take it so seriously as she does. He will look at it from a man's point of view; he won't shrink from it as she did; besides, he'll see that it is no fault in her, that she's just as she always was, sweet, pure, and lovable. She

herself will take it less seriously when she has time to think it over."

"Yes," I agreed, striving to conceal from her the fact that I did not in the least understand. "No doubt of that. The first shock when she read the letter——"

"The letter?" she broke in. "Which letter?"

"But I thought you knew!"

"I knew nothing of any letter," she said, her face suddenly white.

"Yesterday morning," I said, "just as Miss Lawrence was going upstairs after looking at the decorations, a boy came to the door with a special-delivery letter from New York. It was addressed to her—marked 'Important, read at once.' She took it and came into this room, and it was here she learned this secret——"

But Mrs. Lawrence was no longer listening. She was sitting there, staring straight before her, her face livid.

"A letter!" she repeated hoarsely. "A letter! I don't understand. I thought she had been told—I thought that woman had told her—I was sure of it. Yes—that must have been it—I cannot be mistaken—the letter had nothing to do with it. It was that woman. She had waited all these years, and then——"

There was a step at the door, and Lucy Kingdon's dark face appeared. She was going past, but at the sight of us, she hesitated, and then stopped on the threshold.

"Did you call, ma'am?" she asked, shooting me at the same time a glance so venomous that I recoiled a little.

"No!" said Mrs. Lawrence, and it seemed to me that there was abhorrence in the look she turned upon the other woman. "Yet stay," she added quickly. "Go to your sister. Tell her I wish to see her—here—at once."

I saw the girl's start of surprise; she half-opened her lips to speak, then glanced at me again and closed them.

"Very well, ma'am," she said, and left the room.

Mrs. Lawrence turned to me, still breathing quickly under the stress of the emotion which shook her.

"You must leave me to solve this mystery, Mr. Lester," she said rapidly, "by

myself and in my own way. I must find who it is that has dared to meddle in my family affairs. I was prepared to forgive—but there are some things which can never be forgiven—however deeply one may pity——"

She checked herself; perhaps she saw the intentness of my interest.

"But that is no concern of yours," she went on more calmly, and I could not but admit the justice of the rebuke. "You're seeking Marcia. In that I would help you, if I could, but I don't know where she is. As soon as I do know, I will summon Mr. Curtiss; I promise you that. Perhaps you will find her without my help. If you do, tell Mr. Curtiss to go to her and demand an explanation; it is due him, and she has my full permission to tell him everything. Then let him decide whether she shall be his wife. We will both bow to his decision."

"But you've heard from her?" I persisted.

"Only this," she answered, and thrust a crumpled piece of paper into my hand, then turned and left the room.

I smoothed it out and read the message at a glance, noting that it was dated from New York:—

"I am safe. Do not worry. Will write.

"Marcia."

CHAPTER XIII

Pursuit

My work at Elizabeth was done. Whatever mystery this house contained, whatever the secrets of the Kingdons and the Lawrences, my business was not with them. I had only to return to New York and place this message in Burr Curtiss's hands. I would counsel him to wait until Marcia Lawrence chose to reveal herself—I was sure it would not be long. A few days' respite would be wise for both of them; they would be calmer, more self-controlled, better able to meet bravely and sensibly what must be the one crisis of their lives. But a great load was lifted from me. Mrs. Lawrence had assured me that the marriage was not impossible; loving each other as they did, I knew that nothing short of the impossible could stand between them. So they would win through, at last.

Cheered by this thought, I left the house and made my way to the hotel.

"When's the next train to New York?" I asked.

"There's one on the Pennsylvania, sir, in ten minutes," said the clerk. "'Bus just leaving."

I ran out and got aboard, and a moment later we were bumping over the uneven pavement. I took a final look up the shady street; it was the last time I should see it. What was going on, I wondered, in that big house among the trees? Had Miss Kingdon answered the imperative summons sent her? Had there already been an explanation, a revelation of the mystery? Had she confessed that it was indeed she who revealed the secret? Was Mrs. Lawrence right in thinking the letter from New York had no connection with it?

The 'bus stopped abruptly, and I clambered down to the platform and got my ticket. It was still some minutes till train time, and while I waited, a train on the Jersey Central tracks stood puffing a moment, and then started on for Philadelphia. The little station was built in the triangle where the two lines crossed; trains were passing almost every minute, and I reflected how easy it would be for a person not familiar with the place to get confused and to take the wrong train.

There came a growing rumble, a shrieking of brakes. A moment more and we were off.

I glanced at my watch. It was nearly twelve o'clock. I should be at the office in, say, forty-five minutes. I would wire Curtiss at once, and the rest would be in his hands. My connection with the case would end. And yet, it was not without a certain regret that I would relinquish it—for I had not solved the mystery; that was, if anything, more impenetrable than when I had first approached it. Godfrey's specious theory—which I had myself at first believed—I put aside, for, even from the broken sentences which had fallen from Mrs. Lawrence's lips, I could see that it was not the right one. If Marcia Lawrence had fled in order to protect the memory of the dead, there could be no question of a living husband. But though I rejected that explanation, it was evident that, with the data at hand, I could form no adequate one to replace it.

I went over in my mind every phase of the affair from first to last; I endeavoured to sift out the significant incidents, and to reject the immaterial; I tried to weld them into a compact mass, but they would not be welded. There was nothing to connect them, no common thread upon which they could be strung; all that I had in my possession was a bundle of facts which seemed to be flatly self-contradictory.

I remembered Mrs. Lawrence's astonishment when I had mentioned the existence of the letter. What had she said? "I thought it was that woman!" Which woman? Evidently the elder Kingdon, since she had at once sent for her. That had been my suspicion—that it was she or her sister who had betrayed the secret. Yet the letter would seem to prove that it was some one else. And it struck me as significant that at no time had Mrs. Lawrence appeared to suspect the maid.

Was there really any connection, I wondered, between that old tragedy in Mrs. Lawrence's life and this in the life of her daughter? I reviewed again the story Dr. Schuyler had told me. How the lives of the Endicotts and the Kingdons and the Lawrences had intertwined! I got out my notebook and sketched a rough table showing their relationship, which looked somewhat as here shown.

As I gazed down at this, two names seemed to stand out more vividly than all the rest. I closed my eyes and called before me the faces of two beautiful women. I had never seen either of them in the life—of one, I had only a photograph; of the other I had seen only a crude portrait in the parlour of the Kingdon cottage—but they had somehow assumed for me personalities distinct and vivid. Marcia Lawrence and Ruth Endicott—the tragedy of fate linked them together. Beautiful, young, accomplished, reared amid gentle surroundings, both had tasted the bitterness of life. From the very house whence Marcia Lawrence fled, Ruth Endicott had started on her hopeless search for health.

The train slowed up for Jersey City, and in a moment was rolling under the great shed. Twenty minutes later, I opened our office door. Mr. Royce had gone out for lunch—which reminded me that I had missed mine again—but he came in almost immediately.

"Well?" he cried, as he crossed the threshold, and came forward with expectant face.

"You'd better wire Curtiss to come back," I said.

"You've news for him?"

I nodded.

"I knew you'd have!" he said exultantly, and drew a pad of telegraph forms toward him and wrote a rapid message. "Curtiss is staying at a little place on Jamaica Bay. He was afraid to go any farther away, I suppose. He ought to be here in an hour," he added, and called a boy and gave him the message.

Then he swung around to me again.

"Now let's have the story," he prompted. "I know there's a story."

"Yes," I said; "there's a story. I was just——"

The door burst open with a crash, and in came Burr Curtiss himself.

"I couldn't stay away any longer!" he cried. "I was eating my heart out. Have you any news?"

"Sit down, Curtiss, and pull yourself together," interposed our junior, catching him by the arm. "This won't do. I just wired you to come on. You must have met the boy."

"I believe I did knock over a youngster just outside the door."

"Well, there's no damage done, I guess. Since you're here, Lester can go right ahead with the story."

"But one thing first," interrupted our client. "Did you find out where she went, Mr. Lester?"

"No," I answered. "But I have a message from her."

"Thank God!" he murmured, and sank back in his chair. I guessed what his fear had been—that Marcia Lawrence was no longer among the living.

Looking at him closely, I was shocked at the change a single day had wrought in him. His eyes were bloodshot from want of sleep, his face pale and drawn, his hair and beard unkempt. In a word, he had ceased to be the handsome, well-groomed man the world knew as Burr Curtiss.

I related my doings briefly, including only the essential points. Then I placed the message in his hands. He read it, his face quivering.

"But this tells us nothing," he said hoarsely, looking up at me with piteous eyes.

"Except that she was in New York this morning—and wants to fight her battle out by herself."

Curtiss was on his feet, his face livid.

"But she sha'n't fight it out by herself!" he cried. "Do you think I'm such a coward as that—to stand back, not offering to help?"

"Perhaps you can't help," I interposed.

"Don't talk nonsense!" he retorted. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Lester, but I'm overwrought—I can't choose my words. But it *is* nonsense. I love her—of course I can help. Don't you see, it's not herself she's thinking of—she's trying to spare *me*."

I nodded. Perhaps it was for his sake that Marcia Lawrence had taken that wild step. That would be like a woman.

"You may be right," I said. "I'd never thought of that solution, but Mrs. Lawrence's last words to me would seem to point that way. She said that the matter would rest in your hands—that it would be for you to choose, after you'd

heard the story."

"I don't want to hear the story!" Curtiss cried. "Good God! What do I care for the story! I've made my choice, once and forever! I want her! Of course it was to spare me she ran away! She'd never think of herself!"

I might have retorted that it had been a rather questionable form of mercy; that she could scarcely have inflicted on him any suffering more acute than that which he had undergone. But I forbore; instead, I took the telegram again and studied it.

"If you really wish to find her," I said, "perhaps this will give us a clue."

"I do wish to find her."

"This form will tell us which station this message was sent from, I think. Wait here a minute," and I crossed the hall to the brokerage offices of Sims & Wesson. "May I speak to your operator?" I asked of the junior partner.

"Certainly," he said, and waved me to the little room where the instruments were clicking merrily away.

"Can you tell me what these characters mean?" I asked, placing the message before the operator and pointing to the row of figures and letters at the top of it —"61CWDDSA8PD."

"The sixty-one," he said, "means that this was the sixty-first message received at Elizabeth this morning; 'CW' means that the message was filed at the Christopher Street office—corner Christopher and West; 'DD' and 'SA' are the initials of the operators who sent and received the message; '8PD' means that there are eight words in the message and that it was prepaid. It's the regular form used on all Western Union messages."

"Thank you," I said, and hurried back across the hall elated, for I had learned more than I had dared to hope.

"Well?" asked Curtiss, looking up with anxious face.

"The message was filed at the Christopher Street office," I said, "Christopher and West streets——"

"West Street?" echoed Mr. Royce. "What on earth was she doing there?"

"She could have been doing only one thing," I pointed out exultantly. "When a woman goes down to the docks, it must be——"

"To take a boat!"

"Just so! And when she goes to that particular portion of the docks, it must be to take a trans-Atlantic liner."

Curtiss stared at me for a moment as though not understanding; then he rose heavily to his feet.

"Well, I can follow her even there," he said, and started for the door.

But Mr. Royce had him by the arm.

"My dear Curtiss!" he protested. "Think what a wild-goose chase you're starting on!"

"Better than sitting idle here," retorted Curtiss doggedly; and I could not but agree with him.

"Perhaps we can narrow the search down a little," I said. "Suppose we drive around to the West Street office."

"Just what I was about to do," said Curtiss, and led the way to the elevator.

During that drive across town, we found little to say. Curtiss was deep in his own thoughts, and I saw from the way Mr. Royce looked at him, how anxious he was concerning him. But at last we reached our destination.

"Can you give me any description of the person who sent this message?" I asked, and spread out the telegram before the man at the desk. "Perhaps you'll let us see the original."

He glanced at the message and then at us.

"No question of a mistake, I hope?" he said. "The message reads straight enough."

"No," I answered; "rather a question of preventing a mistake. I hope you won't refuse us."

He glanced us over again and seemed to understand.

"It's a little irregular," he said; "but I guess I can do it."

He opened a drawer, and ran through a sheaf of papers.

"Here it is," he said, and laid a sheet before us. "You see the message was correctly sent."

"Yes," I agreed; but it was not at the message I was looking; it was at the sheet upon which it was written—a sheet which had embossed at the top the words "S. S. *Umbria*."

"Who sent the message?" I asked.

"It was brought in by a messenger from the Cunard line pier."

"What time did the *Umbria* sail?"

"She was to have sailed at twelve o'clock, but was delayed by a little accident of some sort. Perhaps she's still at her pier."

I thanked fortune that I had told our cabman to wait; I think Curtiss would have been crazed by any delay. As it was, we rushed from the office and crowded in.

"The Cunard pier!" cried Mr. Royce, "and in a hurry!" and he waved a bill under the cabman's nose.

Not until we were under way did Curtiss speak.

"Did you see?" he asked, in a voice which shook convulsively. "The message was in Marcia's writing."

"Yes," I said. "I recognised it."

"We must catch the boat. Why don't that fellow whip up?"

"He's going as fast as he can," said Mr. Royce. "Sit still, Curtiss," and he threw an arm about him.

What a ride that was over the cobble-stones! Half a dozen times I thought a collision inevitable, but we had fallen into skilful hands, and were safely piloted through openings in the crowd of vehicles where it seemed a hand-barrow could not hope to go.

"Here we are!" cried cabby, and we tumbled out. He had done his best to earn his

tip, and got it.

The pier was crowded, but we forced our way along it with scant regard for the feelings of other people. Had the ship sailed—were we in time——

"She's gone," said Mr. Royce, as we gained the front of the crowd. "See there."

There she was, headed squarely down the stream, just gathering speed. There was a flutter of hand-kerchiefs from her deck, we could see the people crowding against the rail in their eagerness to wave a last good-bye——

Curtiss, who had been staring at her stupidly, suddenly flushed and pulled himself erect.

"There she is!" he cried. "See—standing alone by that forward boat."

I stared with all my eyes. There was indeed a figure there—a woman clad in black—but the face was the merest blur.

"You think so?" I asked incredulously.

"I know so!" and he swung sharp round, his face alight with eagerness. "Come—there must be some way to catch her—a tug——"

He accosted the first blue-coated official he could find, but that worthy shook his head. No tug could catch the *Umbria* now; besides, there was none at hand to make the trial. By the time one could be secured, the ship would be far down the bay, settling into her speed. What was the trouble—a lady on board?

"Well, the best you can do is to meet her at Liverpool when she lands," he said.

"Meet her?" echoed Curtiss. "But how?"

"Take the *Oceanic*. She'll sail in half an hour from Pier 48, just below here. She'll reach Liverpool ahead of the *Umbria*—perhaps a day ahead."

I saw Curtiss's lips tighten with sudden resolution.

"Thank you," he said. "I'll do it."

There was nothing to be said. He was past arguing with, even had we felt like arguing—which I, for one, did not.

"I'll cable," he promised, as we stood in the shadow of the big liner, "and let you

know if I find her."

"Have you money enough?" asked Mr. Royce. "Don't hesitate to say so, if you haven't."

Curtiss laughed bitterly.

"Oh, I've enough!" he said. "Quite a roll, in fact. I'd expected to spend it on a honeymoon!"

"You'll have the honeymoon yet," said Mr. Royce, with a certainty I thought a little forced. "What will you do for clothes?"

"I can make out some way till I get to the other side—the steward can help me."

Mr. Royce was again looking at him anxiously.

"I don't like it," he said, "your running off this way. You'll kill yourself."

"Oh, I'll be all right," Curtiss assured him. "A sea-voyage is just what would have been prescribed for me," and he attempted a smile.

"But you've got the worst stateroom on board," and indeed the *Oceanic* had been so crowded that he was fortunate to get that.

"No matter," said Curtiss. "I'd have gone if there'd been no place but the steerage."

"There's one thing," I said. "Have you an enemy in New York who might try to do you an injury? That would explain the letter, you know."

Curtiss thought for a moment with knitted brows. Then he shook his head.

"No," he said decidedly, "I have no enemy—certainly none who'd descend to stabbing me in the back. Besides, what could even the most unscrupulous enemy have written? How could he have hurt me? I can't understand it," he added wearily.

"Neither can I," I agreed. "It's beyond reasoning about."

"An enemy might have written a lie," suggested Mr. Royce.

"But Marcia wouldn't have believed it," retorted Curtiss. "I know her—she would have cast it from her. She trusted me. No; whatever the secret, it was one

whose truth she could not doubt."

And I agreed with him.

We shook hands with him, at last; and when the great White Star ship swung out into the stream, he waved us a final good-bye from the deck.

"So he's gone," I said, as we rolled back down town again.

"Yes—and the question is whether he was wise to go—whether it can do any good."

"I think he's wise," I said. "It's a real passion—as you yourself pointed out to me."

"A real passion—yes," agreed our junior. "And yet—do you know, Lester, at the bottom of it all, I suspect some hideous, unbelievable thing. It turns me cold sometimes—trying to imagine what the secret is. It's a sort of dim, vague, threatening monster."

"Yes; I've felt that way about it. I can't grasp it, and yet I feel that it's there, just below the surface of things, ready to jump out and rend us. Well, Curtiss will find out."

"I hope so, if only for his sake. He'll go mad if he doesn't—and so will we, if we talk about it any more. I want you to look over those papers in the Consolidated suit. It comes up this afternoon, you know—and, by Jove! we'll have to hurry, or we'll be late for the hearing."

CHAPTER XIV

Recalled to the Front

Never were slippers and easy-chair more welcome to me than they were that night. I was thoroughly weary in mind as well as body, and as I dropped into the chair and donned the slippers, I determined to go early to bed, and to forget all about the Lawrence enigma. I was heartily glad that I was rid of it; it had proved so baffling, so discouraging that I rejoiced at the chance which had taken it out of my hands. Burr Curtiss must puzzle it out for himself.

I fancied I could see him, pacing up and down the deck of the *Oceanic*, staring ahead into the starlit night, bracing himself for that meeting which would mean so much to him. I wondered what Marcia Lawrence's thoughts were. Did she regret that she had fled? Did she already see the fatal error of that step? Ah, if her lover were only beside her, there on the deck, as he might have been but for that cruel irony of fate which had swept her from him! She could not know that he was pursuing her—that he would be the first to meet her as she stepped ashore at Liverpool. How would she bear the shock of that meeting?

