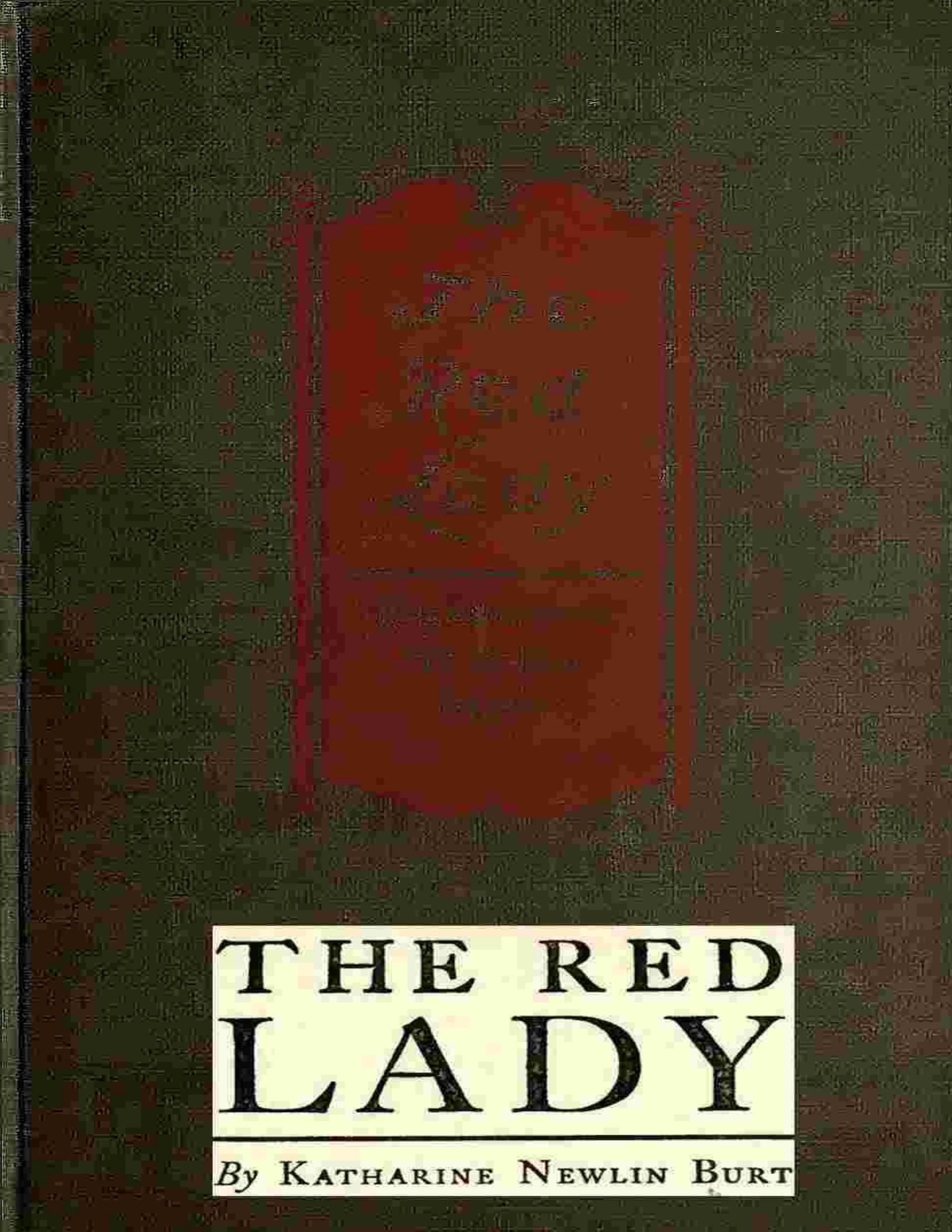

THE RED LADY

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Title: The Red Lady

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Release Date: September 30, 2015 [EBook #50090]
Last Updated: March 15, 2018

Language: English

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Houghton Mifflin Company

1920

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THE RED LADY

CHAPTER I—HOW I CAME TO THE PINES

IT is the discomfort of the thing which comes back upon me, I believe, most forcibly. Of course it was horrible, too, emphatically horrible, but the prolonged, sustained, baffling discomfort of my position is what has left the mark. The growing suspicion, the uncanny circumstances, my long knowledge of that presence: it is all extraordinary, not least, the part I somehow managed to play.

I was housekeeper at the time for little Mrs. Brane. How I had come to be her housekeeper might have served to forewarn me, if I had had the clue. None but an inexperienced, desperate girl would have taken the position after the fashion in which I was urged to take it. I remember the raw, colorless day, and how it made me shiver to face its bitter grayness as I came out of the dismal New York boardinghouse to begin my dreary, mortifying search for work. I remember the hollowness of purse and stomach; and the dullness of head. I even remember wondering that hair like mine, so conspiculously golden-red, could possibly keep its flame under such conditions. And halfway down the block, how very well I remember the decent-looking, black-clad woman who touched my arm, looked me hard in the face, and said, “A message for you, madam.”

She got away so quickly that I had n't opened the blank envelope before she was round the corner and out of sight.

The envelope contained a slip of white paper on which was neatly printed in pen and ink: “Excellent position vacant at The Pines, Pine Cone, N.C. Mrs. Theodore Brane wants housekeeper. Apply at once.”

This was not signed at all. I thought: “Some one is thinking kindly of me, after all. Some oldtime friend of my father's, perhaps, has sent a servant to me with this message.” I returned to my third-story back hall-bedroom and wrote at once, offering my services and sending my references to Mrs. Brane. Two days later, during which my other efforts to find a position entirely failed, there came a letter on good note-paper in a light, sloping hand.

The Pines

My dear Miss Gale:

I shall be delighted to try you as housekeeper. I think you will find the place satisfactory. It is a small household, and your duties will be light, though I am very much out of health and must necessarily leave every detail of management

to you. I want you to take your meals with me. I shall be glad of your companionship. The salary is forty dollars a month.

Sincerely yours

Edna Worthington Brane

And to my delight she enclosed the first month's salary in advance. I wonder if many such checks are blistered with tears. Mine was, when I cashed it at the bank at the corner, where my landlady, suddenly gracious, made me known.

Three days later, I was on my way to “The Pines.”

The country, more and more flat and sandy, with stunted pines and negro huts, with shabby patches of corn and potatoes, was sad under a low, moist sky, but my heart was high with a sense of adventure at all times strong in me, and I read promise between the lines of Mrs. Brane's kind little note.

I slept well in my berth that night and the next afternoon came safely to Pine Cone. My only experience had been the rather annoying, covert attention of a man on the train. He was a pleasant-enough looking fellow and, though he tried to conceal his scrutiny, it was disagreeably incessant. I was glad to leave him on the train, and I saw his face peering out of the window at me and caught a curious expression when I climbed into the cart that had been sent to meet me from “The Pines.” It was a look of intense excitement, and, it seemed to me, almost of alarm. Also, his fingers drew a note-book from his pocket and he fell to writing in it as the train went out. I could not help the ridiculous fancy that he was taking notes on me.

I had never been in the South before, and the country impressed me as being the most desolate I had ever seen. Our road took us straight across the level fields towards a low, cloudlike bank of pines. We passed through a small town blighted by poverty and dark with negro faces which had none of the gayety I associated with their race. These men and women greeted us, to be sure, but in rather a gloomy fashion, not without grace and even a certain stateliness. The few whites looked poorer than the blacks or were less able to conceal their poverty.

My driver was a grizzled negro, friendly, but, I soon found, very deaf. He was eager to talk, but so often misinterpreted my shouted questions that I gave it up. I learned, at least, that we had an eight-mile drive before us; that there was a swamp beyond the pine woods; that the climate was horribly unhealthy in summer so that most of the gentry deserted, but that Mrs. Brane always stayed, though she sent her little boy away.

“Lit'l Massa Robbie, he's jes' got back. Sho'ly we-all's glad to see him too. Jes'

makes world of diffunce to hev a child about."

I, too, was glad of the child's presence. A merry little lad is good company, and can easily be won by a housekeeper with the pantry keys in her hand.

"Mrs. Brane is an invalid?" was one of my questions, I remember, to which I had the curious answer, "Oh, no, missy, not to say timid, not timorous. It's jes' her way, don' mean nothin'. She's a right peart little lady. No, missy, don' get notions into yo' haid. We ain't none of us timid; no, indeed."

And he gave his head a valiant roll and clipped his fat gray horse with a great show of valor. Evidently he had mistaken my word "invalid," for "timid," but the speech was queer, and gave me food for thought.

We had come to an end of our talk by the time we reached the low ridge of pines, and we plodded through the heavy sand into the gloom, out of it, and down into the sudden dampness of the swamp, in silence. This was strange country; a smothered sort of stream under high, steep banks went coiling about under twisted, sprawling trees, all draped with deadlooking gray moss. Everything was gray: sky, road, trees, earth, water. The air was gray and heavy. I tried not to breathe it, and was glad when we came out and up again to our open sandy stretches. There was a further rise and more trees; a gate, an ill-weeded drive, and in a few minutes we stopped before a big square white house. It had six long columns from roof to ground, intersected at the second story by a balcony floor. The windows were large, the ceilings evidently very high. In fact, it was the typical Southern house, of which I had seen pictures, stately and not unbeautiful, though this house looked in need of care.

I felt very nervous as I stepped across the porch and pulled the bell. My hands were cold, and my throat dry. But, no sooner was the door opened, than I found myself all but embraced by a tiny, pale, dark woman in black, who came running out into the high, cold hall, took me by both hands, and spoke in the sweetest voice I had ever heard.

"Oh, Miss Gale, indeed I'm glad to see you. Come in now and have tea with me. My little boy and I have been waiting for you, all impatience since three o'clock. George must just have humored the old horse. They're both so old that they spoil each other, out of fellow-feeling, I reckon."

She went before me through a double doorway, trailing her scarf behind her, and I came into a pleasant, old-fashioned room, crowded with fussy little ornaments and large furniture.

It was thickly carpeted, and darkly papered, but was lit to warmth by a bright open fire of coals. The glow was caught high up by a hanging chandelier with

long crystal pendants, and under this stood a little boy. My heart tightened at sight of him, he looked so small and delicate.

“Here is our new friend, Robbie,” said Mrs. Brane. “Come and shake hands.”

I took the clammy little hand and kissed the sallow little face. The child looked up. Such a glare of speechless, sudden terror I have never seen in the eyes of any child. I hope I shall never see it again. I stepped back, half afraid, and hurt, for I love children, and children love me, and this little, sickly thing I longed to take close to my heart.

“Why, Robbie!” said Mrs. Brane, “Robbie, dear! He's very timid, Miss Gale, you'll have to excuse him.”

She had not seen the look, only the shrinking gesture. He was much worse than “timid.” But I was really too overwhelmed to speak. I turned away, tears in my silly eyes, and took off my hat and coat in silence, tucking in a stray end of hair. The child had got into his mother's lap, and was clinging to her, while she laughed and coaxed him. Under her encouragements he ventured to look up, then threw himself back, stiffened and shrieked, pointing at me, “It's her hair! It's her hair! See her hair!”

For a few moments his mother was fairly unnerved, then she began to laugh again, looked apologetically at me, and, rocking the poor, frightened baby in her arms, “Oh, Miss Gale,” she said sweetly, “we're not used to such splendor in our old house. Come, Robbie dear, all women are not as little and black and dreary as your poor mamma. I'll let him creep off into a corner, Miss Gale, while we have tea, then he'll get used to your prettiness and that wonderful hair from a distance.”