I had bought a copy of the last edition of the *Record* as I came up from dinner, and I shook it out and glanced over it. Apparently Godfrey had discovered nothing new in the affair at Elizabeth, for the paper made absolutely no reference to it, so far as I could discover. No doubt he had returned to New York immediately after bidding me good-bye; by this time he was probably deep in the untangling of some other mystery for the benefit of the *Record's* readers. Sensations of to-day eclipsed those of yesterday, and I realised how quickly Burr Curtiss and his affairs would drop from the public mind.

But as I laid the paper aside, and filled my pipe for a final smoke before turning in, I told myself that I could scarcely hope that they would drop so easily from my mind, however much I might wish it; besides, I had left it unsolved and seemingly unsolvable, and a mystery of that sort is not easily forgotten. It is like an unfinished book, an unsettled case—it lives to oppress the mind and pique the imagination.

I knocked out my pipe impatiently. The place for me was in bed. I was becoming

obsessed by this affair. If I did not shake it off, it would end by getting such a grip of me that I could not sleep at all, or I would fall asleep only to be startled awake again as I had been the night before. That was truly a terrifying prospect!

I started for my bedroom, when a tap at my door stopped me. I opened it to find Mrs. Fitch, my landlady, on the threshold.

"A telegram for you, Mr. Lester," she said, and held it out to me. "I told the boy to wait."

"Thank you," I said, and tore open the envelope. "There'll be no answer," I added, a moment later, and shut the door somewhat hastily I fear, but Mrs. Fitch's eyes are sharp ones, and I did not wish her to see my face just then.

I dropped into my chair and read the message again:—

> "I advise you to return to Elizabeth at once. New developments in which you will be interested.
>
> "GODFREY."

"New developments!" Ah, Godfrey knew me well! For already my fatigue was forgotten in the ardour of the chase, and a moment later I found myself changing from slippers to shoes as fast as my fingers could handle the laces.

Mrs. Fitch met me on the stair.

"Not going out again, Mr. Lester!" she protested. "Why, you'll kill yourself."

"I can't help it, Mrs. Fitch," I said. "I've got to go."

"Not bad news, I hope?"

"No."

"And you'll be back soon?"

"Not to-night, I'm afraid."

"Oh, nonsense, Mr. Lester——"

But I left her protesting on the step, and hurried down the street. Mrs. Fitch meant well, but she was sometimes a little in the way.

I took the elevated to Cortlandt Street, and hurried down to the ferry, expecting every instant to hear the gong which announced the departure of the boat. But I found that I had ten minutes to wait before there was a train, and I spent them walking feverishly up and down the narrow waiting-room, where the road's patrons are herded like cattle behind the slatted gates.

At last the gates opened; there was the usual rush to the boat; the slow crossing of the wide river, with the cool salt breeze coming in from the ocean; the stampede to the coaches through the great Jersey City station; and finally I found myself in a seat, with the train rumbling out from under the long shed.

I stared out into the night, wondering what the new developments could be. They must have been unusual and unexpected ones, to stir Godfrey to sending me that telegram! But what *could* they be? For the present, the case was closed. Curtiss and Miss Lawrence were both in mid-ocean, and any further developments must await their meeting. Besides, it was only a few hours since I myself had left Elizabeth, and there had seemed no prospect then of anything further happening there. Godfrey had announced his own intention of leaving the place at once—he had said that the case wasn't worth wasting any more time over. What, then, had detained him?

Was it possible, I asked myself, that Marcia Lawrence had not sailed on the *Umbria*, that the message had been merely a blind, that she had foreseen that we would trace it to the West Street office, that she had written it on a sheet of the steamer's paper for the purpose of deceiving us? Yes, that was clearly possible. She may have returned home, and Godfrey, discovering the return, had summoned me to be present at her unmasking! I had really only half-believed that it was she whom Curtiss had descried upon the *Umbria's* forward deck. But if she had, indeed, done all this, she must be far more deeply versed in deception than I had supposed. I should hardly have given her credit for laying a plan so adroit as that; but one can never judge a woman's capabilities.

Suddenly conscious again of my fatigue, I laid my head back against the seat, and dozed away until the sharp call of the brakeman aroused me. Not until I had left the train did I remember that Godfrey had appointed no rendezvous. He might, perhaps, be awaiting me at the hotel, or, at least, he had certainly left a message there for me, and I started up the street.

But an inquiry of the clerk developed the fact that, while Godfrey was still stopping there, he had gone out immediately after dinner, and had left no

message of any kind. For a moment I was fairly taken aback, so confident had I been; but perhaps Godfrey had deemed a message superfluous after the hint given in the telegram—I knew how he detested the obvious. He had no doubt thought that hint sufficient—and it was.

Eleven o'clock was striking as I gained the street again, and turned my steps toward the Lawrence place. If there were indeed any new developments, it must be either there or at the cottage that they had come to light. That was self-evident; that could be the only rendezvous; it was there Godfrey was awaiting me. So I walked on rapidly, and in a very few minutes reached my destination.

The house was dark and gloomy, as it had been the night before. I entered the grounds and made a careful circuit of the place, but not a glimmer of light could I detect at any of the windows. There was nothing to indicate that any one was stirring, nor did I come upon any trace of Godfrey, though I half expected to collide with him at any moment. Plainly there was nothing to be discovered here, and at last I turned my steps toward the path which led to the cottage.

Then suddenly I stopped, for it seemed to me that I had caught sight of a dim figure flitting among the trees. I was facing the street, and the glow from the arc lights there made a grey background against which I fancied I saw a shadow moving. I strained my eyes—yes—there it was again, approaching the house along the path.

I am no more superstitious than most men, yet, for an instant, the notion seized me like an electric shock, that this was no earthly visitant. But I shook myself together, and leaned forward watching it from behind a sheltering tree. It went directly to the balcony steps, and mounted them with a swiftness which showed how familiar it was with the place. Had I been right in my conjecture, then? Had Marcia Lawrence really come home again?

The question flashed through my brain like lightning. I had already delayed too much; it was time that I did something!

In an instant I had gained the path and mounted the steps. One of the windows was open. I passed through it into the library.

There was a sharp click and, in the sudden flare of light, I found myself looking down the barrel of a revolver, behind which glared the sinister face of Lucy Kingdon.

CHAPTER XV

A Battle of Wits

I saw the swift spasm of hatred which crossed her face, as she recognised me; I even fancied that her finger tightened convulsively upon the trigger, and I braced myself for the shock. But she did not fire. Instead, she lowered her pistol with a grim little laugh.

"So it's you!" she said, and stood looking at me, her lips curving maliciously.

"Yes," I answered. "Who did you think it was?"

"Oh, I don't know. A burglar, perhaps."

"You seem to have been prepared for him."

"I always carry this pistol when I go back and forth through the grounds at night."

"And know how to use it, I dare say."

"I think I'd be able to defend myself."

"I'm sure of it. Do you often go back and forth at night?"

"It's sometimes late when I get through here."

"But this time," I pointed out, "you weren't leaving the house—you were returning to it."

"Is that any of your business?" she asked, her eyes beginning to gleam.

"Perhaps not," I admitted.

"And yet you're capable of making a mystery out of it!" she sneered. "Let me relieve your mind—I'm staying with Mrs. Lawrence. She sleeps badly, and wishes me near her."

"And your exits and entrances are, I suppose, usually by the window?"

"It's the most convenient way."

"Mrs. Lawrence doesn't object, then, to your leaving it open?"

"I don't leave it open."

"You did just now."

She looked at me a moment without replying, then laughed a short, little laugh of mingled amusement and vexation.

"I'll leave you to puzzle that out, I think," she said. "You're so ingenious, you'll surely hit upon the explanation. I scarcely expected to see you here again," she added. "You thought it worth while to return?"

"Yes; there are one or two points which are not quite clear."

"And you expect to make them so?" she asked, with a mocking smile. "How? By lurking around the house like a thief, and following women?"

There was something in her tone, her look, her attitude, which caught my attention—a sort of confident triumph, as of one who plays for a high stake and wins. She was no longer anxious and perturbed, as she had been the day before—nay, that very morning. She thought it safe to flout me openly.

"So you convinced Mrs. Lawrence that you and your sister were not guilty?" I asked. "But of course you'd do that!"

"Guilty of what?" she demanded, flushing darkly.

"Guilty of causing Miss Lawrence's flight," I answered bluntly. "Of wrecking her life."

"Do you believe that?"

"I know it!"

She laughed scornfully.

"You know a great deal, it seems."

"More than you think," I retorted.

She flushed again, and bit her lips to restrain their trembling.

"Though there's one thing I don't know," I went on, determined to strike home, if I could. "I can't imagine why Miss Lawrence should have chosen your house as a place of refuge. She must know that you hate her—that you waited, like a snake in ambush, for the moment when the blow would pierce most deeply; she must see that you are using her to avenge yourself——"

A sharp click interrupted me, and I found myself in darkness. I heard the closing of a door, the turning of a lock. When, after a moment's groping along the wall, I found the electric button and switched on the light again, I saw that the door leading from the library to the hall was closed. I tried it—it was locked.

"Good-night, Mr. Lester," called a low mocking voice from the other side. "Please turn off the light before you go, and close the window after you. Another thing—I'd advise you not to disturb my sister again to-night; it would really not be safe. And I hope you'll let me know when you succeed in clearing up those little points you were speaking of—I'm immensely interested in them."

She laughed again, and I heard her footsteps die away down the hall.

Feeling absurdly foolish, I switched off the light, and left the house. Plainly, Lucy Kingdon had ceased to fear me. She believed that she had won the fight, that her position was impregnable. Either she thought that Marcia Lawrence had escaped, that we had not traced her to the *Umbria*, or she knew that the telegram was a blind, and that we had been misled by it. Which was right, I wondered. And she must have come off well, too, in that interview with Mrs. Lawrence, which I would have given so much to have overheard—must have convinced her of her innocence, else she would not still be employed as a maid in the Lawrence house, and retained so near her mistress. How had she done it? How had she succeeded in blinding her mistress so completely?

Then a sudden thought stabbed through me. Was it possible, I asked myself, that Mrs. Lawrence had been a party to the deception—that she had knowingly assisted in the farce of the telegram, for my benefit? But, as I reviewed her behaviour at our morning interview, I could not believe it. She was no such consummate actress as that would imply. If I was a dupe, then she was a dupe also.

Busy with this problem, I made my way through the grove along the path back to the Kingdon cottage, and stood for a moment looking over the hedge before opening the gate. There was a light in the room which I took to be the dining-room, but even as I gazed at it, the light moved, a shadow crossed the blind; the

light reappeared in the kitchen, faded and disappeared—then, a moment later, my heart leaped suffocatingly as I perceived a glimmer of light at the ventilator in the foundation! What was this woman doing in the cellar? What was the task that was going forward there?

I entered the grounds and started forward along the hedge, when suddenly a hand reached up from the shadow and held me fast. For an instant I struggled fiercely to free myself—but only for an instant.

"Come, Lester, sit down," said a voice carefully repressed, but which I nevertheless recognised as Godfrey's. "I was looking for you," he added, as I dropped to the grass beside him.

"Oh, is it you, Godfrey?" I asked, much relieved. "I rather thought you might be out this way, when I found you weren't at the hotel. What are the developments?"

"Wait a minute. I wonder where that light has gone?"

"It's in the cellar," I said, and pointed out to him the faint glimmer which marked the ventilator. "It was there last night. I sat here for over an hour and watched it," and I told him briefly of my adventures of the night before.

He listened without comment until I had finished.

"It's a pity you didn't tell me that this morning," he said.

"I didn't see that it was connected with the case in any way. Is it?"

"I don't know," he answered slowly. "Perhaps it is. Did Miss Kingdon mention it when she saw you this morning?"

"Yes—she said she'd been in the cellar, putting away some fruit."

"Absurd! There's no fruit this early in the year. Besides, even if it were true, she wouldn't have to repeat the process again to-night. What else haven't you told me?"

I laughed and recounted my adventures from the moment Mrs. Lawrence gave me her daughter's telegram until that other moment when Lucy Kingdon left me alone in the darkened library.

He listened without interruption, his eyes on the glimmer of light at the

ventilator.

"Yes," he said, "I saw Lucy Kingdon leave the house a few minutes ago. Her sister's alone there now. What do you suppose she's doing in the cellar?"

"I can't imagine."

"You could see nothing?"

"Not a thing except her shadow moving back and forth."

"Moving back and forth?"

"Yes; it seemed to me that she was alternately rising and stooping, as though she were going through some sort of exercise."

"She'd hardly go into the cellar at midnight to exercise."

"No, of course not. But that's the only explanation I could think of, unless she's bowing up and down before an idol."

Godfrey laughed grimly.

"That would be a unique solution," he said. "Fancy our headlines: 'Devil Worship at Elizabeth! Fantastic Midnight Orgies in a Cellar!' Wouldn't that stir the public? But I'm afraid it's a little too fantastic. Could you hear anything?"

"Only the faintest of faint sounds. I couldn't make anything of them."

"Well, there wouldn't be any sounds at all if she were merely bobbing up and down before an idol. Was she alone last night?"

"Yes. Her sister spent the night with Mrs. Lawrence. Godfrey," I added, "you haven't told me yet why you sent that telegram. Has Miss Lawrence returned?"

"Not that I know of. Furthermore, I don't think she will return very soon."

"Then you think she really sailed?"

"I think—I don't know what to think, Lester. Give me a moment more. Isn't there a window to the cellar?"

"Yes, but it's closely curtained."

"Well, I'm going to take a look, myself," he said. "Wait here for me, and be as

patient as you can."

I saw him go cautiously forward toward the ventilator, and stoop down before it. He remained there motionless for some moments, then disappeared around a corner of the house. I sat there waiting for him, thinking not without some chagrin, that, as usual, he had pumped me dry, and given nothing in return. It was really unfair of Godfrey to expect every one to play into his hands. And yet, I reflected, if he hadn't wanted to be friendly, he would scarcely have taken the trouble to send me that message.

I looked up to see his tall figure coming toward me through the darkness. He dropped beside me, and sat for a moment silent—only, as I caught a glimpse of his face, I was startled to see how white it was.

"I couldn't see a thing," he said, at last, "except a shadow moving up and down, as you said. And I heard the sounds. The woman is working at something in the cellar—something that requires time—something which must be done secretly. I couldn't make anything out of the shadows, and not much out of the sounds—at least, I fear it's only my imagination which gave them the significance they had for me."

"What significance did they have?" I asked.

"I'm half afraid to tell you, Lester; you'll laugh at me. But as I bent outside that ventilator yonder with my ear against it, I could have sworn that the person inside was engaged in shovelling earth—shovelling it into—a grave!"

A little shudder ran through me at the words; never was laughter farther from my thoughts.

"A grave!" I stammered. "But whose grave?"

"I don't know—Marcia Lawrence's, perhaps."

"Marcia Lawrence sailed on the *Umbria*."

"You don't know she did. You don't even believe she did."

"Whether she did or not, who would kill her, and why?"

"Ah, if you come to the why and wherefore, I can't answer you—not yet."

"Besides," I went on, "the writing on the message left at the West Street office

was her writing."

"Perhaps it was only a good imitation—you can't be absolutely sure that you've ever seen a sample of her writing. There's nothing to prove that she wrote either the note or the message."

"But Curtiss identified them—he was sure the writing was hers."

"Curtiss wasn't in a condition to be sure of anything. But suppose it was hers. She may have wished to blind her mother and Curtiss completely—she may have wished them to think that she had really gone abroad—she must have foreseen that you would trace the telegram. She may have done all that before she came back here——"

"Came back here?" I repeated, suddenly finding a dozen arguments against my own theory of half an hour before. "Walk into the lion's jaws? Nonsense, Godfrey! Place herself in the power of the people who, I suppose you think, killed her!"

"I don't think they killed her," Godfrey said composedly. "My belief is that she killed herself to escape her husband—to get out of the tangle in which she'd involved herself."

"Her husband! You cling to the husband then, do you?"

"More than ever. He's an Italian—a tall, well-built, handsome fellow, with black eyes and a most becoming black moustache. He has a florid complexion and can speak English, though with a strong accent. He smokes cigarettes, which he rolls himself, and he has lost the tip of the little finger of his left hand. He's fond of music; perhaps himself a singer or musician, and it may have been as instructor that he first met Miss Lawrence——"

I had been staring at Godfrey open-mouthed; I could restrain myself no longer.

"But how do you know all this?" I gasped. "Or is it merely a fairy tale?"

"It's not in the least a fairy tale, my dear Lester. I know it because this estimable gentleman was himself in Elizabeth yesterday. The letter which Miss Lawrence received appointed a rendezvous at the Kingdon cottage. It was here she fled to see him—to buy him off, as she had done once before."

CHAPTER XVI

The Secret of the Cellar

It was a moment before I fully understood the meaning of these extraordinary words. When I did understand them, I saw crumbling before me that elaborate structure which I had been at such pains to build—the structure founded upon the assumption of Miss Lawrence's innocence. She was only an adventuress, after all, then; or, more probably, only a weak woman, swayed by an ungovernable passion, risking everything rather than give up the man she loved; deceiving him, lying to him, taking the one desperate chance that lay within her reach; pausing at nothing so she might gain her end.

Or perhaps she had really believed that old mistake of hers buried past resurrection. She may have thought him dead, this fascinating scoundrel who had turned her girlish head. She may have thought herself free. But even then her skirts were not wholly clean. She should have told her lover; she should never have permitted this shadow to lie between them—this skeleton, ready at any moment to burst from its closet. But better far that it should burst out when it did, than wait until the sin was consummated; an hour later, and the shackles had been forged past breaking! If revenge on Marcia Lawrence was the object of the plot, the conspirators had overleaped themselves. They should have waited until the words were uttered which bound her to her second lover—then, had they sprung their trap, how they might have racked her!

One other thing I understood—and marvelled that I had not understood before. I saw what Mrs. Lawrence had meant by saying that the marriage was not impossible—that the obstacle could be cleared away—that it should be for Burr Curtiss to decide. But even he, I felt, would hesitate to take for his wife a woman just emerging from the shadow of the divorce court, however little she had been to blame for the tragedy which drove her there—more especially since he must see that from the very first she had not dealt fairly with him. A fault confessed may be forgiven; a fault discovered is a different thing.

She had not been brave enough to confess; she had not trusted him; she had deceived him. She had been guilty, guilty! Those were the words which sang and sang in my brain and would not be stilled.

Her face was a siren's face—beautiful, innocent, virgin-fresh; and her soul a siren's soul—merciless, selfish, hard. And I had fancied that the soul was like the face! I had not thought that a face like that could lie! Verily, of women I had much to learn!

"It was only by the merest accident I found it out," Godfrey was saying. "It was the policeman who was on duty at the Lawrence place yesterday morning who gave me the first hint. I'd already sounded him, as well as everybody else about the place, as to whether any strangers had been noticed loitering about, and they were all quite positive that no stranger had passed the gate or entered the grounds during the morning. After I left you, yesterday morning, I started back to the hotel to get my things together, and in the hotel office I happened to meet the policeman, whose name, it seems, is Clemley. He was off duty and seemed anxious to talk, so I took him in to the bar, and got him a drink, and pumped him a little on the off-chance of his knowing something he hadn't told me.

"'And you're still sure,' I asked him after a while, 'that no strangers went into the Lawrence house yesterday morning?'

"'Oh, yes, sir,' he answered. 'Perfectly sure. I was on duty there all the time, you know. There were a good many people around, but I knew them all. I've been a policeman here for twenty years, and there's mighty few people I don't know. The only stranger I noticed the whole morning was a fellow who stopped to ask me where Miss Kingdon lived.'

"You can guess, Lester, how my heart jumped when I heard that! Well, he described him about as I described him to you——"

"Even to his being a musician?" I asked.

"Well, no," Godfrey laughed. "That was a long shot of my own. But he told me the fellow was humming a tune all the time he wasn't talking. He came along just about eleven o'clock, and asked where Miss Kingdon lived; asked also what was going on at the Lawrence place, and seemed much interested in what the policeman told him. He rolled a cigarette and lighted it as he talked—rolled it, Clemley says, with one twist of his fingers, so expertly that Clemley marvelled at it. Finally he went on to the gate out yonder, and entered the yard. That was all Clemley saw."

"Did he see him come out again?"

"No—he's certain he didn't come out while he was on duty, which was till three o'clock in the afternoon. Of course, he may have left by some other way. He could have gone out by the alley at the back of the lot, if he'd wished to avoid being seen."

"And you believe Marcia Lawrence met him here?"

"I'm sure of it. There can be only one explanation of that letter—it demanded a price for silence; threatened exposure—at the church itself, perhaps, unless the money was paid. Miss Lawrence flew here with what jewels and money she could lay her hands on at the moment, gave them to him, and he left; or perhaps she only promised to reward him if he'd keep the secret—it's doubtful if she had money enough at hand to buy him off, for his demands wouldn't be modest. At any rate, she got rid of him for the moment. But after he had gone, she reflected that she would always be at his mercy, that she could never be Burr Curtiss's legal wife. Suppose she should return to the house and carry through the farce of a marriage ceremony, she would only be preparing for herself an agony of suffering even more terrible than that which she was then enduring. The time would surely come when she would be unmasked before her lover. She could bear anything but that. She decided to end it—but to end it in such a way that her secret would be safe forever. So she lured him away upon another trail, then returned here and——" He finished with a significant gesture at his throat.

I thought it over; then I shook my head.

"It won't do, Godfrey," I said. "It won't hold together. In the first place, how did this fellow know about the Kingdons? If he met Miss Lawrence here, they must be his accomplices."

"I believe they are."

"Granting that, I don't believe Miss Lawrence killed herself. I certainly don't believe any such fantastic theory as that Miss Kingdon is working away there in the cellar burying the body. Why should she incur such a risk as that?"

"I've asked myself the same question, depend upon it, Lester."

"And found an answer to it?"

"Not yet."

"Miss Lawrence is on board the *Umbria*," I repeated, trying to convince myself.

"Then what is Miss Kingdon doing in the cellar?"

"I don't know, but it's not what you think."

"Well," said Godfrey, rising suddenly, "I'm not going to theorise about it any longer—I'm going to find out."

"To find out?" I echoed, rising too.

"Yes—I'm going to enter the house."

"But you'll be committing a felony."

"Oh, I don't think I'll have to break in. I believe that door yonder is unlocked, Lester. Lucy Kingdon came out of it, and I'm pretty sure it hasn't been locked since."

"That makes no difference," I pointed out. "If you turn the latch, you are, legally, just as guilty as if you picked the lock."

"Well, I'm going to take the risk," and he stooped over and slipped off his shoes. "Suppose you stay here and give the alarm if any one comes."

"That would make me an accessory just as much as going along," I objected.

He laughed.

"Well, come along, then," he said, and started toward the house; then stopped and turned toward me. "Have you got a revolver?"

"No; I thought of buying one last night, but this morning it seemed ridiculous."

"I think it anything but ridiculous," said Godfrey quietly. "But perhaps it's just as well. A revolver is a dangerous thing for any man who isn't used to it to carry in his pocket. Now, move as silently as you can, and no talking—not even a whisper."

I have never quite understood the uncontrollable impulse which urged me forward. It was, I think, a feverish desire to know the truth, to solve this mystery once and for all; but over that, and stronger than that, was the longing to exonerate Miss Lawrence—to prove Godfrey in the wrong. I did not stop then to reason about it; my brain was in a whirl; but I somehow got my shoes off, and caught up with Godfrey just as he cautiously tried the door. It was unlocked; we slipped inside and closed it softly.

I fancy that I felt at that moment much as a thief feels who, having entered a house, pauses to find if he has been detected, and to determine the direction of his prey. But Godfrey seemed quite self-possessed. He drew from his pocket a small electric torch, and sent a slender beam of light quivering about the room. We were in a sort of entry between kitchen and dining-room; the kitchen door stood ajar; we opened it and passed through. Again I caught a faint gleam of light; Godfrey crossed the room softly, entered what I saw afterwards to be a pantry, and opened another door.

In an instant, a broad stream of yellow light poured through. It was the door to the cellar.

Godfrey lay down cautiously upon the floor, and slowly dropped his head through the opening. I was close behind him, and I caught a sound which sent a sudden chill through me—a sound of shovelling. There was no mistaking it—Godfrey had guessed right. I could hear the shovel scrape against the dirt; I could hear the dirt dropped into a hole——

Godfrey rose to his feet, motioned me to follow, and crept softly down the stair. Not until I was half-way down, did I perceive that the noise came not from the main cellar, but from a sort of recess concealed from us by an angle of the wall. I could see a head bobbing up and down, with the regular rhythm of the shovel, a head which I recognised as belonging to the elder Miss Kingdon.

We crept forward and gained the shelter of the other wall, when there came a sudden sound of footsteps overhead. In an instant the light was extinguished, and I heard the woman cross the cellar and go softly up the stairs. Then a door opened and shut heavily, a voice called her name, and the steps went on into the front part of the house.

My face was damp with perspiration, as Godfrey seized my hand and pulled me forward, shooting a ray of light before us, round the wall into the recess where Miss Kingdon had been labouring—only to pause, shudderingly, at the brink of a —grave?

It was impossible to tell. Certainly it was a hole which roughly resembled a grave, though its outlines were jagged and irregular. It was filled with loose earth to within about a foot of the level of the cellar floor. A pile of dirt was banked in one corner, and upon it lay a pick and shovel.

"Here," whispered Godfrey, and thrust the torch into my hands. "Keep your finger on this button. I'm going to find out what's buried here."

My hand was shaking so that I could scarcely hold the torch. I saw him seize the shovel and step down into the hole. Then with a little shake of his head, he laid it carefully down again, and, stooping, began scooping the loose dirt from one end of the hole with his hands. I scarcely breathed as I watched him. What *was* buried here? What dreadful thing was about to be revealed?

"Steady, Lester!" whispered Godfrey, and bent again to his task.

But it was foolish to suppose this a grave! It might have been dug for any of a dozen purposes—perhaps the cellar needed draining—perhaps the pipes were out of order—perhaps—but if it had been dug for an innocent purpose why had Miss Kingdon chosen the middle of the night for the work?

Godfrey stopped with a sudden exclamation, and dropped upon his knees. He laboured for a moment with feverish energy.

"Now, Lester, here!" he said.

I bent down and shot a ray of light into the little hole which he had made. Then, in sheer terror, I nearly dropped the torch, for, half hidden by the clinging earth, lay a shoe—a shoe that was not empty!

CHAPTER XVII

A Tragedy Unforeseen

For an instant I stood so, rigid with horror, scarcely breathing, scarcely daring to believe my eyes. Then Godfrey snatched the torch from my nerveless fingers, and bent down into the grave.

"Good God!" he murmured, after a moment's inspection of what lay there. "I would never have guessed this! This is a thousand times worse than I imagined! Here, Lester, hold the light. I'll uncover the face," and thrusting the torch into my hands, he attacked the loose earth at the other end of the grave.

I, too, moved somehow to the other end, and threw the light down into the shallow hole. Godfrey worked with desperate energy, hurling the dirt right and left. I watched the flying hands in such an agony of horror as I hope never again to experience; stared down into the deepening hole, with the cold sweat starting out across my forehead at the thought of what any instant might reveal.

Again Godfrey dropped to his knees, and I was conscious of a face growing beneath his hands, almost as if he were calling it out of the darkness. Clearer and clearer it grew, as he brushed away the clinging clay; then he stood erect with a little sigh of mingled horror and satisfaction.

Staring up at us was a face—not a woman's face—not Marcia Lawrence's face—but a man's face, florid, heavy-jowled, with a black moustache; dead, yet not calm in death, but contorted by a hideous grimace, as though chuckling with satisfaction.

"Miss Lawrence may, indeed, have sailed on the *Umbria*," murmured Godfrey, after a moment's silent contemplation of the ghastly countenance. "She had every reason to flee—to the earth's end, if possible. For she left her husband here!"

I could find no word of answer; my throat was dry, contracted; I felt that I was suffocating. So this was the secret! No wonder we had not guessed it!

"One can easily build up the story," went on Godfrey, in a voice carefully

lowered. "She came here called by the note, desperate, ready for anything—ready even to kill the devil who'd written it. For he was a devil, Lester—look at his face!"

It was in truth, repellent enough—doubly repellent now with that triumphant leer upon it—cold and hard, with cruel lines about the mouth; a bloated face, too, marked by dissipation and bestiality. I shuddered at the thought that Marcia Lawrence may have once been in his power—that he had tried to drag her down from her sweet girlish innocence——

"He deserved it!" I said hoarsely. "He deserved it—and more!"

"Yes," agreed Godfrey, "no doubt he did. If she was ever in his hands, she must have suffered the torments of hell."

He fell silent a moment, staring down at the face.

"But I don't understand," I burst out, forgetting for a moment to lower my voice; "I can't understand——"

Godfrey laid his hand sternly upon my lips.

"Neither do I," he said; "but don't shout like that."

The words recalled me suddenly to a sense of our danger.

"We'd better get out of this," I whispered.

"Yes—and as soon as we can. We'll have to call in the police. Besides," he added grimly, "I've got to get off the story and it's getting late."

"The story?" I echoed, suddenly sick at heart.

"So far as I know it, Lester. There can be no doubt about this body, I suppose?"

A curious sound behind me, as of a dog panting for breath, sent a sudden chill through me. I raised the torch and sent a beam of light sweeping about the cellar. It rested for an instant on a face peering at us around a corner of the wall—a face so distorted, so demoniac, that it seemed scarcely human. Then there was a flash of flame, a report, and the torch crashed from my hand, while a gust of acrid smoke whirled into my face.

I felt Godfrey clutch me and pull me down beside him into the half-filled grave; I even fancied that I touched the staring face which lay there. In an agony of

horror I struggled to free myself, to stand erect, ready to brave any danger rather than that, but he held me fast.

"Steady, Lester, steady," he whispered. "If she fires again, I'll drop her," and I knew that he held his revolver in his hand.

"Don't do that!" I gasped. "Don't do that! You've no right to do that!"

"I have the right to defend myself," retorted Godfrey grimly, and waited, his muscles tense.

But she did not fire again. Instead, there was a long, unbroken silence, during which, it seemed to me, I could feel my hair whitening on my head. I also became conscious of a stinging numbness in my right hand. Minute after minute passed, and still no sound came from the outer cellar. I felt that if the silence endured a moment longer, I should shriek aloud.

"Lie still," whispered Godfrey, at last, "and I'll try to find the torch. Did she hit you?"

"My hand feels numb."

"Let me see," and I felt his fingers touching it softly here and there. "It's just a scratch, I think. But wait till I find the torch."

I heard him groping about for it; then for a time all was still again. Suddenly, from an angle of the wall, a shaft of light shot about the cellar. It was empty.

"All right, Lester," said Godfrey's voice. "Let's have a look at the hand."

I got up unsteadily and went to him. A moment's examination showed that my wound was indeed only a scratch. The bullet had grazed the back of the hand and struck the wrist-bone a glancing blow.

"We'll have it dressed as soon as we can," said Godfrey. "And now the next thing is to get out of this place alive. Our enemy is probably lying in wait for us with a loaded gun at the top of the stairs. By the way, I caught only the merest glimpse of the face. Did you recognise it?"

"Yes," I said; "it was the elder Miss Kingdon."

Godfrey gave a little whistle.

"It looked positively devilish," he said. "It gave me the worst scare I've had for a

long time. Did you notice the eyes, how they glared at us?"

"Yes," I said, and shivered a little.

"I confess I don't like the thought of going up those stairs," he went on, "but there's no other way out. This window's too small. So we'll have to chance it. Give me your hand."

I stretched out my uninjured hand. In an instant we were in darkness, and I knew that he had exchanged the torch for his revolver.

"Come on," he whispered, and we started forward.

At the foot of the stair we paused for a moment, listening; but no sound came from above. We mounted a step, two steps, three——

Suddenly I felt a convulsive pressure on my hand. From above came a quick succession of sharp taps, as of some one rapping with his knuckles upon the wall. It rose, fell, rose again——

Involuntarily we retreated to the foot of the stair and took refuge against the farther wall. The light flashed out again, and I saw Godfrey mopping his face with his handkerchief. As for myself, I was fairly bathed in perspiration.

"What was it?" I asked hoarsely.

"I don't know," Godfrey answered, in the same tone. "But I know one thing—if we stay down here much longer, we'll both of us lose our nerve completely. I'm going to make a dash for it," and he started for the cellar steps.

I followed him, clenching my teeth convulsively.

But again a sound from overhead stopped us—a quick step across the floor, the opening of a door, and then a scream so shrill, so agonised, that it made my heart stand still.

"Come on!" cried Godfrey, and dashed up the stair.

In an instant, we reached the top. The kitchen was dark, but a stream of light poured through the open door from the room beyond. We sprang to it. I saw it was the dining-room; a light stood on the table and for a second I thought the room was empty. Then my ear caught a kind of dry sobbing, which seemed to come from one corner.

In an alcove between the chimney and the wall was a closet. Its door was open and, as we peered into it, I saw a woman's figure clothed in white straining at some dark and heavy object.

Godfrey took but one glance at it.

"Good God!" he cried, and sprang into the closet. "Bring the light, Lester."

So shaken by I knew not what new horror that I could scarcely walk, I yet had self-control enough to obey. I tottered to the table, took up the lamp, and returned to the closet door. The rays of the light fell within, revealing the whole terrible scene—Lucy Kingdon and Godfrey holding up a figure clothed in black, a figure which swayed and wabbled, turning at last so that I caught a glimpse of the swollen, distorted face—the same face which had glared at us around a corner of the cellar wall.

CHAPTER XVIII

A New Turn to the Puzzle

How we got her down, I scarcely know. I dimly remembered bringing a chair for Godfrey and holding up the body for a dreadful instant while he severed the cord about the neck; but my first clear recollection is of her form upon a bed in the adjoining room, with Godfrey bending over her and Lucy Kingdon standing by with such a face of anguish and despair that, for the first time since I had known her, I found it in my heart to pity her.

She had snatched up some dark garment and thrown it over her night-dress, and she stood looking down at the limp form on the bed, with its hideous, staring face, as though struck to stone. All but her lips—they opened and shut, drinking the air in gasps, and from moment to moment she muttered to herself, "I should have known! I should have known! I should have known!"

At last Godfrey stood erect and turned to her, and his face was very tender.

"It's no use," he said gently. "Perhaps we'd better summon a physician; but he can do nothing."

For a moment she did not seem to understand; then she suddenly threw her black hair out of her eyes and fell on her knees beside the bed. She caught one dead hand to her and fondled it and kissed it; while a great wave of sobbing swept over her.

"I should have known!" she repeated. "I should have known! It was my fault!"

I shuddered. Was it her fault? Had she been false to Marcia Lawrence, and her sister true, and was this the result of that treachery?

At last she controlled herself and stood erect, still quivering, but fairly calm. And some of her old proud, disdainful spirit returned to her.

"This gentleman I know," she said, with a little gesture in my direction, after looking at us a moment. "You," she added to Godfrey, "I do not know."

"My name is Godfrey," he answered. "I'm a friend of Mr. Lester's."

"And what are you doing here?"

Not until then did I think of our strange appearance, shoeless, covered from head to foot with yellow clay, spotted here and there with the blood which had dripped from my wound—astonishing objects, truly, to burst in upon a woman in the middle of the night! Even Godfrey, ready in invention as was ever the wily Ulysses, found himself unable, for the moment, to explain.

"I suppose you were lurking about the house," she went on, her face darkening with sudden anger, "Mr. Lester, I know, has a fondness for doing that. No doubt you're also an amateur detective."

But Godfrey had got back his self-possession.

"Something of the kind," he admitted good-humouredly. "We heard you scream and rushed to your assistance."

"You were very kind!" she sneered; then her face changed. "The door was locked," she said. "I locked it when I came home. How did you get in?" She glanced through the dining-room and saw that the door was still closed.

"It wasn't locked at the time we entered," explained Godfrey coolly. "But that was nearly an hour ago. We were not lurking about the house, Miss Kingdon, when we heard you scream. We were in the cellar."

He was watching her keenly, but she showed no sign of understanding.

"In the cellar?" she repeated, and scanned our soiled clothes. "What were you doing there?"

"We were making some investigations," answered Godfrey composedly. "Your sister discovered us there and took a shot at my friend here," and he pointed to my bleeding hand. "Luckily her aim was bad. Didn't you hear the shot?"

"No," she said, staring from one to the other of us, her anger and insolence quite gone. "I heard no shot. I was asleep in the bed here—the door was closed. Why did she shoot at you? Did she take you for burglars?"

"No," said Godfrey, "I hardly think she took us for burglars."

"And yet you were burglars—she was justified in shooting."

"No doubt of that," Godfrey agreed. "We took the chance, and are not

complaining."

"You had no business in the cellar. You have no business here. You're intruders. I don't wish you here. I insist that you leave."

"In a moment," said Godfrey.

"At once!" she cried, flushing darkly again. "Or I'll compel you to," and she made a motion toward the pillow of the bed.