As I came up, the child fled from me and crouched in a far corner of the room, from which his little white face glimmered fearfully.

Mrs. Brane poured tea, and chattered incessantly. It was evident that she had suffered greatly from loneliness. Her eyes showed that she had lived too long in memories. I felt a warm desire to cheer and to protect her. She was so small and helpless-looking.

“Since my husband died,” she said, “I really have n't had the courage to go away. It's difficult to pull up roots, and, then, there are the old servants who depend so absolutely upon me. If I moved away it would simply be to explode their whole existence. And I can't quite afford to pension them.” Here she paused and added absently, “At least, not yet.”

I wondered if she had expectations of wealth. Her phrase suggested it.

“By the by,” she went on, “you must meet Delia, and Jane and Annie. They are your business from now on. Delia's the cook, while Annie and Jane do all the other work. I'll tell you about them so you'll be able to understand their crotchets. They're really old dears, and as loyal as loyalty itself. Sometimes,”—she laughed a hollow little laugh that sounded as if it had faded from long disuse,—“I wonder how on earth I could get rid of them.”

She gave me a humorous account of the three old women who did the indoors work at “The Pines.” She had hardly finished when Jane came in. This was the fat, little one; wrinkled, with gray curls; a pursed-up face, little, bright, anxious eyes. Again I was struck by the furtive, frightened air every one at “The Pines” wore, except George, the colored coachman, with his bravado.

Jane was introduced to me, and gave me rather a gloomy greeting. Nevertheless, I thought that she, too, after her own fashion, was glad to see me.

“You don't keep colored servants for indoors, do you, Mrs. Brane?” I asked, when Jane had taken away the tea-things and we were on our way upstairs.

“Oh, mercy, no! Of all wretched, superstitious, timid creatures, negro women are the most miserable. I would n't have one in the house with me over a single night. This is your room, Miss Gale. It is in the old part of the house, what we call the northern wing. Opposite you, along the passageway, is Robbie's nursery, which my husband used in the old days as a sort of study. This end of the house has the deep windows. You won't see those window sills anywhere else at 'The Pines.' My husband discovered the reason. There's a double wall at this end of the house. I think the old northern wall was burnt or torn down, or out of repair, and a former owner just clapped on another wall over it; or, perhaps, he thought it would make this end of the house warmer and more weatherproof. It's the quarter our storms come from. Whatever the reason, it makes these end rooms very pretty, I think. There's nothing like a deep window, is there? I hope you will like your room.”

I was sure that I should. It was really very fresh and pretty, seemed to have been done over recently, for the paper, the matting, the coat of white paint on the woodwork, the muslin curtains, were all spick and span. After Mrs. Brane had left me, I went to the window and looked out. I had a charming view of the old garden, still gay with late fall flowers, and with roses which bloomed here, probably all winter long. A splendid magnolia tree all but brushed the window with its branches. Just below stood a pretty arbor covered with rose-vines and honeysuckle. I drew in a deep breath of the soft, fragrant air. I was very happy, that night, very grateful for the “state of life to which Heaven had called me.”

CHAPTER II—SOMETHING IN THE HOUSE

DOWNSTAIRS, the little room that opened from the drawing-room was given to me by Mrs. Brane for my “office.” Here every morning Jane, Annie, and Delia came to me for orders.

It was a fortnight after my arrival, everything having run smoothly and uneventfully, when, earlier than usual, there came footsteps and a rap on the door of this room. My “Come in” served to admit all three old women, treading upon one another's heels. So odd and so ridiculous was their appearance that I had some ado to keep my laughter in my throat.

“Why,” said I, “what on earth's the matter?”

Jane's little, round, crumpled face puckered and blinked; Annie's stolid, square person was just a symbol of obstinate fear; Delia, long, lean, and stooping, with her knotted hand fingering her loose mouth, shuffled up to me. “We're givin' notice, ma'am,” she whined. Astonishment sent me back into my chair.

“Delia!”

Delia wavered physically, and her whitish-blue eyes watered, but the spirit of fear possessed her utterly.

“I can't help it, ma'am, I've been in this house me last night.”

“But it's impossible! Leave Mrs. Brane like this, with no notice, no time to get any one else? Why, only the other day she was saying, 'I don't see how I could get rid of them even if I wanted to.'”

I meant this to sting, and I succeeded. All three queer, old faces flushed.

Delia muttered, “Well, she's found the way, that's all.”

“What has happened?” I demanded. “Is it because of me?”

“No'm,” the answer came promptly. “You're the best manager we've had here yet, an' you're a kind young lady.” This compliment came from Delia, the most affable of the three. “But, the fact is——”

A pause, and the fright they must have had to bring them all pale and gasping and inarticulate, like fish driven from the dim world of their accustomed lives, communicated itself in some measure to me.

“Yes?” I asked a little uncertainly.

Then Annie, the stolid, came out with it.

“There's somethin' in the house.”

At the words all three of them drew together.

“We've been suspectin' of it for a long time. Them housekeepers did n't leave a good place an' a kind mistress so quick for nothin'.” Delia had taken up the tale. “But we kinder mistrusted like that it was foolishness of some kind. But, miss, well—it ain't.”

I was silent a moment, looking at them, and feeling, I confess, rather blank.

“What is it, then?” I asked sharply.

“It's somethin',” Jane wobbled into the talk.

“Or somebody,” contributed Annie.

I rapped my desk. “Something or somebody doing what? Doing it where?”

“All over the house, miss. But especially in the old part where us servants live. That's where it happened to them housekeepers in the day time, an' that's where it happened to us last night.”

“Well, now, let's have it!” said I impatiently. “What happened to you last night?”

“Delia was in the kitchen makin' bread late last night,” said Annie.

“Oh, let Delia tell it herself,” I insisted.

“But, ma'am, it happened first off to me. I was a-goin' down to help her. She was so late an' her with a headache. So I put on me wrapper, an' come down the passage towards the head o' the back stairs. Just as I come to the turn, ma'am, in the dark—I'm so well used to the way that I did n't even light a candle—somebody went by me like a draught of cold air, an' my hair riz right up on me head!”

“In other words, a draught of cold air struck you, eh?” I said scornfully.

“No, ma'am, there was steps to it, raythe slow, light steps that was n't quite so dost to me as the draught of air.”

I could make nothing of this.

Delia broke in.

“She come into the kitchen, white as flour she was, an' we went up to bed together. But scarce was we in bed when in come Jane, a-shakin' so that the candle-grease spattered all over the floor—you can see it for yourself this day-”

“And what had happened to Jane?” I asked with a sneer.

“I was a-layin' in bed, miss, in the dark, a bit wakeful, an' I heard, jes' back of me in the wall, somebody give a great sigh.”

I threw back my head, laughing. “You silly women! Is this all? Now, you don't mean to tell me that a draught of cold air, some falling plaster or a rat in the wall, are going to drive you away, in your old age, from a good home out into the world?”

“Wait a moment, miss,” cried Delia; “there's somethin' else.”

I waited. This something else seemed difficult to tell.

“You go ahead,” breathed Delia at last, nudging Annie, who gulped and set off with unusual rapidity.

“Robbie was sick last night, towards morn-in'. He had the night terrors, Mary said” (Mary was Robbie's nurse of whom at that time I had seen little), “an' she could n't get him quiet. He kep' a-talkin' about a lady with red hair”—they looked at me out of the corners of their eyes, and I felt my face grow hot—“a lady that stood over him—well! there's no tellin' the fancies of a nervous child like him! Anyways, Mary was after a hot-water bottle, an' we, bein' wakeful an' jumpy-like, was after helpin' her. Delia an' me, we went for a cup of hot milk, an' me an' Mary come upstairs from the kitchen again together an' went towards the nursery. Now, miss,”—again they cuddled up to one another, and Annie's throat gave a queer sort of click,—“jes' as we come to the turn of the passage, we seen somethin' come out o' the nursery, quick an' quiet, an' jump away down the hall an' out o' sight. Delia an' me, bein' scairt already, run away to our own room, but Mary she made fer the nursery as quick as she could, an' there she found Robbie all but in fits, so scairt he could n't scream, doublin' an' twistin', an' rollin' his eyes. But when she got him calmed down at last, why, it was the same story—a lady with red hair that come an' stood over him, an' stuck her face down closter an' closter—jes' a reg'lar nightmare—but we all three seen the thing come boundin' out o' his room.”

“Why isn't Mary here to give notice?” I asked after a few moments. During that time I conquered, first, a certain feeling of fear, caused less by the story than by the look in Delia's light eyes, and, second, a very strong sensation of anger. I could not help feeling that they enjoyed that endless repetition of the “lady with red hair.” Did the silly creatures suspect me of playing ghoulish tricks to terrify a child?

“Well, Mary, she looks rather peaky this mornin',” said Annie, “but she's young an' venturesome, an' she says mebbe we jes' fancied the thing cornin' out o' the nursery, an', anyways, she's the kind that would n't leave her charge. She's

that fond of Robbie.”

“I think I like this Mary,” said I. Then, looking them over as scornfully as I could, I went on coldly: “Very well, I'll take your story to Mrs. Brane. I will tell her that you want to leave at once. No, don't waste any more time. Do your work, and be prepared to pack your trunks. I think Mrs. Brane may be glad to have you go.”

But I was really very much surprised to find that I was right in this. Mrs. Brane almost eagerly consented, and even seemed to feel relief.

“By all means pack them off as soon as you can. I shall advertise for a man and wife to take their places. It will mean some pretty hard work for Mary and you for a short time, I am afraid, as I simply will not have any of these blacks in the house. But—”

I did n't in the least mind hard work, and I told her so and hastened to give the result of my interview, first to Annie, Delia, and Jane, who, to my satisfaction, seemed quite as much dashed as relieved at the readiness with which their mistress let them go, and, second, to Mary, the nurse.

CHAPTER III—MARY

I FOUND Mary, with Robbie, in the garden. She got up from her rustic chair under a big magnolia tree, and came hurrying to meet me, more to keep me from her charge, I thought, than to shorten my walk.

She need not have distressed herself. I felt keenly enough Robbie's daytime fear of me, but that I should inspire horrible dreams of red-haired women bending over his bed at night, filled me with a real terror of the child. I would not, for anything, have come near to him.

I stopped and waited for Mary.

She looked as fresh and sturdy as some hardy blooming plant, nothing "peaky" about her that I could see: short and trim with round, loyal eyes, round, ruddy face, a pugnacious nose, and a bull-dog's jaw—not pretty, certainly, but as trusty and delightful to look at as health, and honesty, and cleanliness could make her. I rejoiced in her that morning, and I have rejoiced in her ever since, even during that worst time when her trust in me wavered a little, a very little.

"Mary," I said, "can you give me five minutes or so? I have a good deal to say to you."

She glanced back at Robbie. He was busy, playing with some sticks on the gravel path.

"Yes, miss. Certainly." And I had her quiet, complete attention.

"You aren't frightened out of your senses, then, this morning?" I asked.

She did not smile back at me, but she shook her head. "No, Miss Gale," she said sturdily, "though I did see thet thing come out of the nursery plain enough. But it might have been Mrs. Brane's Angora cat. Times like that when one is a bit upset, why, things can look twice as big as they really are, and, as for Robbie's nightmare, why, as I make it out, it means just nothing but that some time, when he was a mere infant maybe, some red-haired woman give him a great scare. He's a terrible nervous little fellow, anyways, and terrible secret in his ways. At first, I could n't take to him, somehow, he was so queer. But now—why,"—and here she did smile with an honest radiance,—"it would take more'n a ghost to scare me away from takin' care of him. And a scared ghost, at that."

"Did you know that Delia and Annie and Jane are all leaving us to-day?"

Mary put up her hands and opened her blue eyes. “My Lor'! The poor, silly fools! Excuse me, Miss Gale, but I never did see such a place for cowards. Them housekeepers and their nerves!”

“Housekeepers, Mary?”

“Yes'm. We've had three this summer. They was as lonely and jumpy women as ever I saw. The first, she could n't sleep for hearin' footsteps above her head, and the second, she felt somebody pass her in the hallway, and the third, she would n't say what the matter was, but she was the most frightened of all. You promise to be a young lady with more grit. I'm glad of it, for I do think a delicate lady like Mrs. Brane had ought to have some peace and quiet in her house. Now, miss, I'll do anything to help you till you can find some one to take those women's places. I can cook pretty good, and I can do the laundry, too, and not neglect my Robbie, neither.”

I dismissed the thought of the three housekeepers.

“Oh, Mary, thank you! You are just splendid! Mrs. Brane says she is going to get a man and wife.”

“Now, that's good. That's what we need—a man,” said Mary. She was emphatically an old-fashioned woman, that is, a woman completely capable of any sort of heroism, but who never feels safe unless there is a man in the house. “Those black men, I think, are worse'n ghosts about a place. Not that they come in often, but one of the housekeepers was askin' that George be allowed to sleep inside. I was against it myself. Now, you depend upon me, miss.”

I was almost absurdly grateful, partly because her pluck steadied my nerves, which the morning's occurrences had flurried a little, and partly because I was glad that she did not share Robbie's peculiar prejudice. I went back to the house thoroughly braced, and watched the three old women depart without a pang.

Nevertheless, that description of the other housekeepers did linger uncomfortably in my memory.

CHAPTER IV—PAUL DABNEY

I”LL be glad to get at this kitchen,” said Mary when we went down to survey the scene of our impromptu labors; “those old women were abominably careless. Why, they left enough food about and wasted enough to feed an army. I would n't wonder, miss, if some of them blacks from outside come in here and make a fine meal off of pickin's. They could easy enough, and Mrs. Brane never miss it.”

“I dare say,” said I, inspecting the bright, cheerful place with real pleasure; “but, at any rate, Delia was a clean old soul. Everything's as bright as a new pin.”

Mary begrudged Delia this compliment. “Outside, miss,” she said, “but it's a whited sepulchre”—she pronounced it “sepoolcur”—“Look in here a moment. There's a closet that's just a scandal.”

She threw open a low door in the far end of the kitchen and, bending, I peered in.

“Why,” I said, “it's been used as a storehouse for old junk. One end is just a heap of broken-down furniture and old machinery. It would be a job to clear out, too, heavy as lead. I doubt if a woman could move most of it. I think Delia tried, for I see that things have been pushed to one side. Let me have a candle. You go on with your bread-making, while I get to work in here. I might do a little to straighten things out.”

Mary lit a candle and handed it to me, and I went poking about amongst a clutter of broken implements, pots and kettles, old garden tools, even a lawn-mower, and came against a great mass of iron, which turned out to be a lawn-roller. However did it get in here, and why was it put here? I gave it a push, and found that it rolled ponderously, but very silently aside. In the effort I lost my balance a little, and put my hand out to the wall. It went into damp darkness, and I fell. There was no wall at the narrow, low end of the closet under the stairs, but a hole.

“Oh, miss,” called Mary, coming to the door, her hands covered with flour, “Mrs. Brane says she wants you, please, to take tea up to the drawing-room. There's company, I fancy, and my hands are in the dough.”

I came out, a little jarred by my fall, a little puzzled by that closet with its dark, open end so carefully protected by a mass of heavy things. Then, for the

first time, I began really to suspect that something was not quite right at “The Pines.” I said nothing to Mary. Her steady, cheerful sanity was invaluable. Hastily I washed my rusty, dusty hands, smoothed my hair, prepared the tea-tray, and went upstairs.

Mrs. Brane was entertaining two men in the drawing-room.

I came in and set the tray down on the little table at Mrs. Brane's elbow. As I did so, I glanced at the two men. One was a large, stout man with gray hair and a gray beard and a bullying manner, belied by the kindly expression of his eyes. I liked him at once. The other, for some reason, impressed me much less favorably. He had an air of lazy indifference, large, demure eyes, black hair very sleekly groomed, clothes which even my ignorance of such matters proclaimed themselves just what was most appropriate for an afternoon visit to a Southern country house, and a low, deprecatory, pleasant voice. He gave me a casual look when Mrs. Brane very pleasantly introduced me—she made much more of a guest of me than of a housekeeper—and dropped his eyes again on the cup between his long, slim hands. He dropped them, however, not before I had time to notice that his pupils had grown suddenly large. Otherwise, his expression did not change—indeed, why should it?—but this inexplicable look in his eyes gave me an unpleasant little shock.

“Mr. Dabney,” Mrs. Brane was saying, “has been sent over by Mrs. Rodman, one of our distant neighbors, to enliven our dulness. He wants to study my husband's Russian library, and, as my husband made it an especial request that his books should not be lent, this means that we shall see Mr. Dabney very often. Dr. Haverstock has been looking Robbie over. The poor little fellow's nerves are in a pretty bad condition—”

“You'll let me see him, won't you?” murmured young Dabney; “I rather adore young children.”

“Oh,” laughed the big doctor in his noisy way, “any one who hasn't red hair may see Robbie. I hear he has a violent objection to red hair, eh, Miss Gale! Very pretty red hair, too.”

Of course it was friendly teasing, but it angered me unreasonably, and I felt the color rising to my conspicuous crop. Especially as Mr. Dabney looked at me with an air of mildly increasing interest.

“How very odd!” he said.

“Would you mind taking Mr. Dabney to the bookroom when he's finished his tea, Miss Gale,” asked Mrs. Brane in her sweet way. “I'd like to talk Robbie over a little longer with Dr. Haverstock, if you'll excuse me, Mr. Dabney. Show him

the card catalogue, Miss Gale. Thank you.”

It was an unwelcome duty, and I intended to make it as short as possible. I had not reckoned on young Mr. Dabney's ability as an entertainer.

He began to talk as we crossed the hall.

“Splendid house, isn't it, Miss Gale? The sort of place you read about and would like to write about if you had the gift. Have you ever been in the South before?”

“No,” I said discouragingly. “This is the room.”

“I know the country about here very well. Have you been able to get around much?”

“Naturally not. As a housekeeper—”

For a moment, as we came into the book-room he had stood looking gravely down; now he gave me a sudden frank, merry look and laughed. “Oh,” he said, “it's absurd, too absurd, you know,—your being a housekeeper, I mean. You're just playing at it, are n't you?”

“Indeed, Mr. Dabney,” I said, “I am not. I am very little likely to play at anything. I am earnestly trying to earn my living. The card catalogue is over there between the front windows. Is there anything else?”

“Was I rude?” he asked with an absurdly boyish air; “I am sorry. I did n't mean to be. But surely you can't mind people's noticing it?”

I fell into this little trap. “Noticing what?” I could n't forbear asking him.

“Why,” said he, “the utter incongruity of your being a housekeeper at all. I believe that that is what frightened Robbie.”

There was a strange note in his voice now, an edge. Was he trying to be disagreeable? I could not make out this young man. I moved away.

“Miss Gale,”—he was perfectly distant and casual again,—“I'll have to detain you just a moment. This bookcase is locked, you see—”

“I'll ask Mrs. Brane.”

I came back in a few minutes with the key. Mr. Dabney was busy with the card catalogue, but, for some reason,—I have always had a catlike sense in such matters,—I felt that he had only just returned to this position, and that he wanted me to believe that he had spent the entire time of my absence there.

“These other housekeepers,” he said, “were n't very earnest about earning their living, were they? Mrs. Brane was telling me—”

“Oh,” I smiled, rather surprised that Mrs. Brane had been so confidential. To

me she had never mentioned the other housekeepers. “They were very nervous women. You see, I am not.”

He turned the key about in his hand, looked down, then up at me demurely. He had the most disarming and trust-inspiring look.

“No,” he said, “you are not nervous. It's a great thing to have a steady nerve. You're not easily startled.” Then, turning to the bookcase, he added sharply, looking back at me as he spoke, “Do you know anything about Russia?”

“No,” I answered; “that is, very little.” There were reasons why this subject was distasteful to me. Again I moved away.

He opened the bookcase.

“Phew!” he said,—“the dust of ages here! I'll have to ask Mrs. Brane to let you—”

I went out and shut the door.

But I was not so easily to escape young Dabney's determination to see more of me. Mrs. Brane, that very evening, asked me to spend my mornings dusting, her husband's books and cataloguing them. At first I dreaded these hours with our visitor, but as the days went by I came more and more to enjoy them. I found myself talking to Mr. Dabney freely, more about my thoughts and fancies than about my life, which holds too much that is painful. And he was, at first, a most frank and engaging companion. I was young and lonely, I had never had such pleasant intercourse. Well, there is no use apologizing for it, trying to explain it, beating about the bush,—I lost my heart to him. It went out irrevocably before the shadow fell. And I thought that his heart had begun to move towards mine. Sometimes there was the strangest look of troubled feeling in his eyes.

This preoccupation kept me from thinking of other things. I was always going over yesterday's conversation with Mr. Dabney, planning to-morrow's, enjoying to-day's. Mrs. Brane seemed to watch us with sympathy. After a week or so, she put an end to what she called “Paul Dabney's short comings and long goings” and invited him to stay with us. He accepted, and I was wonderfully happy. I felt very young for the first time in my whole sad life. I remember this period as a sort of shadowy green stretch in a long, horrible, rocky journey. It came—the quiet, shady stretch—soon enough to an end.

CHAPTER V—“NOT IN THE DAYTIME, MA'AM”

MARY'S labors and mine did not last very long. At the end of a week, a promising couple applied for the position described in Mrs. Brane's advertisement. They drove up to the house in a hired hack one morning, and Mrs. Brane and I interviewed them in my little office. They were English people, and had one or two super-excellent references. These were rather antiquated, to be sure, dating to a time before the couple's marriage, but they explained that for a long while they had been living on their savings, but that now the higher cost of living had forced them to go into service again.

The woman would have been very handsome except for a defect in her proportions: her face was very much too large. Also, there was a lack of expression in the large, heavy-lidded eyes. The man was the most discreet type of English house servant imaginable, with side whiskers and a small, thin-lipped, slightly caved-in mouth. His eyes were so small that they were almost negligible in the long, narrow head. Their general appearance, however, was presentable, and their manner left nothing to be desired. To me, especially, they were so respectful, so docile, so eager to serve, that I found it almost disconcerting. They had the oddest way of fixing their eyes on me, as though waiting for some sort of signal. Sometimes, I fancied that, far down underneath the servility of those two pairs of eyes, there was a furtive expression of something I could not quite translate, fear, perhaps, or—how can I express it?—a sort of fearful awareness of secret understanding. Perhaps there is no better way to describe it than to say that I should not have been astonished if, looking up quickly into the woman's large, blank, handsome face, I should have surprised a wink. And she would have expected me to understand the wink.

Of course, I did not gather all these impressions at once. It was only as the days went by that I accumulated them. Once, and once only, Henry Lorrence, the new man, was guilty of a real impertinence. I had been busy in the bookroom with my interminable, but delightful, task of dusting and arranging Mr. Brane's books in Paul Dabney's company, and, hearing Mary's voice calling from the garden rather anxiously for “Miss Gale,” I came out suddenly into the hall. Henry was standing there near the door of the bookroom, doing nothing that I could see, though he certainly had a dust-cloth in his hand. He looked not at all abashed by my discovery of him; on the contrary, that indescribable look of

mutual understanding or of an expectation of mutual understanding took strong possession of his face.