"Oh, no, you won't, Miss Kingdon," protested Godfrey easily. "We won't consent to be shot at any more to-night. We *have* some business here, and we're going to stay till it's completed. Since you didn't hear the shot, will you kindly tell us what it was awakened you? Please believe that we shall be glad to be of service to you. I fear you're going to stand in need of us before long."

She hesitated, still looking at him; but there was no resisting the stern kindness of his eyes, nor doubting that his warning was in earnest.

"I came home about half an hour ago," she began, "or perhaps it's longer than that——"

"Was your sister expecting you?"

"No; I had intended to stay with Mrs. Lawrence all night. But I found I wasn't needed, and so came home."

"The side door was unlocked?"

"Yes, and that surprised me for a moment."

"Was your sister here at the time?"

"She was in the yard—she came in a moment later."

Godfrey and I exchanged a glance, which Miss Kingdon intercepted.

"Wasn't she in the yard?" she demanded. "What is this mystery?"

"We'll tell you in a moment," said Godfrey; "but please let us hear your story first. You had been, you say, at the Lawrence house?"

"Yes; Mrs. Lawrence has been very nervous since Marcia disappeared. I had been sitting with her until she went to sleep. I met Mr. Lester there earlier in the

evening," she added, and cast me a half-mocking glance.

"Yes, he told me," said Godfrey. "He's been having an exciting time to-night. Were you with Mrs. Lawrence last night?"

"Yes; I spent the entire night with her."

Again we exchanged a glance.

"And you say that you expected to stay there again to-night?"

"Yes; but my sister hasn't been well for the past two days, so, as soon as Mrs. Lawrence fell asleep and I found she wouldn't need me, I hurried home. I found Harriet very nervous and excited, and finally persuaded her to take a soothing draught and go to bed. I was so tired that I fell asleep almost at once, and I knew nothing more until I was awakened by what seemed to be a kind of drumming on the head-board."

She stopped, shuddering. We, too, had heard that drumming!

"Yes," said Godfrey. "Your bed, I see, is backed against the closet partition—tight against it. It no doubt makes a kind of sounding-board."

"I suppose that's it. I felt for Harriet and found she wasn't there. That startled me wide awake. Again I heard that drumming, and sprang out of bed, lighted the lamp, and rushed to the closet to find that she had——"

The words ended in a sob, which she tried in vain to repress. Godfrey bent again over the figure on the bed.

"She used what is evidently a curtain cord," he said. "Don't look at her, Miss Kingdon. The death is an easy one, whatever it may appear."

"But why did she do it?" demanded Lucy Kingdon. "Why should she get up in the middle of the night, like that, and hang herself? What impulse was it——"

She stopped suddenly, regarding us fixedly, her face livid, her eyes agleam.

"It was you!" she cried hoarsely, pointing an accusing finger. "She heard you in the cellar—you frightened her—you drove her to it!"

"That's nonsense, Miss Kingdon," broke in Godfrey sternly, "and you know it! How could we drive her to suicide?"

"What was it, then?" she demanded. "I've had enough of this mystery."

Godfrey looked at her keenly.

"You really don't know?"

She shook her head, staring mutely up at him, fascinated by the purpose in his face.

"She was deeply devoted to Miss Lawrence, wasn't she?"

"Yes."

"More devoted than you?"

A sudden flush overspread Lucy Kingdon's face, giving place in a moment to deadly pallor.

"Perhaps," she admitted hoarsely. "But that had nothing to do with it. That was no reason!"

"No," assented Godfrey; "not in itself. But it was at the bottom of it—for it led to something totally unforeseen."

She shook herself together.

"You're speaking in riddles," she said. "It's scarcely fair."

"Pardon me," said Godfrey instantly. "I don't want to be unfair. Come with me and I'll show you the cause of this act. Bring the lamp, Lester."

Together we crossed the kitchen to the door which gave entrance to the cellar stairs. It seemed to me that Miss Kingdon shrank back a little as she saw where we were taking her. But it may have been only my fancy. Certainly she followed promptly enough when Godfrey started down.

At the foot he paused.

"You've not been down here for some days, I take it, Miss Kingdon?" he asked.

"No," she answered, her eyes glancing from right to left. "I very seldom come down here. Harriet always attended to the household affairs. But I see nothing wrong."

"Come this way," and he passed around the angle of the wall into the recess.

"Some one has been digging," she said, as her eyes fell upon the heap of dirt.

"Yes; what was this recess for, Miss Kingdon?"

"We had intended placing a furnace here," she said, "but after the house was finished, we decided that a furnace wasn't needed. Who has been digging here? You?" and her eyes again examined our earth-stained clothes.

"It was your sister dug the hole, and then filled it again, as you see."

"My sister?"

"Yes—she worked at it last night, and again to-night, when she thought herself secure from interruption."

"But why?" she asked, in bewilderment.

"Because she had something to conceal. This hole is a grave, Miss Kingdon. See there."

He flashed a ray from his electric torch full upon the leering face staring up at us.

Lucy Kingdon gazed down at it for a moment with distended eyes. Then, with a deep sigh, she sank backward to the floor.

CHAPTER XIX

Under Suspicion

We carried her up the stair and placed her on a couch in the room where her sister lay.

"She's only fainted," Godfrey said. "Put some water on her face and chafe her hands. She'll soon come around. I must be off, or I'll miss my scoop, after all."

"All right," I agreed. "I'll wait here. You'd better notify the police."

"I will. But I'll get my shoes first," and he hurried out into the yard, while I got some cold water from the tap in the kitchen. "Here are yours, too," he said, coming back with both pairs. "You'd better put them on."

He had his own laced in a moment.

"I'll send the first officer I see," he promised, "and get back as soon as I can. But don't wait for me. Get to bed as soon as you can."

I heard his steps die away down the street, and turned back into the room where the two women lay. I was nearly dead for lack of sleep, and found myself nodding more than once, as I sat there by the couch bathing Lucy Kingdon's face. How Godfrey kept it up I could not understand, but sleep never seemed to have a place in any of his plans.

But as moment after moment passed, and Lucy Kingdon showed no sign of returning consciousness, growing alarm awakened me thoroughly. I soused her head and face and chafed her wrists, but with no perceptible effect. I could feel no pulse, could detect no respiration; perhaps this was something more serious than a mere fainting spell. I should have told Godfrey to summon a physician.

I was relieved at last to hear a step turn in at the gate, and a moment later a patrolman appeared at the door—a rotund and somnolent German, whose somnolency gave place to snorts of mingled terror and astonishment when he saw the two bodies.

"Mein Gott!" he ejaculated. "Two of t'em!"

"No; only one as yet," I corrected. "But there may be two if something isn't done to save this one pretty quick," and I bent again over Lucy Kingdon and chafed her hands.

"Hass she fainted?" he asked.

"That or just naturally dropped dead," I said. "She's been like this for fifteen or twenty minutes."

He came to the bed, stooped down, and pressed back one of her eyelids.

"She ain't dead," he said. "She's chust fainted. I know a trick," and before I could interfere, he gave her ear a cruel tweak.

"Why, you scoundrel!" I began, but a sigh from the couch interrupted me. I turned to see Lucy Kingdon's dark eyes staring up at me.

"You see," he said triumphantly. "I nefer knowed it to fail."

She stirred slightly, drew one hand across her eyes, then, with a long sigh, turned over on her side.

"Come on out here," I said in a low tone, "and don't disturb her. Sleep's the best thing for her now, if she can get it. Besides, I've something to show you," and picking up the lamp, I led the way to the kitchen and closed the door.

"Somet'ing else to show me?" he repeated, staring about at the walls.

"Yes; come along," and I started down the cellar stairs.

He followed me, breathing heavily. As I glanced over my shoulder I was amused to see that he had drawn his revolver.

"This way," I said, and stepped into the recess. "See there!"

He turned livid as he gazed down into the grave, and his hands and face grew clammy.

"Mein Gott!" he breathed. "Mein Gott!" and he returned his revolver to his pocket, took off his helmet and wiped his forehead with a shaking hand.

He said nothing more until we were back again in the kitchen. Then he looked at me with glassy eyes.

"But who's t'e murderer?" he demanded. "Where's t'e guilty party?"

"I don't know," I answered. "That's for you to find out. As for me, I'm going to bed."

"Wait a minute," he said, detaining me, as I started for the door. "Who was t'at feller who told me to come here?"

"He was a reporter named Godfrey. He had nothing to do with it."

"But somebody must be arrested for t'is," and he looked at me in a way that was most suggestive.

"Well, you're not going to arrest me," I retorted.

"What's t'at on your hand?" he asked, and caught my wrist and held it to the light.

"It's blood," I said; "but it's my own," and then I was again suddenly conscious of my strange appearance, and realised how unaccountable my presence in this house must seem. "Oh, well," I said, "there's no use to waste time arguing about it. I suppose you're right in holding me. Go call your chief. I'll explain things to him."

"I can't leave you here," he protested. "T'e patrol box is at t'e corner."

"All right; I'll go with you," I agreed. "I don't want to escape," and I accompanied him to the box, and waited while he called up headquarters, and sent in a brief but highly-coloured version of the tragedy.

Then we walked back to the house together. As we approached it, I was startled to see a shadow flit across the kitchen blind.

"She mustn't go down there again," I said, and flung open the door.

Lucy Kingdon was standing with her hand on the knob of the door which led to the cellar. She started around at my entrance, and stared at me, but I saw no light of recognition in her eyes.

"Don't go down there," I said gently. "You'd better lie down again."

She permitted me to lead her back to the couch without protest or resistance.

"Try to rest," I said. "There's nothing you can do. You must be strong for to-

morrow."

She lay down as obediently as a child, and closed her eyes. Her lips moved for a moment; but at last I was relieved to note by her regular breathing that she had apparently fallen asleep.

I returned to the dining-room and closed the door between, so that the light and noise might not disturb her.

"Here t'ey are!" cried the patrolman, who had stationed himself at the outer door, and I heard a wagon rattle up in front of the house.

Then half a dozen policemen came pouring into the yard, headed by a man with grey hair and heavy black moustache, whom I saw to be the chief. He stopped for a moment to listen to the story the patrolman had to tell, then he turned sharply to me.

"Of course you'll have to explain your presence here," he began.

"My name's Lester; if you doubt it, here's my card," I said, cutting him short. "Mr. Godfrey and I suspected something was wrong here. We looked into it and found much more than we bargained for."

"Who's Mr. Godfrey?"

"The man who sent your patrolman here."

"How did you get so dirty?"

"Uncovering the dead man in the cellar."

"And your hand seems to be wounded."

"Yes; Harriet Kingdon shot me before she hanged herself."

"She discovered you in the cellar?"

"Yes."

He looked at me a moment longer without speaking.

"It's hardly probable," I added, "that if my friend and I had been guilty of any crime, he'd have stopped to warn the police, and I'd have waited here for you to come and take me."

"That's true," he assented; "but I don't quite see what your business was here."

"My friend's a reporter on the New York *Record*," I explained.

"Oh, a reporter!" he repeated, instantly drawing the inference which I hoped he would. "That explains it. But, of course, Mr. Lester, you, as a lawyer, know that you had no right to enter a house in that way. It was your duty to inform the police."

"There are emergencies," I protested, "in which one must take affairs into one's own hands."

"I admit that; but whether this was one of them——"

"Doesn't it look as if it was?" I asked.

"Well, that's not for me to decide. I understand you're staying at the Sheridan?"

"Yes—at least, I was staying there yesterday. I gave up my room, not knowing that I'd need it again. I'm about dead for sleep."

He pondered for a moment, looking at my card.

"How do I know this is really your name?" he asked.

"You don't know it," I retorted, growing suddenly impatient. "But I'll have a dozen people down from New York to identify me, if you doubt it. Meanwhile, let me go to bed."

"All right," he said, pocketing the card with sudden decision. "But it will have to be under guard. I don't want to place you under arrest, but at the same time I can't run the risk of letting you get away. You've no objection to the company of an officer?"

"None whatever, if he'll only let me sleep."

"All right. But you'd better have that hand dressed before you turn in. We brought a doctor along on the off-chance of needing him. Suppose you let him look at it."

"Thank you," I assented, and the doctor was summoned.

"It's not in the least serious," he assured me, after a moment's examination, and the wound was soon washed and bandaged.

"That feels better," I said, as he pressed the last strip of plaster into place. "Now I'm ready for bed."

"Sherman," said the chief to one of his men, "go with this gentleman. Don't let him out of your sight till you hear from me. Let him go to bed, if he wants to, and don't disturb him; but if he tries to escape, stop him if you have to shoot him."

I did my best to repress a smile, and succeeded in turning it into a yawn. After all, there was no need to offend these fellows unnecessarily, and the chief was undoubtedly right in thinking me not entirely clear of suspicion. So Sherman and I went down the street together, in the grey light of the dawn—the second consecutive one that I had witnessed—and we rather astonished the night clerk at the Sheridan by mounting together to the room which was assigned to me. My guardian sat down against the door, after assuring himself that escape by the window was impossible. As for me, I tumbled into bed as quickly as I could and fell asleep as soon as my head touched the pillow.

I was awakened by some one roughly shaking me. I protested, fought against it, but in vain. At last I opened my eyes, and saw that my persecutor was Godfrey.

"Come, Lester," he said, "you've been sleeping ten hours. It's time you were turning out."

I sat up in bed and rubbed my eyes. Then suddenly I remembered.

"Where's my jailer?" I asked, looking at the empty chair by the door.

"Oh, I cleared all that up. I didn't realise at first how suspicious our actions might seem, and how hard it would be to explain them."

"It was lucky I didn't have to spend the night in jail," I laughed. "Are those my trousers?"

"Yes; I had them cleaned—and they needed it. I had a hard time getting my special off—the operator took me for a tramp—and no wonder."

"Were you in time?"

"Oh, yes; and a lovely scoop it was. The town's full of special men, now, trying to work up the story."

"And how are they succeeding?"

"They're winding themselves up in the worst tangle you ever saw——"

"But you——"

"I'm tangled, too. That's one reason I woke you, Lester. I want to talk to you."

"But surely," I said, "Lucy Kingdon can tell——"

"Lucy Kingdon is delirious, threatened with brain fever. The whole affair is a deeper mystery than ever."

CHAPTER XX

An Appeal for Advice

A cold plunge wiped away the last vestiges of sleepiness, and ten minutes later, I joined Godfrey in the dining-room, where he had ordered lunch for both of us, and where we could talk undisturbed, since we were its only occupants.

"I've been up only a few minutes myself," he began as I sat down. "But I didn't get to bed till nearly noon. There was too much to do, this morning."

"Tell me about it," I said. "I'm anxious to hear the developments."

"There aren't any."

"But you've cleared up the mystery of the murder?"

"Cleared it up! My dear Lester, we haven't been able to take the first step toward clearing it up! We know the unknown was shot, but as to who shot him, and why, we're utterly at sea."

"Once establish his identity——"

"That's just what we can't do. But perhaps I'd better tell you the whole story."

"Yes, do," I said. "That's what I want to hear."

"Well," he began, "after I left you, I hurried downtown toward the telegraph office, and it wasn't until I'd gone quite a way that I met a patrolman. I stopped just long enough to tell him that he was needed at the Kingdon place, for my time was getting short, and I couldn't afford to waste a minute. It wasn't until afterwards that I thought of the equivocal position you'd be in when the police arrived."

"I was certainly under suspicion," I laughed, "but there was no harm done."

"After I got off my message, I stopped here at the hotel, and cleaned up, for I was really a sight. I learned from the clerk that you'd already arrived in custody of a policeman. I peeped in at you, and found you sleeping like a log, not disturbed in the least by the presence of the sentinel."

"The result of a clear conscience," I pointed out.

"So I told the cop, after he'd related your adventure with the chief. Then I hurried back to the Kingdon place, and found that the coroner had just arrived. He's an ambitious young fellow, named Haynes, and is cleverer than the run of coroners. I introduced myself, told him what I knew of the case and of your connection with it, and persuaded him to recall the officer who was guarding you."

"The only thing that bothered me," I said, "was to explain our presence in the house. How did you do it?"

Godfrey laughed.

"Oh, easily enough. We yellow journalists, you know, bear the reputation of pausing at nothing. We're also credited with a sort of second sight when it comes to nosing out news. I encouraged Haynes to believe that I possessed both these characteristics. I dwelt upon the suspicious circumstance of the light in the cellar, and led him to think that we saw from the outside considerably more than we really did see. I didn't tell him the whole truth, because I didn't want him to connect this affair in any way with Miss Lawrence's disappearance. I want to work that out for myself—it's my private property."

I nodded; neither did I desire that Miss Lawrence's name should be connected with this tragedy—not, at least, until there was some positive evidence against her. And I hoped against hope, knowing Godfrey's persistence and cleverness, that no such evidence would be found.

"After I'd convinced the coroner of our disinterested motives," continued Godfrey, "we went down to the cellar together, and, with the help of a couple of policemen, dug up the body. One of the policemen happened to be Clemley, who'd been stationed at the Lawrence place, and he identified the man at once as the one who had asked him the way to the Kingdon house. We got him out—and a good load he was—stripped back his clothes, and found that he'd been shot in the breast. The wound was a very small one, and there had been little external bleeding. There were no burns upon the clothing, so the shot was fired from a distance of at least five feet. The police surgeon ran in his probe, and found that the bullet had passed directly through the heart, so that death was instantaneous. From the expression of the face, I should say that the victim had no suspicion of his danger—you remember that leer of self-satisfaction. The course of the bullet was downward, which would seem to indicate that he was sitting in a chair at the time, while his murderer was standing up. He had been dead more than twenty-

four hours. The clay of the cellar was nearly as hard as rock, which accounts for the fact that Harriet Kingdon was so long getting him buried."

"And it was she who fired the shot," I said, with conviction. "Marcia Lawrence had nothing to do with it."

"Do you believe Lucy Kingdon knew anything about it?" he asked, looking at me keenly.

"No—I'm sure she didn't."

"Then you apparently believe that one woman of only ordinary strength could handle a body which taxed two strong men to lift! I tell you, Lester, Harriet Kingdon unaided couldn't have taken that body to the cellar and laid it in that grave. If Lucy Kingdon didn't aid her, who did?"

"I don't know," I answered. "But it wasn't who you think."

"Well, I hope it wasn't—but I don't see any other way out."

"You don't know all the facts, yet," I pointed out. "And I'm not so sure that Harriet Kingdon couldn't have handled the body alone. She didn't have to lift it, but just drag it down the stairs and tumble it into the hole. She could have done that, and removed the traces afterwards."