“I see you're keepin' your eyes on him, madam,” said he softly, jerking his head towards the room where I had left Mr. Dabney.

I was vexed, of course, and I suppose my face showed it. My reproof was not so severe, however, as to cause such a look of cowering fear. Henry turned pale, his thin, loose lips seemed to find themselves unable to fit together properly. He stammered out an abject apology, and melted away in the hall.

I stood for several minutes staring after him, I remember, and when, turning, I found that Mr. Dabney had followed me to the door and was watching both me and the departing man, I was distinctly and unreasonably annoyed with him.

He, too, melted away into the room, and I went out to see Mary in the garden. Truly I never thought myself a particularly awe-inspiring person, but, since I had come to “The Pines,” every one from Robbie to this young man, every one, that is, except Mary and Mrs. Brane, seemed to regard me with varying degrees of fear. It distressed me, but, at the same time, gave me a new feeling of power, and I believe it was a support to me in the difficult and terrifying days to come.

At the box hedge of the garden, Mary met me. As usual, she kept me at a distance from her charge.

“Miss Gale,” she said, “may I speak to you for a minute?”

“For as many minutes as you like,” I said cordially.

She moved to a little arbor near by where there was a rustic seat. I sat down upon it, and she stood before me, her strong, red hands folded on her apron. I saw that she was grave and anxious, though as steady As ever.

“Miss Gale, "t is a queer matter,” she began.

My heart gave a sad jump. “Oh, Mary,” I begged her, “don't say anything, please, about ghosts or weird presences in the house.”

She tried to smile, but it was a half-hearted attempt.

“Miss Gale,” she said, “you know I aren't the one to make mountains out of mole-hills, and you know I ain't easy scairt. But, miss, for Robbie's sake, somethin' must be done.”

“What must be done, Mary?”

“Well, miss, I don't say as it mayn't be nerves; nerves is mysterious things as well I know, havin' lived in a haunted house in the old country where chains was dragged up and down the front stairs regular after dark, and such-like doin's which all of us took as a matter of course, but which was explained to the help

when they was engaged. But I do think that Mrs. Brane had ought to move Robbie out of that wing. Yes'm, that I do."

"Has anything more happened?" I asked blankly.

"Yes'm. That is to say, Robbie's nightmares has been gettin' worse than ever, and, last night, when I run into the nursery, jumpin' out of my bed as quick as I could and not even stoppin' for my slippers—you know, miss, I sleep right next to the nursery, and keeps a night light burnin', for I'm not one of the people that holds to discipline and lets a nervous child cry hisself into fits—when I come in I seen the nursery door close, and just a bit of a gown of some sort whiskin' round the edge. Robbie was most beside hisself, I did n't hardly dare to leave him, but I run to the door and I flung it wide open sudden, the way a body does when they're scairt-like but means to do the right thing, and, in course, the hall was dark, but miss,"—Mary swallowed,—"I heard a footstep far down the passage in the direction of your room."

My blood chilled all along my veins. "In the direction of my room?"

"Yes, miss, so much so that I thought it must'a' been you, and I felt a bit easier like, but when I come back to Robbie—" here she turned her troubled eyes from my face—"why, he was yellin' and screamin' again about that woman with red hair.... Oh, Miss Gale, ma'am, don't you be angry with me. You know I'm your friend, but, miss, did you ever walk in your sleep?"

"No, Mary, no," I said, and, to my surprise, I had no more of a voice than a whisper to say it in.

After a pause, "You must lock me in at night after this, Mary," I added more firmly.

"Or, better still, after Robbie is sound asleep, let me come into your bedroom. You can make me up some sort of a bed there, and we will keep watch over Robbie. I am sure it is just a dream of his—the woman with red hair bending over him—and I am sure, too, that the closing door, and the gown, and the footstep were the result of a nervous and excited imagination. You had been waked suddenly out of a sound sleep."

"I was broad awake, ma'am," said Mary, in the voice of one who would like to be convinced.

I sat there cold in the warm sun, thinking of that woman with long, red hair who visited Robbie. That it might be myself, prompted by some ghoulish influence of sleep and night, made my very heart sick.

"Mary," I asked pitifully enough, "didn't Robbie ever see the woman with red

hair before I came to 'The Pines'?”

Unwillingly she shook her head. “No, miss. The first time he woke up screamin' about her was the night before Delia and Jane and Annie gave notice.”

“But he was afraid of red-haired women before, Mary, because, as soon as I took off my hat downstairs in the drawing-room the afternoon I arrived, he pointed at me and cried, 'It's her hair!'”

“Is that so, miss?” said Mary, much impressed. “Well, that does point to his havin' been scairt by some red-haired person before you come here.”

“Surely Robbie could tell you something that would explain the whole thing,” I said irritably. “Haven't you questioned him?”

Mary flung up her hands. “Have n't I? As long as I dared, Miss Gale, it's as much as his life is worth. Dr. Haverstock has forbidden it absolutely.”

“That's strange, I think, for I know that the first way to be rid of some nervous terror is to confess its cause.”

“Yes, miss.” Mary was evidently impressed by my knowledge. “And that's just what Dr. Haverstock said hisself. But he says it has got to be drawn out of Robbie by what he calls the indirect method. He has asked Mr. Dabney to win the child's confidence; that is, it was Mr. Dabney's own suggestion, I believe. Mr. Dabney was with Mrs. Brane and the doctor when they was discussing Robbie and he says he likes children and they likes him, as, indeed, they do, miss. Robbie and him are like two kiddies together, a-playin' at railroads and such in the gravel yesterday—”

“Did he ask Robbie about the red-haired woman yesterday, because that may have brought on the nightmare last night?”

“I don't know, miss. I was n't in earshot of them. Mr. Dabney, he always coaxes Robbie a bit away from the bench where I set and sew out here.”

“I think I'll ask Mr. Dabney,” I said. I began to move away; then, with an afterthought I turned back to Mary. She was studying me with a dubious air.

“I think we had better try the plan of watching closely over Robbie before we say anything to alarm Mrs. Brane,” I said. “It would distress her very much to move Robbie out of his nursery, and she has been very tired and languid lately. She has been doing too much, I think. This new woman, Sara Lorrence, is a terror for house-cleaning, and she's urged Mrs. Brane to let her give the old part of the house a thorough cleaning. Mrs. Brane simply won't keep away. She works almost as hard as Sara, and goes into every crack and cranny and digs out old rubbish—nothing's more exhausting.”

“Yes, ma'am,” Mary agreed, “she's sure a wonder at cleaning, that Sara. She's straightened out our kitchen closet somethin' wonderful, miss.”

“She has?” I wondered if Sara, too, had discovered that queer opening in the back of the closet. I had almost forgotten it, but now I decided, absurd as such action probably was, to investigate the black hole into which I had fallen when I tried to move the lawn roller.

I chose a time when Sara Lorrence was out of the kitchen, cutting lettuces in the kitchen-garden. For several minutes I watched her broad, well-corseted body at its task, then, singing softly to myself,—for some reason I had a feeling that I was in danger,—I walked across the clean board floor and stepped into the closet to which my attention had first been drawn by Mary. It was indeed a renovated spot, sweet and garnished like the abode of devils in the parable; pots scoured and arranged on shelves, rubbish cleared out, the lawn-mower removed, the roller taken to some more appropriate place. But it was, in its further recesses, as dark as ever. I moved in, bending down my head and feeling before me with my hand. My fingers came presently against a wall. I felt about, in front, on either side, up and down; there was no break anywhere. Either I had imagined an opening or my hole had been boarded up.

I went out, lighted a candle, and returned. The closet was entirely normal,—just a kitchen closet with a sloping roof; it lay under the back stairs, one small, narrow wall, and three high, wide ones. The low, narrow wall stood where I had imagined my hole. I went close and examined it by the light of my candle. There was only one peculiarity about this wall; it had a temporary look, and was made of odd, old boards, which, it seemed to me, showed signs of recent workmanship. Perhaps Henry had made repairs. I blew out my candle and stepped from the closet.

Sara had come back from the garden. She greeted my appearance with a low, quavering cry of fear. “Oh, my God!” Then, recovering herself, though her large face remained ashen, “Excuse me, ma'am,” she said timidly, “I wasn't expectin' to see you there”—and she added incomprehensibly—“*not in the daytime*, ma'am.”

Now, for some reason, these words gave me the most horrible chill of fear. My mind simply turned away from them. I could not question Sara of their meaning. Subconsciously, I must have refused to understand them. It is always difficult to describe such psychological phenomena, but this is one that I am sure many people have experienced. It is akin to the paralysis which attacks one in frightening dreams and sometimes in real life, and prevents escape. The sort of shock it gave me absolutely forbade my taking any notice of it. I spoke to Sara in

a strained, hard voice.

“You have been putting the closet in order,” I said. “Has Henry been repairing it? I mean has he been mending up that—hole?”

“Yes, ma'am,” she said half sullenly, “accordin' to your orders.” And she glanced around as though she were afraid some one might be listening to us.

“My orders? I gave no orders whatever about this closet!” My voice was almost shrill, and sounded angry, though I was not angry, only terribly and quite unreasonably frightened.

“Just as you please, ma'am,” said Sara with that curious submissiveness and its undercurrent of something else,—“just as you say. Of course you did n't give no such orders. Not you. I just had Henry nail it up myself”—? here she fixed those expressionless eyes upon me and the lid of one, or I imagined it, just drooped—“on account of sleuths.”

“Sleuths?” I echoed.

“A kitchen name for rats, ma'am,” said Sara, and came as near to laughing as I ever saw her come. “Rats, ma'am, that comes about old houses such as this.” And here she glanced in a meaning way over her shoulder out of the window.

My glance followed hers; in fact, my whole body followed. I went and stood near the window. The kitchen was on a lower level than the garden, so that I looked up to the gravel path. Here Mr. Dabney was walking with Robbie's hand in his. Robbie was chattering like a bird, and Paul Dabney was smiling down at him. It was a pretty picture in the pale November sunshine, a prettier picture than Sara's face. But, as I looked at them gratefully, feeling that the very sight of those two was bringing me back from a queer attack of dementia, Robbie, looking by chance my way, threw himself against his companion, stiffening and pointing. I heard his shrill cry, “There she is! I *wisht* they'd take her away!”

I flinched out of his sight, covering my face with my hands and hurrying towards the inner door which led to the kitchen stairs. I did not want to look again at Sara, but something forced me to do so. She was watching me with a look of fearful amusement, a most disgusting look. I rushed through the door and stumbled up the stairs. I was shaking with anger, and fear, and pain of heart, and, yet, this last feeling was the only one whose cause I could fully explain to myself. Paul Dabney had seen a child turn pale and stiff with fear at the mere sight of me, and I could not forget the grim, stern look with which he followed Robbie's little pitiful, pointing finger. And I had fancied that this man was falling in love with me!

Truly my nerves should have been in no condition to face the dreadful ordeal

of the time that was to come, but, truly, too, and very mercifully, those nerves are made of steel. They bend often, and with agonizing pain, but they do not break. I know now that they never will. They have been tested supremely, and have stood the test.

CHAPTER VI—A STRAND OF RED-GOLD HAIR

I WENT to bed early that night, and, partially undressing myself, I put on a wrapper and sat on my bed reading till Mary should come to tell me that Robbie had fallen asleep, and that it was time for our night-watch to begin. I had not spoken to Mary again on the subject, for soon after my investigations in the kitchen, Mrs. Brane had asked me to help her in her work of going over the old, long-closed drawers and wardrobes in the north wing, and I had had a very busy and tiring afternoon. It was a relief, however, to find that Sara dropped her labors when I appeared. Mrs. Brane looked almost as relieved as I felt.

“That is the most indefatigable worker I ever met, Miss Gale,” she said in her listless, nervous way; “she's been glued to my side ever since we began this interminable piece of work.”

“I wish you'd give it up, dear Mrs. Brane,” I said, “and let the indefatigable Sara tire out her own energy. I'm sure that you have none to spare, and this going over of old letters, and papers, and books and clothes is very tiring and depressing work for you.”

She gave a tormented sigh. “Oh, isn't it? It's aging me.” She stood before a great, old highboy, its drawers pulled out, and she looked so tiny and helpless, as small almost as Robbie. All the rest of the furniture was as massive as the highboy, the four-poster and the marble-topped bureau, and the tall mirror with its tarnished frame. I liked the mirror, and rather admired its reflection of myself.

Mrs. Brane looked wistfully about the room, and her eyes, like mine, stopped at the mirror. “How young you look beside me,” she said, “and so bright, with that wonderful hair! I wish you'd let me know you better, dear; I am really very fond of you, you know, and you must have something of a history with your beauty and your 'grand air,' and that halo of tragedy Mr. Dabney talks about.” She smiled teasingly, but I was too sad to smile back.

“My history is not romantic,” I said bitterly; “it is dull and sordid. You are very good to me, dear Mrs. Brane.” I was close to tears. “I wish I could do more for you.”

“More! Why, child, if it wasn't for you, I'd run away from 'The Pines' and never come back. *No* inducement, no consideration of any kind would keep me in this place.”

She certainly spoke as though she had in mind some very weighty inducement and consideration.

“Why do you stay, Mrs. Brane.” I asked impulsively. “At least, why don't you go away for a change? It would do you so much good, and it would be wonderful for Robbie. Why, Mrs. Brane, you have n't left this place for a day, have you, since your husband died?”

“No, dear,” said the little lady sorrowfully, “hardly for an hour. It's my prison.” She looked about the room again, and added as though she were talking to herself, “I don't dare to leave it.”

“Dare?” I repeated.

She smiled deprecatingly. “That was a silly word to use, was n't it?” Again that tormented little sigh. “You see, I'm a silly little person. I'm not fit to carry the weight of other people's secrets.”

Again I repeated like some brainless parrot, “Secrets?”

“Of course there are secrets, child,” she said impatiently. “Every one has secrets, their own or other people's. You have secrets, without doubt?”

I had. She had successfully silenced me. After that we worked steadily, and there was no further attempt at confidence.

Nevertheless, as I lay on my bed trying to read and waiting for Mary's summons, I decided that I would make a strong effort to get Mrs. Brane and Robbie out of the house. I had come to the conclusion that my employer was the victim of a mild sort of mania, one symptom of which was a fear of leaving her home. I thought I would consult with Dr. Haverstock and get him to order Robbie and Robbie's mother a change of air. It might cure the little fellow of his nervous terrors. How I wish I had thought of this plan a few days sooner! What dreadful reason I have for regretting my delay!

Mary was a long time in coming. I must have fallen asleep, for a while later, I became aware that I had slipped down on my pillows and that my book had fallen to the floor. I got up, feeling rather startled, and looked at my clock. It was already half-past twelve, and Mary had not called me. I went to my door and found that it was locked. I remembered that it had been my alternate plan for Mary to lock me in, and I supposed that she had forgotten that our final decision was in favor of the other scheme, or she had preferred to watch over Robbie alone. I was a little hurt, but I acquiesced in my imprisonment and went back to bed. I put out the light, and was very soon asleep again.

I was waked by a dreadful sound of screaming. I sat up in bed, stiff with fear,

my heart leaping. Then I ran towards the door, remembered that it was locked, and stood in the middle of the room, pressing my hands together.

The screaming stopped. Robbie had had his nightmare, and it was over. Thank God! this time my alibi was established without doubt. I was enormously relieved, for I had begun myself to fear that I had been walking in my sleep, and, perhaps, influenced by the description of Robbie's favorite nightmare, had unconsciously acted out the horror beside his bed. After a while, the house being fairly quiet, though I thought I would hear Mary moving about, I went back to my bed. When she could leave her charge I knew that she would come to me with her story. I tried to be calm and patient, but of course I was anything but that.

It was nearly morning, a faint, greenish light spread in the sky, opening fanlike fingers through the slats of my shutter. After a while, it seemed interminable, a step came down the hall. It was not Mary's padded, nurselike tread, it was the quick, resolute footstep of a man. It stopped outside my door. There was no ceremony of knocking, no key turned. The handle was sharply moved, and, to my utter amazement, the door opened.

There stood Paul Dabney, fully dressed, his face pale and grim.

“Come out,” he said. “Come with me and see what has been done.” I noticed that he kept one hand in his pocket, and that the pocket bulged.

I got up, still in my wrapper, my hair hanging in two long, dishevelled braids, and came, in a dazed way, towards him. He took me by the wrist, using his left hand, the other still in his pocket. His fingers were as cold and hard as steel. I shrunk a little from them, and he gave my wrist a queer, cruel little shake.

“What does it feel like, eh?” he snarled.

I merely looked at him. His unexpected appearance, his terrible manner, the opening of that locked door without the use of any key, above all, a dull sense of some overwhelming tragedy for which I was to be held responsible,—all these things held me dumb and powerless. I let him keep his grasp on my wrist, and I walked beside him along the passage-way as though I were indeed a somnambulist. So we came to the nursery door. Inside, I saw Mary kneeling beside Robbie's little bed, and heard her sobbing as though her heart would break.

“What is it?” I whispered, looking at Paul Dabney and pulling back.

My look must have made some impression on him. A queer sort of gleam of doubt seemed to pass across his face. He drew me towards the cot, keeping his eyes riveted upon me.

There lay the little boy who had never allowed me to come so near to him before, passive and still—a white little face, a body like a broken flower. I saw at once that he was dead.

“Oh, miss,” sobbed Mary, keeping her face hidden, “why didn't you keep to your plan? Oh, God have mercy on us, we have killed the poor soul!”

“Mary,” I whispered, “you locked me in.”

“Oh, indeed, Miss Gale, no. I thought you said you'd come and spend the night with me. I had a couch made up. I waited for you, and I must have fallen asleep...” Here she got to her feet, drying her eyes. We were both talking in whispers, Dabney still held my wrist, the little corpse lay silent there before us as though he were asleep. “I was waked by Robbie. Oh, my lamb! My lamb!” Again she wept and tears poured down my own face.

“I heard him,” I choked. “I would have come. But the door was locked.”

Here Mr. Dabney's fingers tightened perceptibly, almost painfully upon my wrist.

“I opened your locked door,” he sneered. “Remember that.”

Mary looked at me with bewildered eyes. “I did n't lock your door, miss.”

We stared at each other in dumb and tragic mystification.

“I came to Robbie as fast as I could,” she went on. “I was too late to see any one go out. He was in convulsions, the pitiful baby! In my arms, he died before ever I could call for help. Mr. Dabney come in almost at once and and—Oh, miss, who's to tell his mother?”

I made a move. “I must—” I began, but that cold, steel grip on my wrist coerced me.

“You go, Mary,” said Dabney, “and break it to her carefully. Send for Dr. Haverstock. This—sleep-walker will stay here with me,” he added between his teeth.

Mary, with a little moan, obeyed and went out and slowly away. Paul Dabney and I stood in silence, linked together strangely in that room of death. This was the man I loved. I looked at him.

“You look as innocent as a flower,” he said painfully. “Perhaps this will move you.”

He drew me close to Robbie. He lifted one of the little hands and laid it, still warm, in mine. The small fingers were clenched into a fist, and about two of them was wrapped a strand of red-gold hair.

I fell down at Paul Dabney's feet.

The consciousness of his grip on my wrist, which kept me from measuring my length on the floor, stayed with me through a strange, short journey into forgetfulness.

“Ah!” said Paul Dabney, as I came back and raised my head; “I thought that would cut the ground from under you.”

He quietly untwisted the hairs from the child's clutch, and, still keeping his hold of me, he put the lock into his pocket-book and replaced it in an inner pocket.

“Stand up!” he said.

I obeyed. The blood was beginning to return to my brain, and with it an intolerable sense of outrage. I returned him look for look.

“If I am unfortunate enough to walk in my sleep,” I said quiveringly, “and if, through this misfortune, I have been so terribly unhappy as to cause the death of this poor delicate child, is that any reason, Paul Dabney, that you should hold me by the wrist and threaten me and treat me like a murderess?”

I was standing at my full height, and my eyes were fixed on his. To my inexpressible relief, the expression of his face changed. His eyes faltered from their implacable judgment, his lips relaxed, his fingers slowly slipped from my wrist. I caught his arm in both my hands.

“Paul! Paul!” I gasped. Not for long afterwards did I realize that I had used his name. “How can you, how can you put me through such agony? As though this were not enough! O God! God!”

I broke down utterly. I shook and wept. He held me in his arms. I could feel him tremble.

“Go back to your room,” he said at last, in a low, guilty sort of voice. “Try to command yourself.”

I faltered away, trying pitifully as a punished child, to be obedient, to be good, to merit trust. He looked after me with such a face of doubt and despair that, had it not been for Robbie's small, wax-like countenance, I must have been haunted by the look.

I got somehow to my room and lay down on my bed. I was broken in body, mind, and spirit. For the time being there was no strength or courage left in me. But they came back.

CHAPTER VII—THE RUSSIAN BOOK-SHELVES

IT was fortunate for us all, especially for poor Mary, that, after Robbie's death, Mrs. Brane needed every care and attention that we could give her. For myself, I had expected prompt dismissal, but, as it turned out, Mrs. Brane more than ever insisted upon my staying on as housekeeper. Neither Mary, because of her loyalty to me, nor Paul Dabney, for some less friendly reason, had told the poor little woman of the cause of Robbie's death, nor of their suspicions concerning my complicity, unconscious or otherwise.

It may seem strange to the reader that I should not have left “The Pines.” It seems strange to me now. But there was more than one reason for my courage or my obstinacy. First, I felt that after Dabney's extraordinary treatment of me, treatment which he made no attempt to explain and for which he made no apology, my honor demanded that I should stay in the house and clear up the double mystery of the locked door that opened, and of the strand of red-gold hair that was wrapped around poor little Robbie's fingers. Of course I may have dreamed that the door was locked; I may have, that time when I fancied myself broad awake, been really in a state of trance, and, instead of finding a locked door and going back to bed, I may then have gone through the door and down the hall to Robbie's nursery, coming to myself only, when, being again in bed, I had awakened to the sound of his screams. This explanation, I know, was the one adopted by Mary. Mr. Dabney had other and darker suspicions. I realized that in some mysterious fashion he had constituted himself my judge. I realized, too, by degrees, and here, if you like, was the chief reason for my not leaving “The Pines,” that Paul Dabney simply would not have let me go. Unobtrusively, quietly, more, almost loathfully, he kept me under a strict surveillance. I became conscious of it slowly. If I had to leave the place on an errand he accompanied me or he sent Mary to accompany me. At about this time Mrs. Brane, without asking any advice from me, engaged two outdoor men. They were to tidy up the grounds, she told me, and to do some repairing within and without. They were certainly the most inefficient workmen I have ever seen. They were always pottering about the house or grounds. I grew weary of the very sight of them. It seemed to me that one was always in my sight, whatever I did, wherever I went.