"But the body wasn't tumbled into the hole—it was laid in. Did you notice its position—the feet were toward the inner wall. Do you suppose she'd have dragged him by his legs?"

"She might have done anything, in her excitement," I persisted doggedly. "You can't reason about what a woman would do under such circumstances."

"Perhaps not," Godfrey admitted; "but Haynes was struck with the idea, too, that Harriet Kingdon must have had an accomplice. He believes, of course, that the accomplice was her sister. I let him keep on believing so—she can clear herself easily enough when the time comes; but just at present I want him to think he knows the whole story."

"Yes," I agreed, "that's the best—keep the bomb from bursting as long as you can."

"I'm not keeping it from bursting; but I can't explode it until I get it properly charged. I see you're hoping I never will."

"Not with that charge!" I said fervently.

"Well, we won't talk about it now," said Godfrey, smiling at my earnestness. "After the coroner had looked over the ground and got his data, we lugged the body upstairs and examined it. It was that of a man of about fifty, well-preserved, but showing marks of dissipation. The tip of the little finger on his left hand was missing, as Clemley had said. From his complexion, hair, and general appearance I should say that he was undoubtedly an Italian. I've already told you how he was killed."

"And you couldn't identify him."

"No."

"Nothing in his clothes—no letter, or anything of that sort?"

"Not a thing. There was some loose money in the trousers pockets, a knife, a small comb, and a few other odds and ends, but no watch nor pocketbook nor papers. However, I believe there had been. I fancied that the inside pocket of the coat had been turned out and then hastily shoved in again. One of the vest buttons was unbuttoned, and the lower left-hand pocket of the vest certainly showed that a watch had been carried in it."

"You mean these things had been removed?"

"I certainly do."

"But what was the motive of it all?" I demanded desperately.

"I don't know; I can't see clearly; but I'm sure of one thing, and that is that it will lead back to Marcia Lawrence."

"I don't believe it!" I retorted. "I don't——"

The door opened and the clerk came in.

"Somebody wants you at the 'phone, Mr. Lester," he said; "long distance," and he led the way to the booth.

It was Mr. Royce, and not until that moment did I remember that my absence from the office was unexplained.

"I *was* a little worried at first," he said, in answer to my question, "but when I saw that special from Elizabeth in the *Record* this morning, I began to

understand, especially when I called up your landlady, and found you'd left the house in a hurry last night after getting a telegram."

"Yes, it was from Godfrey."

"What's up? The clerk down there told me this morning that you'd come in about daybreak looking like you'd been digging a sewer, and that a policeman was guarding you in your room."

"Yes, I was suspected of murder for a while, but I'm not under guard any longer. I'll get back to the office as soon as I can."

"Oh, take your time—I'm getting along fairly well. Of course I've read the papers—there's no connection between this affair and that other one, is there, Lester?"

"Godfrey thinks so," I answered, glancing around to make sure that the door of the booth was securely closed. "He thinks the dead man was Miss L.'s husband, and half believes she killed him."

I could hear Mr. Royce's inarticulate exclamation of disgust and anger.

"But of course that's all moonshine," I added.

"Moonshine! I should say so! Now, Lester, I want you to stay there till you get this thing straightened out, if only for Curtiss's sake. I know you can prove that any such theory as that is all bosh."

"I'll try to," I answered him, and hung up the receiver; but I confess that I was not at all sure of my ability to accomplish the task.

As I left the booth, the clerk came toward me.

"There's a gentleman inquiring for you, Mr. Lester," he said. "He was here about noon asking for you, but wouldn't have you disturbed. He's over here in the parlour, waiting for you."

I followed him to the door of the parlour.

"This is Mr. Lester," he said to a white-haired old man who was pacing nervously up and down, and left us alone together.

For a moment I did not recognise him, then as he came forward into the clearer light, I found myself looking down into the face of Dr. Schuyler.

"My dear Mr. Lester," he said, advancing with outstretched hand, "I hope you will pardon this intrusion."

"It's not in the least an intrusion," I said, honestly glad to see him.

"Thank you. Let us sit down over here by the window, if you will. I do not wish to run any risk of being overheard," and he glanced about anxiously.

As I looked at him more closely, I saw that he was labouring under some deep trouble or anxiety. His face was pale and haggard, and he fingered his glasses with a nervousness which I knew was not habitual.

"The truth of the matter is," he went on, "that I feel the need of advice—legal advice. I have friends here, of course, to whom I could have gone; but I was told that you were interested in this case, and from what I saw of you the other evening, I felt that I should like to lay my difficulty before you. It is, as I said, a purely legal question, or I should not have felt the need of any earthly counsel."

I thanked him for his confidence and begged him to continue.

"As I understand the law," he went on, "an insane person cannot be punished for a crime."

"No," I said, "except by being confined in an asylum until cured—and even that is largely discretionary."

"And what, in law, is considered insanity—what is the test for it?"

"Inability to distinguish right from wrong is the usual test. No man is excused from responsibility for a crime, if he has the capacity and reason sufficient to enable him to distinguish between right and wrong, as to the particular act he is then doing."

I fancied I heard the clergyman breathe a sigh of relief.

"A person, then, may be sane as regards some things, and insane as regards others?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Would the fact that a person had at one time been confined in an asylum, and had occasional lapses from sanity afterward, tend to prove that he was insane at the time of committing a crime?"

"It would tend to prove it very strongly; especially if the circumstances under which the crime was committed were related in any way to the cause of the insanity."

He paused a moment in deep thought.

"I cannot go that far," he said slowly, at last. "And yet—and yet—it may be that

you've hit upon the clue, Mr. Lester. I must have time to think it over. Will you come to see me this evening?"

"Gladly," I said; "I only hope I can be of service."

"Thank you. I shall look for you between seven and eight. It may be that I shall have something to tell you."

I watched him as he left the room, with a curious mixture of emotions. What was it he would have to tell me? Who was it was insane? Was it——

And suddenly I seemed to catch a glimmer of the truth; I felt that, however slowly and uncertainly, I was at last groping toward the light.

CHAPTER XXI

Cross-Purposes

Godfrey was waiting for me at the desk, and I felt him glance at me keenly as I announced my readiness to accompany him.

"We'll go up to the Kingdon place," he said, "and see if the coroner has made any discoveries. The clerk told me you had a visitor," he added, as we reached the street.

"A client," I answered, with forced jocularity. "A clergyman in need of legal advice."

"I thought I recognised him as he came out. It was Dr. Schuyler, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

He glanced at me again, and then walked on in silence; but I felt the reproach he did not utter.

"He's in trouble of some kind," I explained.

"Connected with this affair?"

"I think so. But I don't want it blazed forth in the *Record* till I'm sure."

"The *Record* doesn't blaze forth everything I know," he said quietly.

"I know it doesn't, but you'd give it this—it would have a right to this."

"Is it so important as all that?"

"I rather fancy it's the clue we've been looking for."

His eyes were shining now as he looked at me.

"That *is* important," he said. "I should like to have it."

"I'm not absolutely sure," I said, again. "But I'm going to see him again this evening. If there's anything I can tell you after that, I will."

"That's fair enough," he assented. "The story, whatever it is, is bound to be public property in a few days, I suppose?"

"It will probably come out at the inquest. When is the inquest?"

"It's been set for to-morrow; but it will probably be held open until Lucy Kingdon can testify."

"You'll beat the world a day, then."

"That's what I like to do. But here we are, and there's Haynes at the door."

We entered the yard, and Godfrey introduced me to the coroner. He impressed me at once as alert and efficient, and he led the way into the house, and asked that I tell him the story of the night before, which I did as circumstantially as I could.

"I hope your wound isn't a bad one," he said, when I had finished, glancing at my bandaged hand.

"Oh, no," I said; "a mere scratch. To tell the truth, I'd nearly forgotten it."

"Here's the weapon the bullet came from," he added, and produced from his pocket a small, pearl-handled revolver. "There are two chambers empty. The other bullet flew straighter than the one fired at you, Mr. Lester."

"You mean——"

"Yes, we probed for it and got it out. It had passed directly through the heart, and lodged in the muscles of the back. There can be no question that it came from this revolver."

"Whose revolver is it?" I asked.

"Presumably Miss Kingdon's. We've not been able to find any evidence on that point. It wasn't bought here in Elizabeth. You see it's a foreign make."

I could decipher upon the barrel the letters "C & I, Paris." Godfrey examined it with eyes which were gleaming strangely. I watched him with a curious sinking of the heart, but he handed it back to the coroner without comment.

"Anything else?" he asked. "No trace of the watch?"

"No," and Haynes shook his head.

"How is Miss Kingdon?"

"A little quieter, but still delirious. She won't be able to testify to-morrow. We've got a trained nurse for her—the doctor thinks she'd better not be moved for a day or two."

"And no light as to the identity of the victim?"

"Not the slightest. I've found a cabman who saw him get off the 10.30 train from New York on the morning of the tenth. Then he went into a drugstore near the depot, and asked to look at a directory, afterwards asking the way to North Broad Street. He probably spoke to no one else till he stopped to ask Clemley where the Kingdons lived."

"He'd never been here before, then."

"Evidently not. And he didn't know the Kingdons' address until he got here."

"No," agreed Godfrey; "no. Well, you've evidently done everything that could be done, Mr. Haynes. Perhaps something more will come out at the inquest. It opens at ten o'clock, doesn't it?"

"Yes; here are your subpœnas," and he handed us each a paper.

"Very well," said Godfrey. "We'll be present, of course. Where will it be held?"

"I thought it best to hold it right here," answered Haynes, "I want the jury to be on the scene."

"But won't it disturb Miss Kingdon?"

"Not at all. There's a large front room which will answer nicely—and I'll have the police keep everybody out who hasn't some business there. Here's the room," and he opened a door and led the way into the room beyond.

It was the one into which Miss Kingdon had shown me on the morning of my memorable interview with her, and involuntarily my eyes sought the portrait on the wall opposite the front windows. It was still there—as alluring, astonishing, compelling as ever. Indeed, as I gazed at it now, it seemed even more striking than it had when I saw it first.

"Look at that," I said, turning to Godfrey, but there was no need for me to call his attention to the portrait. He had already seen it, and was gazing at it in rapt

admiration.

"Whose is it?" he demanded, at last. "Who painted it?"

I pointed to the name scrawled in the corner.

"'Ruth Endicott,'" he read slowly. "Well, and who was she?"

"That's her portrait," I said. "Does it remind you of any one?"

He looked at it for a moment in silence; then he shook his head.

"No, I can't say that it does. But who was Ruth Endicott?"

"Nobody in particular—a distant relative of the Kingdons."

Godfrey gazed at me sceptically.

"Really?" he asked.

"Really. This was the last picture she painted—of herself. You see how crude it is."

"Crude—yes; but it's got power, Lester. The woman's *there*, somehow, looking right out of the canvas. Did she die?"

"Yes; thirty years ago," and I told him the little I knew of Ruth Endicott and her history.

He listened without comment, his eyes still on the bewitching face gazing down from the wall at us.

"Well, it beats me," was his only remark, when I had ended, and with a visible effort he tore himself away from the portrait, and turned to the coroner, who had been waiting patiently until our inspection of the painting was ended. "Is this where the inquest will be held?"

"Yes, sir; I'll have some chairs brought in. It won't last very long. I'll have to adjourn it, of course, until Miss Kingdon can give her testimony."

Godfrey nodded.

"Yes, you'll have to do that. Well, you may depend upon us—but I doubt if our evidence will go very far toward solving the mystery."

If the town had been glowing the night before over the disappearance of Marcia Lawrence, it was fairly blazing now over this new mystery. In fact, the one had quite eclipsed the other, and I was mightily relieved to find that no one suspected any relation between them. I bought copies of both the local papers, and observed again their prodigal use of black type and exclamation points. Each of them devoted the whole front page to the case, without, however, throwing any new light upon it. On another page, one of them stated in a few lines that nothing further had been heard from Miss Lawrence; the other contained no reference whatever to the Lawrence affair, and had apparently forgotten all about it.

Could any good come of reviving it? Why need Dr. Schuyler interfere at all? If it was Marcia Lawrence who was insane, the law could not touch her, whatever she had done. Harriet Kingdon was dead, and the obloquy of the crime could do her no injury. Besides, whoever had fired the shot——

Then, suddenly, I remembered the revolver. That was going to prove an awkward piece of evidence. Godfrey had suspected instantly who its owner was; and he, certainly, would permit no sentimental considerations to interfere with placing the whole truth before the public.

But perhaps I was mistaken, after all. Granted that Marcia Lawrence had been subject to spells of derangement, that was no proof that she had committed this crime. It might be, indeed, that that very infirmity was the cause of her flight. She may have believed herself cured, and accepted Curtiss in good faith, only to discover at the last moment that she was not cured; or the impulse to flight may have seized her during a sudden aberration caused by the excitement of her wedding-day. Aversion to friends and kindred was, as I knew, one of the most common symptoms of such derangement. Was this the key to the mystery? Was this the explanation of her flight?

It was with my mind in this tumult that I approached Dr. Schuyler's house, that evening, and rang the bell. He opened the door himself.

"I was expecting you," he said, and led the way to his study. "Sit down, Mr. Lester. I've been thinking over what you told me, and it seems to me that the world should know the whole truth."

My heart sank at the words.

"But what good will it do?" I questioned. "Of course, Dr. Schuyler, I suspect what the secret is. What good will it do that the world should know it?"

"It will at least turn loathing into pity; it will show that she was justified, in so far as there can be justification for such an act. It will show that she was not mentally responsible—therefore neither legally nor morally guilty."

"I wasn't aware that she was regarded with loathing," I said. "In fact, I didn't know that she was connected with this case at all in any one's mind outside of ourselves and a friend of mine."

"Not connected with it!" Dr. Schuyler cried. "You astonish me!"

"The public doesn't know the facts, and I see no reason why they should. You will answer me, perhaps, that it's a duty to protect the memory of the dead; but the dead was guilty equally with the living."

"My dear sir," said Dr. Schuyler, staring at me in a way I found most puzzling, "you're speaking in riddles. I confess that I don't in the least understand you. What is it you propose?"

"What I propose," I said bluntly, "is this. Let Harriet Kingdon bear the obloquy of the crime—it can't harm her now—besides, she largely deserves it. My evidence and Godfrey's will show that Lucy Kingdon had no hand in it, so there'll be no danger of wronging her. Let us see that Marcia Lawrence is placed in proper hands and receives proper care. Perhaps she may yet——"

"Marcia Lawrence!" he repeated hoarsely. "What has she to do with this case, Mr. Lester?"

The question, the expression of his face, brought me to my feet. I was trembling so that I caught at the chair for support. I saw it all. In an instant, I saw it all!

"Then it wasn't Miss Lawrence——"

"Nonsense! Not at all!" he broke in testily. "It was Harriet Kingdon."

CHAPTER XXII

Light at Last!

I sank back into my chair, overcome by such a flood of relief and thankfulness that I could not speak. But Dr. Schuyler laboured under no such disability.

"I cannot understand," he said, and I saw by his flushed face that he was genuinely angry, "how you could have got the preposterous idea that Marcia Lawrence was connected in any way with this affair. Any sane man would have seen the utter absurdity of such a theory."

"I see it now," I assented hoarsely.

"Why, Marcia Lawrence could no more be concerned in a thing like that," he went on hotly, "than—than a babe unborn. She could not be concerned in anything wrong, or mean, or criminal. I want you to understand, Mr. Lester, that she's absolutely spotless. If you knew her, I shouldn't need to tell you."

"I've always believed it," I protested. "In my heart of hearts, I've always believed it. We've been fools—we've been trying to make two things fit which didn't fit. We imagined they must fit because they happened so close together. I see now that it was merely a coincidence, and I'm glad from the very bottom of my heart."

"You believed, then, that Miss Lawrence was really concerned in this murder?"

"We thought her the active party in it."

"The active party! But on what grounds?"

"We thought the dead man was her husband—an adventurer who'd lured her into a marriage while she was abroad. You'll remember I mentioned this theory to you the other night."

"Yes, and I told you at the time how ridiculous I thought it."

"I've never wholly believed it," I repeated. "It wasn't mine. But it seemed to fit the facts so perfectly, and when you intimated this afternoon, as I thought, that

Miss Lawrence was subject to spells of insanity, I imagined that I understood the whole story."

He sat for a moment silent, regarding me from half-closed eyes; I saw that he was considering whether he should speak or remain silent.

"I hope this mistake has gone no farther," he said, at last.

"No," I answered, and genuinely thankful I was that I could say so. "I kept it absolutely to myself."

He breathed a sigh of relief.

"Then no harm has been done. I'm glad of that. I see that you're glad, too."

"Yes," I said; "I am—more glad than I can say."

"And now that you understand the matter," he continued, "I suppose you see it in a different light?"

"In a different light?"

"At least, you'll hardly advise now that I keep silent?"

"By no means," I asserted heartily. "I think it is clearly your duty to tell all you know. You will absolve Harriet Kingdon from responsibility for her act—as you said, change loathing to pity. Besides, if the dead man deserved death, let the world know it."

"I don't know that he did," corrected my companion; "I know nothing about him."

"But you suspect?" I prompted.

"Perhaps I do," he admitted, "but suspicion uttered is such a deadly thing! What I do know came to me in the way so many things come to a minister. I was asked for advice—I received a confidence——"

He stopped and pondered for a moment.

"I came very near telling you night before last," he continued, "when you were asking me about the Kingdons—telling you, at least, as much as I could without violating that confidence. But on second thought, I did not see that any good would come of it, and so kept silent. Now, circumstances absolve me from any

obligation of secrecy and I can speak freely.

"I told you the other evening that John Kingdon had died in an asylum for the insane, and that his family had a hard struggle for existence. After the mother's death, they had no means to maintain a home, and Lucy, who was only a girl, went to the Lawrence house to help her cousin, Ruth Endicott, who was housekeeper there, as I have said. The elder daughter, Harriet, secured a position in New York—I think as governess in a private family. She was called home, some time later, by the illness of her cousin Ruth, whom she took to Florida, where Ruth died. Mr. Lawrence was married soon afterwards, and Lucy Kingdon remained in his house as maid, first to his wife and afterwards to his daughter.

"Harriet Kingdon returned to New York and took up again her work of teaching. About six months later, there was a quarrel of some sort between her and her sister Lucy—a violent quarrel—and they ceased to correspond or hold communication of any kind. Just how long a time elapsed I don't know, but I should judge it was at least three years, when a letter came to Lucy Kingdon from Bloomingdale hospital, stating that her sister had been brought there a year before, violently insane, that she was practically well again and wished to be taken away. Lucy went after her at once and brought her home."