Mrs. Brane felt Robbie's death terribly, of course; she suffered not only from the natural grief of a mother, but from a morbid fancy that, in some way, the

tragedy was her own fault. “I should have taken him away. I should not have let him live in this dreary, dreadful house. What was anything worth compared to his dear life! What is anything worth to me now!” There was again the suggestion that living in this house was worth something. I should have discussed all these matters with Mr. Dabney. Indeed, I should have made him my confidant on all these mysteries which confronted me, had it not been for his harshness on that dreadful night. As it was, I could hardly bear to look at him, hardly bear to speak to him. And, yet, poor, wretched, lonely-hearted girl that I was, I loved him more than ever. I kept on with my work of dusting books, and he kept on with his everlasting notes on Russian literature, so we were as much as ever in each other's company. But what a sad change in our intercourse! The shadow of sorrow and discomfort that lay upon “The Pines” lay heaviest of all in that sunny, peaceful bookroom where we had had such happy hours. And I could not help being glad of his presence, and, sometimes, I found his eyes fixed upon me with such a look of doubt, of dumb and miserable feeling. I was trying to make up my mind to speak to him in those days. I think that in the end I should have done so, with what result I cannot even now imagine, had it not been, first, for the episode of the Russian Baron, and, second, for another matter, infinitely and incomparably more dreadful than any other experience of my life.

The Russian Baron came to “The Pines” one morning about ten days after little Robbie's death. Mrs. Brane received him in the drawing-room, and presently rang the bell and sent Sara upstairs with a message for me.

I came down at once. The Baron sat opposite to Mrs. Brane before the small coal fire. He was a heavy, high-shouldered, bearded man, with that look of having too many and too white teeth which a full black beard gives. His figure reminded me of a dressed-up bolster. It was round and narrow, and without any shape, and it looked soft. His plump hands were buttoned into light-colored gloves, which he had not removed, and his feet were encased in extravagantly long, pointed, very light tan shoes. He kept his eyebrows raised, and his eyes opened so wide that the whites showed above the iris, and this with no sense of effort and for no reason whatever. It disguised every possible expression except one of entirely unwarranted, extreme surprise. At first, when I came into the room, I thought that in some way I must have caused the look, but I soon found that it was habitual to him. Mrs. Brane looked at once nervous, and faintly amused.

“Miss Gale,” she said, “this is Baron Borff.” She consulted the card on her lap. “He was a friend of my husband's when my husband was in Europe, and he, too, like Mr. Dabney, wants to see my husband's collection of Russian books.”

The Baron stood up, and made me a bow so deep that I discovered his hair was parted down the back.

“Mees Gale,” said the Baron, looking up at me while he bowed. He suggested the contortions of a trained sea-animal of some kind.

“I shall have to ask you to show him the books, Miss Gale,” went on Mrs. Brane. “It seems to be one of your principal duties in the house, does n't it! And I certainly did not engage you for a librarian. But I have not been very well since my little boy died—” Her lips quivered and the Baron gave a magnificent, deep, organ-like murmur of sympathy, his unreasonably astonished eyes being fixed meanwhile upon me. In fact, he had stared at me without deviation since my entrance, and I was thoroughly out of countenance.

“It ees true that I should not have intruded myself at this so tragic time into your house of mourning,” he said, “but, unfortunately, my time in your country is so very short that unless I come at this juncture I should not be able to come at all, and so—”

“I understand, of course,” said Mrs. Brane, rising and twisting the Baron's card in her hand. “I am very glad you came. Will you not take dinner with us this evening?”

The Baron looked at me as if for consent or advice, and, thinking that he was considering his hostess's health I made a motion of my lips of “no,” at which he promptly but very politely and effusively declined her hospitality, and followed me out of the room.

Young Dabney met us in the hall. I introduced him to the Baron, who turned very pale, quite green, in fact. I was astonished at this loss of color on his part, especially as Mr. Dabney was extremely polite and gentle with him in his demure way, and strolled beside him into the bookroom chatting in the most friendly fashion, and reminding me of his manner to me on the first afternoon of our acquaintance. The Baron stood in the middle of the bookroom peeling off his gloves as though his hands were wet. His forehead certainly was, and he stayed green and kept those astonished eyes fixed upon me so that I felt like screaming at him to remove them.

Paul Dabney sat on the window seat and took up a book.

“I shall be perfectly quiet, Baron,” he said, “and not disturb your investigations.”

He was admirably quiet, but I could not help but see that he did very little reading. He did not turn a page, but sat with one hand in his pocket. I remembered that he had held his hand just that way on the night of Robbie's

death. One of the outdoors men came across the lawn, and began to trim the vine beside one of the open windows. I thought the Baron could not complain of any too much privacy for his researches.

“This is the Russian library,” I said, and led the way to the shelves. He followed me so closely that I could feel his breath on my neck. He was breathing fast, and rather unevenly.

“Thank you so much,” he said. He took out a volume, and rustled the pages. At last, “I wonder if I might be allowed to pursue my studies with no other assistance than yours, Miss Gale,” he asked irritably. He wiped his forehead. “I am a student, a recluse. It is a folly, but these presences”—he pointed towards Mr. Dabney and the man at the window—“disturb me.”

I glanced at Paul Dabney, who smiled and came down from his window seat, moving towards the door, the book under his arm, his hand still in his pocket. He did not say anything, but went out quietly and nearly closed the door. I shut it quite. A second later I heard him speaking to the man outside, and he, too, removed himself. The Baron gave a great whistling sigh of relief, ran to each of the windows in turn, then came back to me and spoke in a low, muttering voice.

“You are incomparable, madame,” he said.

I was perfectly astonished, both at the speech and the manner. But this was my first specimen of the Russian nobility, and supposing that it was the aristocratic Russian method of compliment, I bowed, and was going to follow Mr. Dabney out, when the Baron, kneeling by the bookcase, clutched my skirt in his hand.

“You will not leave me?”

I withdrew my skirt from his grasp. “Not if I can be of any help to you, Baron,” I said and could not restrain a smile, he was so absurd.

“Help? *Boje moe! Da!*”

He turned from me, and began rapidly to remove all the books from the bookcase. I thought this a peculiar way to pursue studies, especially as he was so frightfully quick about it; I have never seen any one so marvellously quick with his hands, tumbling the books down one after the other. When the case was entirely empty, and I knew that I should have the work of filling it again, he very calmly removed a shelf and began feeling with his fingers along the back of the case. I stared at him, silent and fascinated. I thought him harmlessly insane. He was evidently very much excited. He tapped with his fingers. Perspiration streamed down his face. He glanced at me over his shoulder.

“You see,” he said. “It is back there. Don't you hear?”

I heard that his tapping produced a hollow sound.

“What are you about?” I asked him sternly.

At that he began tumbling the books back in their places as feverishly as he had taken them out. In an incredibly short time they were arranged.

“Yes, yes, you are quite right,” he said as though my bewildered question had been a piece of advice. “Now you see for yourself.” He got up and dusted his knees. “It is much safer for you, but I did not dare to trust it to writing. You have, however, much better opportunities than I knew. It will be in Russian, of course, but that, too, will give you no trouble. I meant to contrive a meeting with Maida, but this is much better.”

I stared at him, open-mouthed, the jargon made no sense at all.

He took my hand and raised it to his lips.

“You are extraordinary, astonishing! Such youth! Such innocence! *Bo je moe!* How is it done?” He put his mouth close to my ear, and muttered something in Russian, the spitting, purring tongue which I detest. What he said, for I was able to translate it, sent me back, white and shaking into the nearest chair.

“It will not be long, eh?” the Baron had sputtered into my ear, “before the young man, too, is found with three of those golden hairs about his fingers, eh?”

I sat down and covered my eyes with my hands, an action that seemed to throw him into a convulsion of mirth. When I looked up, the abominable, grotesque figure was gone.

I went over to the window. He was walking rapidly down the driveway. As he turned the corner I saw a man step from the side of the road and saunter after him. It was one of the outside men engaged by Mrs. Brane.

I ran upstairs to my own room, and sat down at random in the chair before my dressing-table and rested my head in my hands. I sat there for a long, long time, and I felt that I was fighting against a mist. Just so must some victim dragonfly struggle with the dreadful stickiness of the spider's web. I was blinded mentally by the very meshes that were beginning to wrap round me. I knew now that I was in great danger of some kind, that I was being played with by sinister and evil forces, that, perhaps purposely, I was being terrified and bewildered and mystified. There was none whom I could surely count for a friend, no one except Mary, and how could she or any one else understand the undefined, dreamlike, grotesque forms my experiences had taken. Mrs. Brane, perhaps, was the person for me to take into my confidence, and yet, was it fair to frighten her when she was so delicate? Already one person too many had been frightened in that house.

Mr. Dabney was my enemy. No matter what the feeling that possessed his heart, his brain was pitted against me. I was being made a victim, a cat's-paw. But how and by whom? This Baron had treated me as an accomplice. He had showed me a secret. He had made to me a horrible suggestion. The power that had frightened away the three housekeepers, the power that had scared Delia and Jane and Annie from their home, the power that had thrown little Robbie into the convulsions that caused his death, the power that had taken every one but me and the Lorrences—for Mary now slept near Mrs. Brane—out of the northern wing—this power was threatening Paul Dabney and, from the Baron's whispered words, I understood that it was threatening Paul Dabney through me. Was it not a supernatural evil? Was I not perhaps possessed? Could I be driven to commit crimes and to leave as evidence against myself those strands of hair? Flesh and blood could not bear the horror of all this. I would go to Mr. Dabney at once.

With this resolution to comfort me, I rose and made myself ready for dinner. It was too late to change my dress, but Mrs. Brane was not particular as to our dressing for dinner; besides, my frock was neat and fresh, a soft gray crêpe with wide white collar and cuffs. My working dresses were all made alike and trimmed in this Quaker style which I had found becoming. I thought that, in spite of extreme pallor and shadows under my eyes, I looked rather pretty. I believe that was the last evening when I took any particular pleasure in my own looks. I was rather nervous over my impending interview with Paul Dabney and it was with a certain relief that I heard from Mrs. Brane in the diningroom that our guest had gone out and would not be back that night.

“How queer it seems to be alone again!” she said, but I thought she looked more alarmed than relieved.

That night, however, in spite of her timidity, she was in better spirits than I had seen her since Robbie's death. Her listlessness was not quite so extreme as usual, she even chatted about her youth and dances she used to go to. She must have been as pretty as a fairy and she had evidently been something of a belle, though I have noticed that all Southern women see themselves in retrospect as the center of a little throng of suitors. Mary waited on us, for Henry had the toothache and had gone to bed. It was quite a cozy and cheerful meal. In spite of myself, the disagreeable impression produced by the Baron faded a little from my mind and, as it faded, another feeling began to strengthen. In other words, I began to be acutely curious about the hollow sound produced by tapping on the back of that bookcase.

“I think you made a great impression on the Baron, Miss Gale,” said Mrs. Brane teasingly as we sat at our coffee in the drawing-room; “he really seemed

unable to take his eyes off you. I don't wonder. You are really extraordinarily pretty in an odd way.”

“In an odd way?” I could n't help asking.

“Why, yes, you are the strangest-looking pretty girl I've ever seen. You know, my dear, if I should catalogue your features no one would think it the portrait of an angelic-looking creature. It would sound like a vixen. Now, stiffen up your vanity and listen.” She looked me over and gave me this description. “You have fiery hair, in the first place, which is the right color for a vixen, you know, and you have a long, slender, pale face, and green-blue eyes, though they do look black at night and gray sometimes, but still they are the real Becky Sharp color and no mistake. You have very thin, red lips, and, if their expression was not so unmistakably sweet, I should say they were frightfully capable of looking cruel and—well, yes—mean.”