"Home?" I repeated.

"Yes; it was at that time that Mrs. Lawrence gave them the cottage in which they still live. She virtually supported them for some time, until Harriet was able to attend to the household duties, and Lucy to resume her place as maid."

"Was Mr. Lawrence living at the time?"

"Yes; but it was generally understood that he had no part in these benefactions. He was not a charitable man."

"And no reason was ever given for this generosity on Mrs. Lawrence's part?"

"None but her interest in the family. This was only one of her many charities."

I paused for a moment's thought. After all, there was nothing peculiar about it. Mrs. Lawrence would naturally be interested in a family whom she had known so well, and who had suddenly been reduced to such desperate straits.

"Did you ever hear any explanation of Harriet Kingdon's madness?" I asked at last.

"None but that of heredity—and that is an explanation I made to myself. I'm pretty sure that no one here except her sister and Mrs. Lawrence knew that she had been at Bloomingdale."

"Mrs. Lawrence knew it, then?"

"Oh, yes; it was from her I learned the story. She came to me for advice a few months after Harriet Kingdon had been brought home. I don't think she was ever wholly cured. She had slight relapses from time to time, and it was during one of these, rather more violent than usual, that Mrs. Lawrence came to me. I made an excuse for going to see her. But I saw no reason for advising that she be sent to an asylum. I did advise, however, that a specialist be brought down from New York to look at her, and Mrs. Lawrence did this. He also advised against the asylum; he said that rest, and quiet, and freedom from worry would, in time, afford permanent relief. She certainly grew better as time went on, and, though she was always somewhat peculiar, I have regarded her as wholly out of danger of relapse, for several years past."

"And yet," I objected, harking back, "heredity of itself would hardly be sufficient explanation. There must have been something to induce insanity—some shock or grave trouble."

"Yes, I agree with you there. I have a theory, Mr. Lester, which some chance words of yours this afternoon served greatly to strengthen. You remember, you remarked that a recurrence of insanity would be very likely if the circumstances attending it were related in any way to the original cause. My theory is that this man whom Harriet Kingdon killed was the cause of her insanity—that he'd wronged her."

"Yes," I agreed; "yes—and yet, how explain his presence here? If he'd wronged her, he'd hardly seek her again."

"I don't know; there are queer depths in human nature. Unfortunately, I see no way of proving the theory either right or wrong—of putting it to the test; not, at least, until Lucy Kingdon recovers and chooses to speak."

"I think I can put it to the test," I said, "if you'll permit me to lay it before a friend. I must tell you, though, that he's a reporter, and if the theory proves to be the right one, he'll use it."

"I see no objection to that," said Dr. Schuyler, after a moment's thought;

"provided, of course, that he doesn't use it unless it's fully proved."

"I can promise that," I said.

"And whether it proves right or wrong, I should like to know."

"You shall, at the first moment. And, by the way," I added, "you were speaking the other evening of Ruth Endicott. There is a rather remarkable portrait belonging to the Kingdons which has her name in the corner."

"Yes; I've seen it."

"Did she really paint it?"

"Oh, I think there's no doubt of that."

"Did she paint anything else?"

"She painted three or four crude portraits for people here in town, but they've long since been banished to the garret—where they belong. She had talent, but she lacked training."

"She interests me, somehow," I said. "I don't know why. Is the portrait a good one?"

"It isn't a portrait—it's rather an impression of her. As an impression, it's very good."

He opened his mouth as though to say something more, then thought better of it.

"You haven't told me yet," he added, as I rose to go, "whether you've heard anything more from Miss Lawrence. To-day's tragedy has so far outdone yesterday's that I nearly forgot to ask you."

"I believe she's out in mid-ocean now," I said, and related briefly the incident of the telegram and of Burr Curtiss's starting in pursuit. "He'll meet her at Liverpool," I concluded, "and they can fight out their battle there."

"Yes," he nodded. "God grant they find it not too bitter."

Godfrey was awaiting me at the hotel, and I told him in detail of Dr. Schuyler's

revelation, pointing out at the same time—not without some obvious exultation—how, at a breath, it overthrew his elaborately developed theory.

"Well, we're all liable to make mistakes at times," he said good-humouredly. "Now that we're on the right track, I don't think there'll be much difficulty in working the whole thing out."

"Dr. Schuyler hopes you'll be able to, and so do I—though I don't see just how you're going to do it."

"Oh, I think I'll be able to do it—you see, we've got a starting-point now. But I'll have to go to New York. Won't you come along?"

I was tempted.

"How long will it take?" I asked.

"Not over three or four hours. You ought to get to bed by midnight, and you can come down in the morning for the inquest."

I saw that he wanted me; the temptation was too strong to be resisted.

An hour later we were in the office of the Bloomingsdale asylum.

"It was about twenty years ago that Miss Kingdon was admitted," said Godfrey to the chief physician, whose interest he had enlisted, and who had been busy getting out the records, "and she remained here about a year before she was discharged as cured."

"There oughtn't to be any trouble finding it," said the chief. "In fact, there ought to be a voluminous record of a case like that. Let me see—Kingdon—Kingdon," and he ran his finger down an index. "No, I don't see it—this covers five years."

"Perhaps she was registered under another name," I suggested.

"Yes, that's very likely," Godfrey admitted. "May I see the record, doctor? Perhaps I'll be able to pick her out. Cases that stay here that length of time aren't very common, are they?"

"No; they're rather exceptional; besides, twenty years ago, we hadn't so many as

we have to-day."

Godfrey was examining the index.

"If there's no other way, we can sift out the cases which answer in a general way to the one we want, and investigate all of them. But I hope that won't be necessary. Let me see—F—G—H——"

"There was an inquiry the other day about a case which was a good deal like yours—only that was for an Italian woman—a Harriet Parello."

Godfrey's lips were twitching and his finger trembled a little as he ran it down the column of names, but when he spoke, his tone was the most casual.

"Yes," he said, "here she is—Harriet Parello. She was brought here from West Twenty-seventh Street," and he named the number. "Not a very savoury locality, is it, doctor?"

"No; though one can't tell what it was twenty years ago."

"That's true. I don't suppose you remember anything about her?"

"No; I wasn't here at that time."

Godfrey was still running down the column of names, and was seemingly little interested in the Parello case.

"The husband rather impressed me," went on the chief. "Rather a handsome fellow in his day, but now evidently a wreck—and a perfect brute morally—or so I judge."

"What did he want?" inquired Godfrey negligently.

"He wanted to know what had become of her. I thought it peculiar he should have waited so long to make inquiries."

"Were you able to help him out?"

"Oh, yes; our records give the history of every case."

Godfrey closed the index, evidently disappointed.

"I don't see any trace here of the case I'm looking for," he said. "Maybe she didn't come here, after all. But I should like to look at the records, doctor, just

out of curiosity. This Parello case, now——"

The chief pulled a big ledger down from a shelf, referred to a number in the index, and opened the book.

"Here it is," he said. "You see, she was suffering from emotional insanity—homicidal mania—stayed nearly a year—was very violent at first—gradually grew better and was finally discharged as cured. Her sister, Miss Lucy Kingdon—why, wasn't that the name you were looking for?"

"Yes; and this is the case. Please go ahead, doctor."

The chief looked at him for a moment in astonishment, then turned back to his book.

"Her sister, Miss Lucy Kingdon, of Elizabeth, New Jersey, was notified at her request," he continued, "and came after her. There have been no reports since."

"That's all we need to know," said Godfrey, permitting some of his satisfaction to appear in his face. "This record was shown to the husband, I suppose?"

"Yes; I had no reason for refusing to show it."

"Most certainly not," agreed Godfrey. "And I must compliment you, doctor, on the very thorough way in which your records are kept. Come, Lester, we haven't any time to lose.

"Our chain is complete in every link," he added, when we were in our cab again, rattling westward across the city. "Nothing can break it. All we need now is to learn the story of the Parellos."

"And that's what we're going after?"

"Yes—but it's a chance. Twenty years, in a neighbourhood like that, are certain to work great changes. It's a long chance. Ten to one, there'll be nobody there who remembers Parello."

And he was right. The block in which was the number we sought had been converted into a street-car barn. There were no longer any Italians in the neighbourhood—it had become an outskirt of the negro quarter.

Godfrey took out his watch and glanced at it.

"Lester," he said, "I'm sorry, but I'll have to leave you. I've got to set my

subterranean machinery to work, and I'm afraid I can't take you with me, much as I'd like to. The agents I'll have to use are shy of strangers. Besides, I see you're getting sleepy."

"Yes," I confessed; "I am. I don't see how you hold up so well. Good-night, then; and good luck. I hope you'll win out."

"Oh, I shall," he said confidently. "You take the cab. I'll use the elevated. It's quicker, and every moment counts," and he waved me good-bye.

CHAPTER XXIII

The Story

It was not until I unfolded my *Record* at the breakfast table, next morning, that I fully appreciated Godfrey's tremendous activity. I had always known, of course, that he was energetic, indefatigable, and fertile of expedient, but his results, remarkable as they often were, were usually achieved with such apparent ease that I had never suspected the extent of the downright hard work which lay back of them. Now, as I looked over the paper before me, I understood and wondered.

I had left him at ten o'clock the night before, with the mystery still unsolved and seemingly unsolvable, for the only clue in his possession had led him to a blank wall. Yet here before me was the story. An entire page was devoted to it—and an astonishing story it was, written with verve and vividness, complete in every detail, and illustrated with photographs and sketches of all the scenes and characters. There was the Kingdon cottage, the grave in the cellar, the Kingdon sisters, the murdered man, the pearl-handled revolver—even the coroner and the chief of police. Many of the photographs had, of course, been collected the day before, and some of them, no doubt, had been used in the afternoon edition, but here they were welded into a homogeneous whole, complete and satisfying. I could fancy the city editors of the other morning papers turning green with envy as they read it.

And looking at the story, I understood, more clearly than I had ever done, the wide appeal of the yellow press—it paid for the best talent in the market; it handled its matter in a way to attract attention; it told its stories in a style incisive and easily comprehensible, and added the visual appeal of pictures, which gave the supreme touch of reality. *And* it got the news. Abstractly, I am anything but an admirer of the yellow press; concretely, I have often found that to get the last detail of any event—more especially of any event with a sensational or mysterious side—I must have recourse to its columns, just as I had recourse to them now.

As I read on, I marvelled more and more at the system which rendered possible the securing of all these details in so short a time—subterranean, Godfrey had called it; superhuman, I would have said, and I determined that he should some

day introduce me to it. He had run down Parello, unmasked him, laid him bare in all his treachery and vileness; the whole sordid, terrible story lay revealed—and as I thought of Harriet Kingdon's sufferings and abasement, I did not wonder that she had shot down the brute who was trying to drag her back to them. Some of the details, I knew, Godfrey must have filled in for himself, since there could be no way of verifying them at this late day; but they fitted so closely with the rest of the structure that there could be no doubt of their essential truthfulness.

Such, for instance, was the detail of their meeting. Parello had been a teacher of music, and Godfrey shrewdly guessed that he must have met Harriet Kingdon and become acquainted with her at the house where she was employed as governess. The rest of the story could be easily built up. He was a handsome and magnetic fellow, she a passionate and attractive woman. He had struck a chord in her which she could not but obey. He had seemed then to have a future before him; the brave exterior gave no hint of the rottenness within. He had that grandiloquent way of speaking of the future which is characteristic of the Latin races—that sublime faith in himself which needed no justification. He had impressed himself upon her as a genius who would one day astonish the world; and if he had certain assertive peculiarities which jarred disagreeably at times, why, was not all genius so? She began by admiring him; she ended by yielding to him. No doubt she fancied that she was hitching her wagon to a star.

Whether there had been a marriage was not certain; Godfrey believed there had been. At any rate, Parello had introduced her to his friends as his wife, and, for a time, all went well. Then the devil in the man cropped out. He was naturally indolent. He quit teaching under the pretext that he wished to compose a masterpiece, and forced her to support him. No doubt she even yet believed in him; but he dragged her down to depths unspeakable, trampling her into the very mire of the Italian colony.

At last, he brought his real wife from Italy to live with him. This swarthy vixen had added new torments to the unfortunate girl's position, had devised new insults for her, and the end had been Bloomingdale. Up to the very last, such was the nature of the woman, she had continued to love the man, contented to be his dog, his slave, for the privilege of being near him. Doubtless all this time her mind was weakening, and she clung to him out of old habit. But with the sudden accession of madness, hate had blazed up in her, white-hot, and she had attempted to stab him. He had called the police, and she had been dragged away, cursing, shrieking, a spectacle to shake the strongest nerves. It was in that struggle that he had lost the end of his little finger. She had seized it between her

teeth and bitten it clean through. From a woman she had changed into a monster.

But insanity of this type usually yields to treatment; and though Harriet Kingdon's case proved to be of unusual obstinacy, patience and careful nursing triumphed in the end, and reason was restored to her. Restored, that is, as life is restored to a man stricken with heart disease; resting not on the firm foundation of assured health, but on a delicate balance which any shock may disturb.

Not until she was ready to leave the asylum, did her sister know her whereabouts; I doubt if she ever knew the whole story of the sufferings which went before. She had come for her, had taken her back to Elizabeth, to the home which Mrs. Lawrence's kindness and generosity had provided.

The Parellos had remained with the Italian colony, sinking lower and lower. Parello, driven by his wife, the target of her abuse now that she no longer had any other, endeavoured to resume his teaching, but he had so coarsened in habits and appearance that the old doors were shut to him. Still, he managed to scrape along, always on the verge of want. Then, in a fortunate hour, his wife had been run down and killed by a trolley car, he managed to exact damages for her death, and for the moment found himself in affluence.

It was at this time that his thoughts turned to Harriet Kingdon. Why? It is impossible to say. Perhaps he felt some revival of his old passion for her; perhaps he may even have had some twinges of remorse; more probably he realised that he was growing old; he wanted some one to wait on him and slave for him, some one upon whom he could wreak his gusts of passion. He had always believed himself irresistible to women; he knew the dog-like devotion which Harriet Kingdon had had for him; he believed that he had only to speak the word, and she would crawl back to him. But he would do more than that; he would be generous; he would offer to make her really his wife. Magnificent! Could she refuse such an offer as that? The wife of Parello!

So he had made inquiries at the asylum, had learned her address, and had taken the train for Elizabeth on the morning of that fatal tenth of June. He had made his way to the Kingdon cottage, had found Harriet Kingdon there alone, had entered, seated himself familiarly, perhaps attempted some endearment. He was confident, self-satisfied. It was better than he had hoped. Here was a comfortable home ready for him; a wife who seemed to be making a good living. If it should be necessary, he could no doubt find many pupils at Elizabeth, and if the pay was not quite metropolitan, why, neither was the work. Here was a golden future;

yes, he would be generous; she should be his wife; he would forget all that had happened....

But the sight of him had brought back the memory of her old infamy, which her attack of madness and the years had partially blotted out; the cloud rolled down upon her brain again, that white hate leaped to life. She snatched up her revolver and shot him through the heart, even as he sat there confidently smiling. Then, with a strength born of insanity, she had dragged him to the cellar and dug a grave for him there.

The story was strong in every link; there could be no doubting it.

Not until the inquest was finished, and we entered the train together to return to New York, did I get the chance to talk quietly with Godfrey.

"You did great work," I said, as we sat down together.

"Yes," he agreed, smiling, "I was pleased with it myself. The story developed beautifully."

"And clearly. Even the coroner's jury couldn't question it. There's no possibility, now, of any one associating this affair with Miss Lawrence's disappearance. If it had to happen, I'm glad that it happened just when it did—it's served to make the public forget the other mystery. I'm pleased for another reason," I added. "Lucy Kingdon won't be called upon to tell that story on the stand. I don't like her nor trust her, but I'm glad she'll be spared that ordeal."

"It would have been a trying one," Godfrey agreed. "The coroner tells me that she's very ill. I feel guilty, in a way. I should have prepared her for that horror in the cellar. I shouldn't have taken her without warning to the brink of that grave."

"That wasn't the only cause of her illness," I said. "She had sins of her own on her conscience. I don't understand even yet," I added, "why that face should affect her so. She couldn't have recognised it, since she'd never seen Parello."

"How do you know she never saw him? I'm decidedly inclined to think she had—that he was the cause of that violent quarrel between her and her sister which Dr. Schuyler mentioned. Lucy Kingdon, looking at the man clear-eyed, saw him as he was and tried to dissuade her sister from the entanglement; the elder

woman, blinded by passion, wouldn't listen, and the quarrel followed, in which both, no doubt, used words which they afterwards regretted."

"Yes," I agreed, "perhaps you're right."

"Even if she'd never seen him," Godfrey added, "she must have suspected who it was—there was only one man in the world whom her sister was capable of killing. Or she might have imagined that it was some one else. There's been nothing in all this, Lester, to disprove my original theory about Miss Lawrence."

"Godfrey," I said impulsively, "I'm going to disprove it once and for all. Look at this," and I thrust into his hands the photograph Burr Curtiss had entrusted to me.

He gazed at it for some moments in silence. At last he handed it back to me.

"Do you believe that theory now?" I asked.

"No," he answered, and sat staring straight before him, his lips compressed.

"I knew you'd say so," I said. "I knew you'd see how impossible it was that there should be any shameful secret in her life. I wavered once or twice when every discovery we made seemed to confirm your theory, but I never really believed it. I'd only to recall this photograph——"

"Why didn't you show it to me before?" he asked.

"Candidly, Godfrey," I answered, crimsoning a little, "I—I don't know."

"Oh, yes, you do!" he retorted. "You were afraid I'd chin it out of you."

"Well, yes, I was," I admitted.

He looked at me curiously for a moment.

"I see you don't know me very well, even yet, Lester," he said, at last. "I'm sorry you didn't let me see it. It would have saved me a wild-goose chase. But then," he added, with a grim little laugh, "I might not have stumbled upon this second tragedy. So perhaps it was as well, after all. I forgive you."

"You think the photograph would have made the mystery clearer?" I asked.

"Clearer?" he echoed. "My dear Lester, it makes it more unexplainable than ever. It converts it from a vulgar intrigue into the most puzzling problem I ever had to

deal with!"

I was staring at him in astonishment.

"I don't see how it can do that!" I protested.

"Don't you? Well, I'll tell you. I've already pointed out to you that, so far as I could see, my theory was the only conceivable one which would explain Marcia Lawrence's flight. I look at that photograph and see at once that I must throw that theory aside. What have I left? Nothing! That photograph shows me a pure, cultured, innocent woman; I know that she loved devotedly the man she was to marry. Yet she deliberately deserts him. I should say it was incredible, if I didn't know it was true!"