“Oh, Mrs. Brane, what a dreadful portrait!”

“What did I tell you? It is true, too, line by line, and yet you are quite the loveliest-looking woman I have ever seen. Miss Gale, come, now, you must see the impression you make. Are you not concerned over the condition of poor Paul Dabney?”

“I have not noticed his condition,” said I bitterly.

She shook her head at me. “Fibs!” she said. “The poor boy is as restless as a hawk. He is getting pale and thin and gaunt. He eats nothing. He can't let you out of his sight.”

“If he is consumed by love of me,” I said, “it is strange that he has never confided to me as to his sufferings.”

“But has n't he really, Janice?—I am just going to call you by your first name, may I?” I was so grateful to her for the pretty way she said it and for the sweet look she gave me, that I kissed the hand she held out.

“Has n't he really made love to you, Janice? I could have sworn that, during all those hours you two have spent in the bookroom, something of the sort was going on.”

“Nothing of the sort at all. In fact, Mrs. Brane, I think that Paul Dabney dislikes me very much.”

She thought this over, stirring her coffee absently and staring into the coalfire. “It is rather mysterious, but, sometimes, I have thought that too. At least, his feeling for you is very strong, one way or the other. Sometimes it has seemed to me that he both hates and loves you. How do you treat him, Janice?”

I tried to avoid her eyes. “Not any way at all,” I stammered. “That is, just the way I feel, with polite indifference.”

Mrs. Brane gave a little trill of sad laughter. “Oh, how I am enjoying this nonsense, Janice! I have n't talked such delicious stuff for years. No, dear, you don't treat him with polite indifference at all. You treat him with the most dreadful and crushing and stately hauteur imaginable. Now, you were much more affable with the Baron.”

I gave a little involuntary shiver.

“How ridiculous that creature was, was n't he?” laughed Mrs. Brane. “I could hardly keep my face straight as I looked at him. He was like a make-up of some kind. He did n't seem real, do you know what I mean? I wish he had stayed to dinner. He would have amused me.”

“He did n't amuse me,” I said positively; “I thought he was detestable.”

“Poor Baron Borff! And he was *so* enamoured. You have a very hard heart, Janice. Never mind, when I get rich, I'll set you up like a queen. You must not be a housekeeper always even if you do refuse to be a baroness. You did n't know I had hopes of wealth, did you?” She looked rather sly as she put this question.

“I had fancied it, Mrs. Brane,” I said.

She looked about the room nervously and lowered her voice.

“It is so queer, Janice,” she said; then she moved over to the sofa where I sat and spoke very low indeed: “It is so queer to have a fortune and—*not to know where it is*.”

I, too, looked anxiously about me, even behind me where there was no possible space for a listener.

“If you would only tell me, Mrs. Brane,” I began earnestly,—“if you would only tell me something, about this fortune of yours, I feel that I might be able to help you. Mrs. Brane, does any one know? Mr. Dabney, for instance?”

“No,” she murmured. “I have never told any one; I ought not to tell you.—Oh, Mary, is that you? How you made me jump! I suppose it's bedtime.”

“Yes'm,” said Mary, “and past bedtime. Don't you want to get strong and well, Mrs. Brane?”

She laughed and stood up obediently, gave me a look that said “Hush,” and followed Mary out. I took up a book and began to read.

After an hour or two, oppressed by the dead stillness of the house, I went upstairs to my own room.

But I did not undress. The most overwhelming desire possessed me suddenly to go down to the bookroom and to discover, if I could, the secret of the bookcase. There is no doubt about it, there is the blood of adventurers in my veins. Danger is a real temptation to me, danger and the devious way. I would rather, I believe, be playing with peril than not.

The house was very silent. I was alone in the old wing. My nerves had been badly shaken only that afternoon, but I was keen for adventure. Curiosity was far stronger than my fears. I took off my shoes and opened the door. A faint light shone at the far end of the passage, the night light that Mrs. Brane had been burning there since Robbie's death. I walked along the hallway to the stairs. I had never realized before how noiseless one may be in stocking feet, nor how noisy an old floor is of itself under the quietest step. Boards snapped under me like pistol shots. But no one in the sleeping house seemed the wiser for my stealthy passing. I got down the stairs and found my way into the bookroom, saw that the shutters were all tightly fastened and the shades drawn down. Then I lighted the gas-jet near the Russian collection and knelt before it on the floor.

I began quietly to take out the books, as I had seen the Baron take them. I had removed perhaps half a dozen from the middle shelf when the strangest feeling made me look around.

The door of the bookroom was open and I had left it shut. I rose to my feet. At the same instant something just outside the threshold of the door seemed to rise to its feet. I looked at it. *It was myself.*

There is no way of describing the horror of such a sight.

This figure wore my dress of gray with its Quaker collar and cuffs, its long, slender face was framed in fiery hair, its green-blue eyes, narrow and long-lashed, were fixed on mine. There was no mirror outside of that door; besides, no mirror could have reflected the look of white damnation that possessed this face. Haggard and hard and vile, with a wicked, stony leer in the eyes, with a wicked, tight smile on the lips, with a blasted, devastated look too dreadful to describe, it faced me. And it was myself, as I might have been after a lifetime of crime and cruelty.

I stood and looked at it till a black cloud seemed to roll up over it, from which for a second its evil countenance smiled imperturbably at me. Then the face, too, was blotted out and I fell down on the floor.

CHAPTER VIII. A DANGEROUS GAME

I CAME to my senses. I looked up slowly.

The thing was gone. I put out the light and fled like a hunted creature to my room. There I locked myself in and dropped down on my knees beside my bed.

At first it was entirely a battle with fear that kept me, rigid and silent, on my knees. I knew that unless I overcame the extremity of my nervous terror, I should lose my mind. If I went out of my room at all, it would be to go raving and shrieking down the hall and to alarm the house. Self-control was possible only if I should stay here and conquer the evil spirit of “The Pines”—conquer its effect upon my own steadiness and self-respect. I would not repeat the grotesque tragi-comedy of Jane and Delia and Annie, and present myself, gasping and wild-eyed, to Mrs. Brane demanding my dismissal on the spot. Neither would I be like the other three housekeepers. Even in that moment of prostration I am glad to say that I was not utterly a victim; the demon that had possessed the house had to a certain extent already met its match in me.

Of course, during those first hours, I did entertain the belief that I was possessed by a denizen from another world who had come to this house to terrify and to kill and had borrowed my astral body for its clothing—a horrid idea enough and not unnatural under the circumstances. If I remember rightly I decided that if the awful figure came again or if any other tragedy should happen at “The Pines” I should kill myself. Fortunately my reason, though badly shaken, did at least reassert itself. After all, I am not a natural believer in ghosts. The supernatural has never greatly interested or impressed me. It is not so much-that I am skeptical as that I am pragmatic—that is, I have to discern some use or meaning in spiritual experiences. It is this turn of mind, inherited, I think, from my French father, that saved me now. Very gradually, as I knelt there in that God-given attitude of prayer, an attitude whose subjective benefit to the human race no one will ever be able to measure, an attitude which, in its humility, in its resignation, in its shutting out of this world's light, so opens the inner eyes of the soul—as I knelt there, my mood began to change from one of insane superstition and fear to one of quiet and most determined thought.

In fact, my reason reasserted itself and powerfully. One by one, all the alarming incidents began to link themselves together, to suggest a plan, a logical whole. It was as though, with my eyes shut and hidden in my hands, I saw for

the first time.

Three housekeepers, one after the other, had been frightened away from “The Pines.” The old servants of the house had been forced, also by supernatural fears, to leave. A most determined attempt had been made against Robbie's nerves and Mary's courage. And now, at the climax of the crescendo—for then it seemed to me, God forgive me! that my experience had been worse than Robbie's death—I, the fourth housekeeper, was being terrified almost out of my wits. All these things pointed to one conclusion. It was somebody's interest to isolate little Mrs. Brane. It was especially somebody's interest to frighten every one away from the northern wing. Somewhere in this house, and presumably in this part of the house, there was something enormously valuable, something to tempt evil spirits clad in substantial flesh and blood, as substantial, for instance, as that of the bolster-like figure of the Baron. And the leader of this enterprise, the master-spirit, was a hell-cat with red-gold hair and a face like my own.

This was a horrid thought in itself and almost an incredible one, but it was, at least, not supernatural. The creature that had seemed to rise up on the threshold of the bookroom was a living being, a woman of flesh and blood. I repeated this over and over to myself. I felt that I must possess my mind perfectly of this fact and lay hold of it so that no future manifestations might so nearly drive me to distraction as the manifestation of to-night. She was a real woman, a female criminal, wily and brave and very cunning. She had deliberately made use of this extraordinary chance resemblance, had artfully heightened it, had copied my habitual costume, for excellent reasons of her own. It was probably entirely by her agency that I had been brought to “The Pines.” With a blinding realization of my own stupidity I remembered the suspicious fashion in which I had learned of the position—a slip of paper handed to me on the street! I had been chosen deliberately, for my resemblance, by this thief for a double purpose of mystification and of diverting suspicion. What more convenient for a night-prowler than to possess a double in some authorized inmate of the house? Night-prowler?—why, she might walk up and down the house in broad daylight, and, providing only that she was careful not to be seen simultaneously with me, nor at too close intervals of time at an unreasonable distance from my known whereabouts, she might stand at Mrs. Brane's elbow or flit past Mary down the stairs or go through the kitchen under Sara Lorrence's very nose.

More light here broke upon me so brilliantly that it brought me to my feet. I began walking up and down the room in a fever of excited thought. I knew now why Henry Lorrence and the woman who called herself his wife, cringed when they met my eye, whitened at my lightest reproof, and, at the same time, could

barely repress that leer of evil understanding. They, too, had been brought to “The Pines.” They were members of the gang of which my double was the leader. Only—and this cleared up a whole fog of mystery—they did not know the secret of the dual personality. They thought that the criminal and the housekeeper were one and the same person under a different make-up. They were evidently under strict orders not to betray, even by a word or look, even when there was no one by, their knowledge of collusion with Mrs. Brane's reputed housekeeper; but Sara had made a bad slip. She had spoken of “instruction” and she had said that she had not expected to see me come out of the kitchen closet in the daytime.

My God! What danger we were all in! While we shivered and shook over ghosts and nightmares, light footsteps in the wall and draughts of cold air going by, a dangerous gang of thieves had actually taken up its abode with us; one of them was hiding somewhere in the old house, the others served us, walked about amongst us, took our orders, spoke to us discreetly with soft voices and hypocritical, lowered eyes. We were entirely at their mercy and the only suspecting person in the house, Paul Dabney, suspected *me*. Undoubtedly he, too, had explained to his own satisfaction the mystery of “The Pines,” and *his* explanation was—Janice Gale. He knew nothing about me, but he did—he must—know something about Mrs. Brane's mysterious fortune. Bobbie's nightmares, the strand of hair about his little fingers, were evidence enough against my innocence. I might be a sleep-walker,—he could not prove that I was not,—but in his heart he believed me to be a sleep-walker with a purpose. He was watching me, playing amateur detective in the house. He had constituted himself a guardian of Mrs. Brane. Perhaps he was in love with her.