"Then," I said, "while we've solved one mystery, the other is as deep as ever."

"Deeper!" he corrected. "Miles deeper. In fact, it hasn't any bottom at all, that I can see," and he sank back into his seat again, a deep line between his eyebrows.

CHAPTER XXIV

The Secret

The dusk of evening was falling as we were ferried across to the city. I bade Godfrey good-bye, and took a cab direct to my rooms, for I was weary in body and spirit. But a bath and dinner improved both, and at eight o'clock I was ringing at Mr. Royce's door, for I knew how anxious he would be to hear my story, and besides, I owed him some reparation for leaving him alone at the office.

He opened the door himself, and his face brightened at sight of me.

"Why, Lester!" he cried, and shook hands warmly. "Come in. I'm mighty glad to see you."

"I thought you'd like to hear about it," I said.

"Of course I shall. It was like you to think of it."

"I wanted to talk it over with you. It may help to straighten things out. I was afraid there wouldn't be time at the office."

"We are rushed there, and that's a fact. Suppose we go up to the den. We can talk our talk out, there. Though," he added, as he led the way up the stair, "we could do that anywhere to-night. I'm keeping bachelor's hall. That affair at Elizabeth so upset my wife that she's gone away to the mountains to get braced up. Here we are," and he threw open a door.

It was a cheery room, where he had gathered together the impedimenta which had marked his progress through bachelordom, mementoes of his college days, and such other possessions as were peculiarly his.

"Now," he said, when we were settled, "let's have the story. Of course I've read the papers, but I hope you won't take that into account."

So I told it step by step, while he listened silently, save for an occasional exclamation of astonishment.

"It's the most remarkable thing I ever heard," he said, when I had finished. "I don't wonder that you believed at first that it had some connection with the Lawrence affair."

"It was certainly a remarkable coincidence that they should happen together as they did."

"And the first affair is as deep a mystery as ever?"

"Godfrey says it's deeper than ever. I showed him Miss Lawrence's photograph as we came in on the train together, and after he'd looked at it, he said it was the strangest puzzle he'd ever encountered. It's absolutely unexplainable."

Mr. Royce smoked for a moment in silence.

"Of course there must be some explanation," he said, "and an adequate one. Marcia Lawrence wouldn't have run away without good and sufficient reason."

"No," I agreed, "but there's one thing certain—whatever the reason, it isn't of a nature to render the marriage impossible. She was probably overwrought when she wrote that note to Curtiss—something had upset her so suddenly and completely that she couldn't see clearly."

"How do you know that?"

"Don't you remember her mother's last words to me? She said it would be for Curtiss to decide."

"Yes, I remember. And I think there's no question as to what his decision will be."

"No," I agreed. "Most men would be glad to get Marcia Lawrence upon any terms."

"Not Curtiss—but then he's desperately in love. Maybe he'll be willing to recede a shade or two from his ideal."

"He won't have to recede," I asserted confidently. "She's spotless, whatever the secret."

"I hope so," agreed our junior slowly. "Well, they'll have to fight it out together when they meet on the other side. If I were Curtiss, I'd be mighty shaky about that meeting."

"And I. Of course," I added, "the whole mystery hinges on that letter from New York. Godfrey imagined he knew the contents, but the event showed how wide he was of the mark. He had a theory that the letter was written by a disreputable, blackmailing husband of the girl, whom she'd believed dead. That was his theory from the first—the only possible explanation, he called it. Then, when he found that a picturesque stranger had asked the way to the Kingdon cottage, he immediately concluded that the letter had appointed a rendezvous, and that Miss Lawrence had kept it. All of which was afterwards shown to be mere moonshine."

"Not the first part of it," Mr. Royce objected. "There's been nothing to disprove that."

"Nor anything to prove it."

"True—but it has a certain speciousness."

"Yes—all of Godfrey's theories have that. Do you remember what a perfect one he built up in the Holladay case, and how it fell to pieces? Well, I believe this is wilder yet. A look at Miss Lawrence's face will show you she hasn't any past of that kind. Godfrey himself admits that now."

My companion ran his fingers savagely through his hair.

"Of course I don't know anything about it," he said, "but I've already told you how the affair affects me. Trust me, Lester, there's some terrible secret just below the surface. I wanted to say as much to Curtiss, but didn't quite dare. That's why I shiver at the thought of that meeting. I pity him when he comes face to face with it. That reminds me—I found an old photograph of him the other day." He turned to his desk and, after a moment's search, brought out a card. "He gave it to me when we were chums together at college," he added, and handed it over to me.

It showed Curtiss as he was at twenty or twenty-one. The face was plumper than I knew it, and the skin much fairer. The hair was worn longer and the absence of beard or moustache revealed fully the singularly pure lines of the lower portion of the face—a poetic face, yet full of fire and vigour.

"We used to call him 'The Beaut.'," went on my companion. "I told you that he was rather girlish-looking. Well, see here—here he is as the soubrette, in a burlesque we got up in senior year."

He handed me a group picture including the whole company. The central figure was a charming girl, with admirable arms, hands, shoulders—an inimitable way of holding the head....

"Great Scott!" I shouted, springing to my feet. "Don't you see it? Don't you see it, man?"

"See it? See what, Lester?" repeated Mr. Royce, in amazement. "What's the matter, old fellow?"

"No, I haven't gone mad," I laughed, as he put a restraining hand on my arm. "It's the key to the mystery," I added, as calmly as I could. "I'm not going to tell you—I want you to see it for yourself. Come along."

He followed me down to the street without a word, though I could see how his hand trembled as he took down his hat. I myself was quivering from head to foot with excitement—with triumph. What a blind fool I had been not to suspect it long ago. Godfrey had never seen Curtiss, or he would have known the instant his eyes rested on that photograph!

Luckily, the journey was not a long one, or I could not have kept the secret.

"Sit there," I said, when we reached my room, and I motioned him to a chair near the table. I turned down the light and arranged my properties—let me confess at once to a secret liking for the dramatic—the unexpected. Then I turned up the light.

"Now look at them," I said, and pointed to the three photographs placed side by side before him.

He stared at them—at Marcia Lawrence; at Burr Curtiss, smooth-faced and girlish; at the soubrette....

I knew by the sudden deep breath he drew that he understood. There could be no mistaking. Feature for feature they would not match at all; but there was a tone, an expression, that little way of holding the head....

"Of course," he said slowly, at last. "Of course."

How easily it explained Marcia Lawrence's panic, her flight—there could be no marriage, no explanation—only flight!

"There's one crucial test," I said, glancing at my watch. "I'll make it this very

evening."

An hour later, I was shown for the third time into the study of Dr. Schuyler at Elizabeth. He was sitting at his desk, just as I had found him once before.

"Ah, Mr. Lester," he began.

"Dr. Schuyler," I interrupted, "I've a photograph here which I'm very anxious for you to see. This is it—whose do you think it is?"

He took it with a glance of astonishment, moved over to the table, and held it beneath the rays of the lamp.

"Why," he faltered, "why—it reminds me very strongly of young Boyd Endicott, as he was when I knew him, thirty years ago."

My heart leaped.

"As a matter of fact, Dr. Schuyler," I said, "it's a photograph of Burr Curtiss, as he was ten years ago."

He stared at me for a moment without understanding, then I saw the light of comprehension in his eyes, and he sank heavily back into his chair.

"Poor woman!" he murmured hoarsely. "Poor woman!"

And all the way back to New York, I was wondering which of the women he had meant. Which was the more to be pitied—the woman who, thirty years before, had been whirled away from her lover by a trick of fortune; or the younger one, innocent and unsuspecting, discovering, only at the last moment, the horrible abyss yawning at her feet?

Which of the women had he meant?

CHAPTER XXV

The Revelation

Neither Mr. Royce nor myself was quite equal to the routine work of the office next morning. We had solved the mystery, indeed; but so far from bringing us relief, the solution had brought us a terrible unrest. Miss Lawrence had chosen her words well when she had said that the marriage was "quite, quite impossible." Yet who could have guessed a reason so dark, so terrifying, so unanswerable! Small wonder that she had fled, that her first thought had been to put the ocean between herself and her lover. How could she meet him, how look him in the eyes, with that secret weighing upon her? How would she face him when she found him awaiting her at Liverpool? I shuddered at thought of that meeting. We should have held Curtiss back; we should have known that it was no idle whim, no empty fear which had driven her over-sea.

Resolutely I tried to put such thoughts behind me, and to apply myself to the mass of work which had accumulated during my three days' absence. Was it only three days? It seemed weeks, months, since that moment when I opened the telegram from Mr. Royce which summoned me to Elizabeth.

But they would not be frowned down, for there were many questions still unanswered. What had been Lucy Kingdon's connection with the mystery? Above all, why had Mrs. Lawrence permitted the courtship to go on? Perhaps she had not known—only at the last moment, after her daughter's disappearance, had she suspected. No doubt, it was that sudden revelation, confirmed, perhaps, by Lucy Kingdon, coming to her after she had left us in the library, which had struck her white and tremulous, which had urged her to tell me that the search must cease. Yet, even then, she had spoken as though the marriage might be arranged, as though it were not impossible! She had said that Curtiss himself should choose! What had she meant by that? Was there some depth which we had not yet touched, some turn to the tragedy which we did not suspect? Had we really found the solution, after all?

My mind flew back to the Kingdon women, with a sort of fascination. What had Harriet Kingdon meant by that wild outburst of hers?

"There are others," she had said, "who have waived their rights and torn their hearts and withered in silence——"

What had she meant by that? What secret was it had torn her heart? Were the words merely a meaningless outburst, an incoherent cry, the result of a mind disordered? I could not bring myself to think so, but cudgel my brain as I might, I could read no meaning into them. Yet it was for her that Mrs. Lawrence had sent at that supreme moment when I revealed to her the secret of the letter; it was of her she had spoken when she cried, "I thought it was that woman!" Harriet Kingdon had known the secret, then, and had kept silence.

Then, suddenly, it burst upon me what a hideous thing it was that she had done by keeping silent. It was the letter, arriving at that last desperate moment, which had snatched Marcia Lawrence and Burr Curtiss from the horrible pit which yawned before them. The writing of that letter was not an act of enmity, but of mercy. Harriet Kingdon had stood by and uttered no word of warning—I shuddered at the utter fiendishness of it! But who had written the letter? Then, in a flash, I knew!

"What is it, Lester?" demanded Mr. Royce, wheeling suddenly around. I suppose some exclamation must have burst from me, though I was not conscious of uttering any sound. "What is it? I can guess what you're thinking of—I can't think of anything else."

"I believe," I answered, "that I know who it was wrote that letter to Miss Lawrence."

"You do!" he cried. "Who was it?"

"Wait!" I said, and closed my eyes and pressed my hands tight against my temples in the effort at recollection. "It was Mrs. Lawrence's aunt—her father's sister. It was to her house she came when she ran away. It was there, no doubt, that the child was born."

"And who is she?" asked our junior. "Where does she live?"

I made another desperate effort of memory. At last I had it.

"Her name is Heminway," I said. "I don't know her address, except that it's somewhere in New York. She was married to a banker."

"Oh, I knew him—Martin Heminway," and Mr. Royce jerked down a directory

and ran feverishly through its pages. "Here it is—East Fifty-fourth Street."

He closed the book with a bang and took down his hat.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"I'm going to see her," he said. "You're coming, too. We'll get to the bottom of this, for Curtiss's sake. Either we'll prove it a mistake, or we'll prove beyond doubt that it's true."

Neither of us spoke during that long drive uptown. We were too depressed, too anxious. Nor did we speak as we mounted the steps of the old-fashioned brownstone and rang the bell. We were admitted. We were shown into a room on the second floor, after some delay, where, in a great padded chair, an old, old woman sat, thin and wrinkled, but with eyes preternaturally bright.

"Mrs. Heminway," Mr. Royce began directly, "we're representing Mr. Burr Curtiss. We feel that some explanation is due him of the sudden flight, three days ago, of Marcia Lawrence, whom he was to marry; and we believe that you're the one best fitted to tell us the whole story."

She did not answer for a moment, but sat peering up at us, plucking at the arms of her chair with nervous, skinny hands.

"Of course he has a right to know!" she cried, in a high, thin voice, like the note of a flute. "I thought the girl would tell him."

"But since she hasn't," said our junior, "I hope you will. I know it won't be a pleasant task——"

She stopped him with a quick, claw-like gesture.

"I have never shrunk from any duty," she said, "however unpleasant. Sit down, gentlemen. I will tell you the story."

I am sure there was no evil in either of them—Boyd Endicott or Mary Jarvis. They were rather another Mildred and Mertoun, caught in the grip of circumstance and whirled asunder, by one of those ironical tricks which fate sometimes loves to play. For, on the night of the elopement, while Boyd

Endicott, leaving Princeton on the eve of his Christmas vacation, was waiting for his bride at Trenton, with every preparation made to whirl her away to a new home in the West, she was speeding away from him toward New York. She had taken the train at Fanwood and was to change at Elizabeth. There, half dazed by the noise, bewildered by the storm which was raging, tremulous with fright, confused in the tangle of tracks, she had taken the wrong train.

Boyd Endicott waited through the night, with what agony of doubt one can guess; then, when morning dawned, believing Mary Jarvis faithless—believing she loved her father more than him—hot-blooded and impetuous, he had boarded a train and journeyed alone into the West, where they had planned to build up a new home together. He was never to know the true story of that night, for there in the West, two days later, his life had been crushed out.

Meanwhile, almost paralysed with fear, the girl arrived at New York. She was ill, benumbed, chilled with the cold; darkness was coming on; she knew not where to turn, and finally, in an agony of desperation, she sought the home of Mrs. Heminway. The cause of her illness could not be long concealed; she asserted that she was married, that she had been Boyd Endicott's wife for nearly a year; but her father did not believe her. For she had no marriage lines, she did not even know the name of the minister before whom their vows had been uttered—she could tell only of a long drive through the dashing rain one night when her father had been detained in town; of a hasty ceremony; of the drive home again. It was an incoherent story, at the best, and she told it in a half-delirium which made it more incoherent still. Her father was nearly mad with rage; in his first white wrath, he was for sending her forth into the streets. But his sister reasoned with him—there was no need of a public disgrace; she would take the child, the sight of it should never offend him, nor should his daughter know aught concerning it. Doubtless they would have made some effort to verify her story, but the news of Boyd Endicott's death rendered that unnecessary. For their plan was laid.

So the child was born—a boy—and the mother lay for days and weeks hovering between life and death. When she came again to consciousness, they told her that the child was dead—had never lived, indeed. They told her, too—no doubt with a kind of fierce exulting—how Boyd Endicott had met his end—a fit punishment from the hand of God! The past was buried with him. It must be as though it had never been.

Mary Jarvis acquiesced. Life, it seemed, held nothing more for her. The future, no less than the past, was to her a dark and lifeless thing. She would have

welcomed death, but it did not come. She grew slowly better, and at last she was able to go with her father to Scotland, for a long visit among his people there, while he hastened home for his revenge—his pound of flesh. Whatever fault she had been guilty of, she expiated by taking, without love—for she knew that love would never come into her life again—the husband of her father's choosing. And seemingly she had never suspected that her child was living; certainly she never dreamed that her instinctive tenderness for her daughter's lover was that of a mother for her son.

So the years passed, and cast a veil about this sorrow; not concealing it, but rendering it less sharp, less poignant. To her daughter no whisper of this secret ever came until that terrible moment when she opened the letter marked "Important—read at once." The blow, of course, must have fallen—it was right that it should fall—but oh! how it might have been tempered. Here is what she read, in that half-darkened library whither she had fled for refuge:

> "MARCIA LAWRENCE:—I suppose that you have never heard of me, yet I am your mother's only living relative, her father's sister. There are painful memories, perhaps, which have caused her to wish to forget me, and it is not to claim relationship or ask for love or sympathy that I write this letter, but to fulfil a sacred duty. A Merciful Providence turned my eyes, this morning, to an article in the *Tribune*, describing your approaching marriage, of which I have hitherto been kept in ignorance. From the name, age, and circumstances given concerning the bridegroom's life, I am certain he is your brother, your mother's son, born in sin in this house thirty-one years ago. So are the iniquities of the parents visited upon the children. Ex. 34:7; 20:5. See also Le. 20:10; I. Cor. 6:13; Ro. 6:23. I thank God that He has enabled me to prevent this last iniquity. If any doubt remains to you, ask your mother for the story, or come to me and I will tell it you.
>
> "MARGARET HEMINWAY."

One can guess how this horrible letter palsied her; how this first face-to-face encounter with the world's sin and misery tortured and sickened her. But she shook the weakness off—they would be seeking her in a moment; she must flee, must hide herself, until she had time to think, to adjust herself to this new, corroding fact which had come into her life. So she sought the Kingdon cottage, the nearest, most convenient refuge, and there had written that hasty, despairing note and entrusted it to Lucy Kingdon, who had brought her a gown to replace that mockery of satin. She had remained there, hidden, during the long

afternoon, secure in the knowledge that these women, whose devotion to her had a peculiar intensity which she had not quite understood, would not betray her.

Then, as soon as darkness fell, she had come to New York and sought Mrs. Heminway. She must be quite certain; she must know the whole truth. And that old, old woman, with all the grimness of her creed, told her the story bluntly and cruelly, as she told it to us. The child had not died, but had been placed with the family of the manager of her husband's estate on Long Island, who himself did not know its history; who had, in the end, adopted it and given it his name. There could be no mistaking.

I have called her merciless, for she seemed to glory in another's anguish, counting it fit retribution and a punishment from the Lord. Yet I trembled to think how more merciless she might have been had she withheld the truth!

And when she had heard the story, Marcia Lawrence could no longer doubt. But one great load was lifted from her, for she knew in her inmost heart that the story of that wild night drive was true—she knew that her mother had been guilty of no sin. There was a sweet comfort in the thought which made her burden less, though it did not alter the problem which she herself must face. She had been stabbed to the heart, and the wound was bleeding still. She had gone forth from the house white with agony; she wanted time to rest, to think, to grow accustomed to the world again. She had a battle to fight; and, hastily purchasing such clothing as she needed, she had taken the first boat for England, where she hoped to hide herself until the tumult in her heart subsided, and she had gathered courage to face the world and her lover.

CHAPTER XXVI

The Return

It was not until we were back at the office again that either Mr. Royce or myself ventured a comment upon this extraordinary story. Even then, we found very little to say. Nothing could be done to divert the blow; nothing even to lessen its severity. Burr Curtiss and Marcia Lawrence must endure their fate with such courage as they could; must forget; at least, must strive to soften love into affection. How would they regard each other, I wondered? Would the mere fact of revealed relationship alter their old feeling, or would love survive to torture them? They had in common no brotherly-and-sisterly instincts or experiences; they were unchanged; they were still maid and lover, as they had always been.

The days passed, and in the stress of work at the office, the memory of Burr Curtiss and his fortunes gradually became less vivid, until I began to hope that, in time, it might really cease to worry me. But one morning, Mr. Royce looked up from his paper, his eyes shining.

"The *Umbria* reached Liverpool this morning," he said, in a voice not wholly steady. "It's all over by this time. I wonder how they bore it?"

"Bravely, I've no doubt," I answered, but I trembled at thought of it. How had she summoned courage to tell him?

"He'll come home, I think," added Mr. Royce, pursuing his own thoughts. "They could hardly stay abroad together; their relationship, of course, will always remain a secret——"

The office boy entered and laid a little envelope at his elbow. He tore it open quickly and read its contents at a glance.

"It's a cable from Curtiss," he said, and passed it over to me.

> "*Oceanic* delayed engine break-down," I read. "Reached Liverpool five hours after *Umbria*. Missed Marcia but searching for her. Cable care Hotel Adelphi."

Mr. Royce sat for a moment drumming nervously upon his chair-arm.

"He hasn't any chance of finding her in a place like that," he said, at last. "Most probably she's gone on to London."

"Or to some place on the continent. There must be many places where she'd feel at home."

"What would we better do? Shall we write out the story and mail it to Curtiss? He'll get it in a week."

"He won't stay at Liverpool a week," I objected. "The letter might go astray, and be opened by some one who had no right to read it."

"We might cable a mere outline."

I thought it over; but somehow my point of view had changed. Now that I knew the story, it seemed to me that it was Marcia Lawrence's right to decide what step should be taken next. Once she had recovered her self-poise, she would see what course was best, and I was certain that she would be brave enough, strong enough, to follow it unshrinking to the end.

"Let us wait," I said. "A little delay can do no harm; just as haste can do no good."

"Yes; I believe that's best," agreed our junior. "Nothing we can do will help them. They must work out the problem for themselves."

"Besides," I added, "I've a feeling that Miss Lawrence will herself decide to meet it squarely. She'll realise that Curtiss has a right to know the story. I believe that she'll soon come home again, ready to face him and tell him everything. She'll see that it's cowardly to stay away. Then there's her mother—she'll think of her—of her misery and loneliness. She won't leave her to live by herself in that great, gloomy house. We're safe in leaving the future in her hands."

But in the days that followed, I came to doubt more and more whether this policy was the best one. Had I not been thinking too much of Miss Lawrence, and too little of our client? Perhaps if he knew the secret, he would no longer wish to pursue her; he might prefer to wait, to give time opportunity to heal the first rawness of the wound. Indeed, it was conceivable that love might change to loathing. In that case, it were better to have the crisis over with at once; to apply the knife before the sore had a chance to harden or grow deeper. Such heroic

action might effect a cure. But I kept these doubts to myself; there was no use disturbing our junior with them. I could see how he was suffering on his friend's behalf. I could guess his fear that some dreadful tragedy would mark the end.

The days passed, and we heard no more from

Curtiss, not a word to tell us how the search had progressed. Godfrey came in to see me once or twice, but he had nothing new to tell; and of course I had nothing to tell him. At last, he expressed the opinion that we should never solve the mystery; and as the public had forgotten it long since, he decided to waste no more time upon it.

Another visitor I had one afternoon, when Dr. Schuyler's card was brought in to me. I ordered him shown in at once, and as I shook hands with him, I noted that he seemed greyer and older than when I had seen him last.

"Yes," he said, with a smile, interpreting my glance; "it's this trouble which has been weighing upon me. I've tried to shake it off, but I can't."

"Sit down," I said. "I'm glad to see you. And I wouldn't allow the affair to worry me, if I were you."

"That's easy enough to say," he retorted, with a little shake of the head. "But remember, Mr. Lester, Mrs. Lawrence and her daughter were two of my dearest friends. And this tragedy has wrecked their lives. Is there any news?"

"None at all, except that Curtiss missed the *Umbria* at Liverpool, and has not been able to find Miss Lawrence."

"Perhaps that was best."

"I'm inclined to think so myself," I agreed.

"There's one thing, though," he added suddenly. "Curtiss has no reason to be ashamed of his birth."

I looked at him with quick interest.

"Then you've discovered——"

"Yes; the minister who married Mary Jarvis and Boyd Endicott. I couldn't rest after you showed me that picture—after I knew that Mary Jarvis had had a child. I felt that I must find out—for her sake, as well as for my own. And so I set

systematically to work. It was really not difficult, for there were not more than six or eight places where the ceremony could possibly have been performed. I took them one after another, and soon found the right one—you see, I had the date, approximately. Her story was true in every detail. They had driven to Clearwater, about five miles north of Plainfield, a little village of two or three hundred inhabitants. The minister who married them is still living. He showed me the record, and he remembered the affair distinctly. The night was a very bad one, and he had been aroused from sleep by a loud knocking at the door. He had gone down, thinking that it was some neighbour come to summon him to the bedside of some one taken suddenly ill, and was surprised to find a handsome young fellow standing on the doorstep. He explained his errand in a few words, and ten minutes later, the thing was done. The minister's wife was the only witness. The bride was very frightened and more than once seemed about to faint, but managed to pull through, and was driven away with her husband a few minutes after the ceremony has been performed."

The clergyman's face was glowing with satisfaction.

"It was a great thing to me," he added, "to be able to prove that Mary Jarvis had told her father the truth."

"It seems strange," I said, "that he never made any attempt to verify it."

"Ah, but he did," broke in Dr. Schuyler quickly. "He did verify it. At least it could have been no one else in my opinion, from the description given me by the minister at Clearwater. He was there and saw the record only a few days after that Christmas Eve on which his daughter attempted to run away."

"He never told his sister," I said, and told him of Mrs. Heminway's story.

"It was like him," said my companion, after a moment's thought, "to keep it to himself. Perhaps he feared his sister would feel some tenderness for the child if she knew there was no shame attached to it. But whatever his motive, I am glad that I know the truth."

"And I," I said. "It will be easier to tell Curtiss—if he must be told."

"And Marcia."

"I don't believe she ever doubted."

"Perhaps not; but it will be good for her to know."

"Yes," I agreed, and fell a moment silent. How would the story end?

"Poor children!" said my companion, and rose with a little sigh. "They must bear the burden with what strength they have. God send it be sufficient! I must bid you good-bye, Mr. Lester. I feel better, now that you know the truth. I want every one who knows the story to know this part of it."

"They shall," I promised.

"And if there is any way that I can help——"

"You don't need to assure me of that," I interrupted. "I shall call upon you without an instant's hesitation."

"Thank you," and he wrung my hand and was gone.

How would the story end? I asked myself the question again, as I sank back into my seat. And I could find no answer to it.

But the end was nearer than I had thought.

It was near closing time one afternoon, and we were finishing up some odds and ends of work, when the door opened, and in came Burr Curtiss. We were on our feet in an instant—Mr. Royce and I—and had him by the hands. He was greatly changed—older and thinner, with an increased lankness of jaw; but he had regained his equilibrium. He was no longer dazed by the blow fate had dealt him. The firm-set lips told that he had taught himself how to face the world and his own future.

We sat down after the first greetings, and then there was a little pause. I was uncertain how to begin; I had a horror of opening old wounds which I saw that Mr. Royce acutely shared.

"Well, I'm back," Curtiss began, seeing our hesitation and no doubt understanding it. "I soon found out that I'd undertaken a hopeless task."

"Then you didn't find her?" asked Mr. Royce.

"No," answered the other evenly. "I completely lost track of her after she left Liverpool. I was able to trace her to the station, and to find that she'd taken train

for London, and that was all. So I decided that the wisest thing for me to do was to come home. My boat got in an hour ago—and I came straight here for news."

Our junior nodded.

"Yes—I think you did right to come back. But I haven't any news—at least, I believe that she herself would wish to tell you——"

Curtiss started sharp around.

"Then you know?" he asked. "You know why she left me?"

Mr. Royce paused an instant, then chose the better way.

"Yes," he said. "Lester hit upon it, and we proved he was right."

Curtiss was out of his chair now; but he held himself well in hand.

"And you'll tell me?"

"It was nothing that reflects on either of you. It was something neither of you could help nor do anything to alter."

"So it's bad news!" and his face turned suddenly livid.

"Sit down, Curtiss," said our junior imploringly. "It's hard enough, at best—I—can't tell you at all if you take it that way."

Curtiss glanced at him again, then sat down.

"Now tell me," he said quietly, but I saw how his hands were trembling.

"I don't wonder she fled," began Mr. Royce, shrinking from the plunge. "She couldn't face the world——"

"But me," cried Curtiss; "she could have faced me!"

"You least of all."

"Tell me," whispered Curtiss. "Let me judge of that."

There was no resisting him—it was his right to know—so our junior told the story, as briefly as might be.

He bore it better than I had hoped. After a time, he was able to talk of it quite

calmly, to ask a question or two, to tell us something of his own boyhood, and of the people who reared him.

"I never suspected," he concluded, "that John Curtiss and his wife weren't really my grandparents. They told me my father and mother were dead, and they certainly treated me as a child of their own. They had no other children, and doubtless by the time I came of age to ask questions, regarded me as wholly theirs. Mrs. Curtiss died when I was sixteen, her husband three years later, just as I was ready to enter college; and I found that he'd made me his sole heir, and that I was worth some thirty thousand dollars. I went on to college, as they'd wished me to. And now," he added, "what shall I do? Shall I go to Elizabeth and see Mrs. Lawrence——"

It was plain that he could not think of her as his mother. She had never been his mother. He had never known her as such; she had played no part in his childhood. I knew that one of the questions I had asked myself was answered: the mere revelation of kinship had made no difference in his feeling for Marcia Lawrence. He loved her yet; he had that battle still to fight. And she—was it the same with her? What a hideous irony of fate!

"Mrs. Lawrence knew nothing of the story," I pointed out. "She may know nothing of it, even yet. She doesn't suspect that her child lived. I think her daughter means that she should never know, if it can be kept from her."

"Then she shall never know from me," he said, and took a deep breath. "I suppose that I'd better wait. Marcia can decide what's best to do. I—I don't think I quite realise what it all means," and he passed his hand before his eyes. "The best thing for me is to go to work. That'll give me something else to think about."

"That's right," I said. "Thinking about this won't do any good—nothing will."

"No," he agreed, his lips bloodless. "I begin to see that—to understand——"

The door opened, and the office boy came in.

"Telegram, Mr. Lester," he said, and gave it to me.

It was:

"Our Elizabeth correspondent wires Miss Lawrence home noon to-day.

"GODFREY."

CHAPTER XXVII

The Curtain Lifts

For a moment I hesitated. Was it best to tell him? But a glance at his drawn face decided me.

"The search is over," I said. "Miss Lawrence is home again," and I handed him the message.

He read it at a glance, then started to his feet.

"Will you come with me, Mr. Lester?" he asked. "I know I've given you a lot of trouble, but this will be the last, I think."

"You haven't given me a bit of trouble," I protested. "I'll be glad to come."

"Thank you," he said simply, and held out his hand to Royce.

"You think it best to go?" the latter asked.

"Best? Oh, I'm not thinking of that! I'm going to her—I've got to see her! I can't wait! I——"

He wrung our junior's hand without finishing the sentence; too overwrought, indeed, to finish it—and strode from the room.

Mr. Royce held me back for a rapid word of warning.

"I'm glad you're going," he said. "He'll need some one. There's no telling what'll happen. Good luck!"

When we were in the train, with the lights of Jersey City flying past us, I took occasion to examine Curtiss again. He was lying back in the seat with his eyes closed, and the posture made his face seem even lanker and grimmer than it had at first appeared. I saw that I must keep my wits about me. When he awoke to a full realisation of the trick fate had played him, he might, in his desperation——

"But you said Mrs. Lawrence told you she knew why Marcia had run away."

The voice fairly made me jump, it came so suddenly, so unexpectedly.

"She did," I answered, turning to find his dark eyes open and strangely bright. "But of course she was mistaken. She fancied it was something else, or she wouldn't have said what she did."

"What did she say? You've told me, but I've forgotten."

"She said that the marriage wasn't impossible—that the choice should be left to you."

He pondered this a moment, then his lips curved into an ironical smile.

"No doubt another family secret!" he said. "One would think we were in Corsica or Sicily! Well, we'll try to bear it. By the way, who's this fellow Godfrey, who sent you that message?"

"He's a newspaper-man, a friend of mine—a mighty clever fellow."

His face grew grimmer still.

"More food for the yellow press," he said, with a harsh laugh. "They certainly owe us a vote of thanks."

He was in a dangerous mood. I saw his face harden and darken as he gazed out through the window. His lips moved, but no sound came from them. Then they closed again, compressed and bloodless, and he settled back in his seat as though he had taken a final resolution. I shuddered as I tried to guess what it was. I could imagine but one end for a drama so hideous as this.

And then, as I lay back in the seat, gazing at him, a sudden ray of light flashed across my brain. That contour of the face—that poise of the head—where had I seen them? Where but in the portrait of Ruth Endicott which hung upon the wall of the Kingdon cottage! Since he resembled his father, he would, of course, resemble her. Another link in the chain, I told myself; and trembled to think how strong it was.

Nothing about the house had changed. As we drove up to the door, I saw that the

blinds were still drawn, as they had been at the time of my first visit, and no ray of light came through them. It seemed a house of death, and a little shiver ran through me as Curtiss rang the bell.

There was a long delay; a delay that tortured me: for a dark vision danced before me—the vision of a girl lying dead beneath the windows of the library, with a portrait pressed close against her heart. So vivid was it that I could not shake it off, and I nearly cried aloud as a light was switched on the hall, and the door suddenly opened. I looked up expectantly—but it was not Lucy Kingdon; it was a servant whose face I did not remember. She took our cards and showed us into the room which, when I had seen it last, was gay with flowers. Then she left us. Not until she had gone did I remember that Lucy Kingdon was still fighting a battle with death.

As moment followed moment, I found myself unconsciously gripping my hands tighter and tighter about the arms of my chair. There seemed to be about the house an atmosphere of terror. I could guess what agony of suspense Curtiss was enduring and I saw him wipe the perspiration from his forehead once or twice with a hand anything but steady. Perhaps she would not come. Perhaps she was not yet brave enough. Or perhaps she could not come——

There was a step at the door; a woman entered——

It was Mrs. Lawrence. She came forward with a smile of welcome. One glance at her face told me that she did not yet suspect—that her daughter had kept the secret.

"I knew you'd come," she said.

"Then she *is* here?" asked Curtiss, gripping his hands behind him, devouring her face with his eyes; feeling, perhaps, for the first time, some instinct of sonship stirring within him.

"Yes, she's here," answered Mrs. Lawrence, still smiling at him. "She came only a few hours ago and is very tired—too tired to talk, even to me. She doesn't feel strong enough to come down to see you now."

What power was it drew my eyes to the tapestry at the inner door? I saw it swing aside, almost imperceptibly; I caught the glimpse of a face, white as marble, whose eyes dwelt upon Curtiss with a look of love, of longing, that turned me a little giddy. She loved him yet! God pity them both!

"But she told me," Mrs. Lawrence was saying, "that if you'll come to-morrow morning, she'll see you. Oh, I can see how she's suffered! Too much, I think! And you've suffered, too," she added, and her eyes questioned his.

"Yes," he said. "I've suffered too."

"Thank God it's past! You see, I don't doubt you. I know that when you hear the story——"

"I have heard it," Curtiss interrupted grimly, and I saw a spasm of pain convulse the face at the door.

But Mrs. Lawrence was looking up at him, her eyes alight.

"And it will make no difference!" she cried. "It *can* make no difference—for you love her—I know it—I can see it—you love her just as you always did!"

"Yes," said Curtiss hoarsely. "God help me, I love her just as I always did!"

"Then you can't give her up—you won't—that would be cruel—would kill her, I think—for it's no fault of hers——"

"Give her up!" echoed Curtiss, seized suddenly with a terrible trembling. "No, I'll never give her up!"

"I knew it," she said triumphantly. "I knew I'd not misjudged you. And there need be no scandal. No one need ever know!"

What was she saying? What infamy was she proposing? But not with the joy-illumined face! Ah, she did not understand, and we should have to tell her!

"It was wrong, I know," she went on, more calmly. "But when the mother died, he wanted to take the child to rear it as his own—I had not given him any—and since—since—there was a sorrow in my own life, I could understand and forgive. It was a kind of penance—an atonement—and I welcomed it. Besides, he was not wholly to blame, for she—but I'll speak no ill of her. And I grew to love the child for her own sake—I grew to forget that she was not really mine ——"

Curtiss was clutching blindly at a chair, his face ghastly, his eyes staring.

"I—I don't think I quite understand," he faltered, "You—you're speaking of Marcia?"

"Of Marcia, certainly. But you said you knew the story."

She was looking at him intently, her face suddenly pale.

"Was it something else?" she asked. "Something else? Was it the letter? Tell me!"

"No, no," he protested, and stopped, unable to go on.

"I don't think he heard it quite correctly, Mrs. Lawrence," I said, seeing that he needed saving. "Do I understand you to say Miss Lawrence isn't your daughter?"

"She's Ruth Endicott's daughter. She was housekeeper here and she—she—But no matter. No one knew except her cousins, the Kingdons. It was Harriet who took her away—to Florida—and she died there. They promised to keep the secret—it was to their interest—we did everything we could for them—I was kinder to them than they deserved. But I loved the child—I had none of my own—I wanted to protect my husband's memory—Where was the sin in——"

"Where is she?" demanded Curtiss hoarsely, but with a great light in his eyes. "Where is she?"

"Then you don't mind? You won't——"

"Mind!" cried Curtiss. "Mind! Where is she?"

The curtains at the door were swept aside, and a woman appeared between them—a woman regal, with glowing eyes, with smiling, tremulous lips——

Fool that I had been not to guess—not to see! It was the Endicott strain, first and last—dark, passionate, virile—and I had shut my eyes to it!

I saw him turn toward her, his face aflame with joy——

Then the hot tears blinded me, and I groped my way from the room, from the house, out into the silent night; and I looked up at the quiet stars, with Pippa's song singing in my heart——

> "God's in his heaven—
> All's right with the world!"

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