You see, this is not only the history of the Pine Cone mystery. It is the history of my love for Paul Dabney. This must be understood, for it explains my actions. The part I managed to play, which it astounds me even now to think that I was able to play, would barely have been possible without the goad of my bitterness and pain and anger. I would have gone at once to Paul Dabney and have told him everything I knew and let him call in outside help. But, ever since he had held me by the wrist and, in spite of his very apparent mental abhorrence for me, had taken me into his arms, my pride was up. I would fight this thing through alone. I would make no appeal to him, rather I would save the household myself, and when I had exposed the real criminal and shamed Paul Dabney's cruelty to a lonely girl and humbled him in his conceit, I would go away and begin life again as far as possible from him.

This resolution utterly possessed me. Under its spur I began to think with

great lucidity. I suppose it was then, at about four o'clock on that November morning, with the quiet house sleeping around me and the quiet world outside just faintly turning gray with dawn, that I began to see the weapon which lay within my grasp. It was a matter of turning the situation upside down. In fact, if we did that more often with our mental tangles, if suddenly in the midst of a train of thought we made a *volte-face*, and from looking at things from our own obvious viewpoint, we suddenly chose a right angle for contemplation, I am sure there would be many illuminations similar to mine that night. But I did not make any *volte-face* deliberately. It was a sort of accident. Quite suddenly I saw the situation as though I were a criminal myself, a criminal or a sleuth, the mental attitude must be in some respects the same. What advantage did this fantastic resemblance give the woman downstairs that it did not also give me?

Now you have it, the whole astounding situation. You see what decision I was coming to. I would deliberately play out the dangerous game. For the woman's benefit I would pretend that I believed the apparition to be ghostlike, dreamlike, the fabrication of my own feverish mind, but to Sara and Henry and any other Barons that might visit us, I would play my vixen as skilfully, as informingly as Heaven and my own wits and courage would let me. I would discover the whereabouts of Mrs. Brane's fortune, I would save it for her, and I would trap the thieves. That was my resolve, the fruit of my night's vigil. Having made it, I undressed myself and went to bed. I fell asleep at once like an overwearied child.

CHAPTER IX—MAIDA

I WAS surprised to find, when I examined myself in the glass next morning, that I did not look like a person that has seen a ghost. I had rather more color than usual and my eyes were bright; also the fact that I had controlled and overcome my nerves seemed to have acted like a tonic to my whole system. In some mysterious way I had tapped a whole reservoir of nervous strength and resilience. The same thing often happens physically: one is tired to the very point of exhaustion, one goes on, there is a renewal of strength, the effort that seems about to crack the muscles suddenly lightens, becomes almost easy again. I suppose the nervous system is subject to the same rules. At any rate, in my case, the explanation works.

Without any exaggerated horror I dressed again in my Quaker costume and I went down to breakfast. There must have been something in my face, however, for Mrs. Brane, after we had had our coffee, began to look at me rather searchingly, and at last she said, “You are getting very thin, Janice, do you know that?”

“I had n't noticed it. Perhaps.”

“Not perhaps at all. Certainly. Your gown is beginning to hang on you and your face is just a wedge between all that hair. You look a little feverish too. Suppose you try to take a little more exercise and fresh air. After all, keeping house at 'The Pines' does not demand so much strenuous desk work, does it? And now that Paul Dabney is away, you can neglect that endless library work.”

“Has he gone for good?” I asked, as lightly as possible, though my heart fell.

“No, my dear. You will still be able to torment him with your proud 'Maisie' looks and ways. He is coming back this evening on the afternoon train. He'll be late for tea, but we'll wait for him, shall we? He did n't want to be met, said he would walk up. I think he dreads that long, poky ride with old George nursing old Gregory through the sand. When you're a young man who flies about the country in a motor, 'The Pines' vehicle must be an instrument of torture. Janice, suppose you put on your cloak and hat and come out with me for a nice long walk. It would do us both good, I have n't had any heart for exercise. There seems to be nothing to live for now—but Dr. Haverstock—”

“You think Dr. Haverstock something to live for?” I asked, rather puzzled.

She laughed a little and blushed a great deal. “Mercy, no! I meant to say, 'But Dr. Haverstock has told me that I must take more exercise'—I don't know why I stopped that way—absent-mindedness. I was looking through the window at one of those men.”

“Do you think they are very useful members of society, Mrs. Brane? They seem to do very little work.”

She gave me an odd, half-amused, half-embarrassed look.

“They think they are useful, poor fellows! They are my pet charity.”

“Oh,” said I blankly. I was not sure whether she was joking or not.

“Come on, Janice. Don't worry your head over my extravagances. Your duty is just to be a nice, cheerful, young companion for me. It's a help to me to see that fiery gold head of yours moving about this musty old house. Don't wear your hat. It's not cold, and I love to see the sun on your hair.”

I tried to suppress my little shiver, but couldn't. She interpreted it very naturally, however. “Oh, it is n't a bit cold, not a bit.”

So we went out into the mild, soft day, and I went without my hat for the sake of letting her see the sun on my hair. As we walked down the ill-weeded drive on which the labors of the two men had made little or no impression, I wondered if narrow, green eyes under a mass of just such hair were watching us from some secret post of observation. I thought that I could feel them boring into my back. I could not restrain a backward look. The old house stood quietly, its long windows blank except for an upper one, out of which Sara was shaking a pillow. I wondered why she should be working in the nursery, but I did n't like to draw Mrs. Brane's attention to the fact.

To my surprise Mrs. Brane was a very energetic walker. She stepped along briskly on her tiny feet, and a faint color came into her poor, wistful face.

“I should be a different person, Janice,” she sighed, “if I could get away from this place and live in some more bracing climate, or some more cheerful country. How lovely Paris would be!”

She laughed her hollow, little laugh.

“My husband lived in Paris for a long time. Before that he was in Russia. He knew a great deal of Russian, even dialects. He was a great traveler. I met him at Aix-les-Bains. He was taking the baths, and so was I. We were both invalids, and I suppose it was a sort of bond. But invalids should not be allowed to marry. Of course, we had no serious disease; it was rheumatism with him, and nervous prostration with me. I wonder if there is n't such a thing as a nerve-germ,

Janice.”

“I wondered,” absently. I was busy with my own thoughts, and she was a great chatterer.

“I think old houses get saturated with nerve-germs, truly I do. That's the real explanation of ghosts. I am sure rooms are haunted by the sorrows and mournful preoccupations of the people that die in them. I am not very superstitious, and I am so glad that you are n't. I trembled for you. You see those other housekeepers —”

“Do tell me about the other housekeepers,” I begged, “especially the one just before me. What was she like?”

“Oh, a little, fat thing, white as wax, very bustling, but with no real ability. She stayed with me for some time, though, and I was beginning to think that— you know, Janice, I owe you an apology.”

“Why, dear Mrs. Brane?”

“Because I never told you about those three housekeepers and their alarms. It was rather shabby of me not to warn you. But, you see, I did n't want to suggest fears to you. I hope I won't suggest them now. But all my other housekeepers have been haunted.”

“Haunted?” I asked with as much surprise as I could assume.

“Yes; the first heard a voice in the wall, and the second knew that some one was in her room at night. The third was so badly frightened that she would n't tell me what happened at all.”

“Where is she now?”

“I don't know. She went away leaving me no address, and I've never heard a word of her since. At first I thought she might have made away with something, some money or jewelry, but I have never missed anything.”

“Mrs. Brane,” I asked hesitatingly, “what is your explanation of these apparitions, of the things that alarmed the housekeepers, of the things that frightened Delia and Annie and Jane?”

As we talked, we had been coming down the long hill on top of which stood “The Pines,” and now were beginning to go towards that swamp, with its black, smothered stream, across which George had driven me on the day of my arrival. I did not like the direction of our walk; I did not like the swamp nor my memory of the oily-looking stream under the twisted, sprawling trees, draped with Spanish moss. But I supposed it was Mrs. Brane's business, and not mine. Besides, I was now interested in what she was saying.

She listened to my question, and seemed to ponder her reply rather doubtfully. At last she made up her mind to some measure of frankness.

“Of course, I have a sort of explanation of my own for their leaving,” she said; “rather a suspicion than an explanation. But, Janice,” she looked about her, drew closer and spoke very low, “if I tell you this suspicion you must promise to keep it very strictly to yourself. I am going against orders in speaking of it at all. And against my own resolution, too. But I feel as if I must have a confidante, and I do think that you are a person to be trusted.”

“Oh, Mrs. Brane,” I said half-tearfully, “indeed, indeed I am. You will not be sorry if you tell me everything, everything that has to do with these queer happenings at 'The Pines.'”

We came down the sandy slope to the bridge and on it we paused, leaning against the rail and looking far down at the sluggish, gray water. The black roots of the trees crawled down into it like snakes from the banks. It was the stillest, deadliest-looking water I have ever seen.

“Just underneath this bridge there is a quicksand,” said Mrs. Brane; “a mule was lost here two years ago, and a poor, half-witted negress killed herself by letting herself drop down from the bridge. Was n't it a dreadful death to choose—slow and suffocating? Ugh!”

“I hate this place,” I said half angrily; “why do we stay here? Let's go and do our talking somewhere else.”

“I have a fancy to tell you here,” she half laughed. The laugh ended in a little shriek. “Janice! There's some one under the bridge!”

I clutched the rail and leaned forward, though God knows, I was in no mind for horrid sights. This was neither horrid nor ghostly, however; no drowned negress haunting the scene of her death. The discreet, bewhiskered face of Henry Lorrence looked respectfully up at us. He was squatting on the bank of the stream under the shadow of the bridge, his coat lay beside him, and he was busy with some tools.

“What are you doing, Henry?” asked Mrs. Brane in rather a shrill voice. She had been startled.

“Mendin' up the bridge, ma'am,” said Henry thickly, for his mouth was full of rusty-looking nails. “There's a couple of weak planks here, ma'am, that I noticed the other afternoon, and they seemed to me dangerous to life and limb over this here stream at such a height. If a person fell through, ma'am, there would n't be much chance for him, would there?”

“I should think not. You're quite right.”

“Better wait till I've got it fixed before you goes acrost, ma'am. It will be a matter of a few hours, and I ain't sure't will be safe then. The whole bridge should be rebuilt.”

“We'll stay on this side,” said Mrs. Brane; “we can go back and walk along the ridge. I don't think the air is particularly healthy down in this swamp, anyway, even at this time of the year. We won't be back this way, Henry. Make a good job of it.”

“Yes, ma'am,” said Henry, with one of his servile, thin-lipped smiles, “I mean to make a regular good job.”

He began to hammer away vigorously. He had quite an assortment of tools, a saw and an axe and some planks. It really looked as if he were going to make a thorough good job of it, and I hoped he would. A fall through the bridge into that thick, gray, turbid water with its faint odor of rottenness—it was not a pleasant thought. And even a very loud crying for help would not reach “The Pines.” There was no nearer place, and the road led only to us. Not a nice spot for an accident at all!

Mrs. Brane and I hastened back to the higher ground, where we found a path, soft with pine needles, where the sunlight sifted through wide branches to the red-brown, hushed earth.

“You see,” she said, “there is no safe place for confidence. If I had not happened to see Henry at just that instant, he would have heard my suspicions, and Heaven knows what effect they might have had on his dull, honest, old mind!”

An honest, old mind, indeed!—if my own suspicions were correct. I wondered if the whiskers were false. Henry was really too perfect an image of the reliable old family servant. He might have been copied from a book.

“Well, here we can look about us, at any rate,” I said; “there's no place for eavesdroppers to hide in.”

“After all, there is n't so much to tell. If I knew more, why, then, there would be no mystery, and I should be safely away from 'The Pines.' You see, I suspect that there has been an attempt at burglary which has failed.”

“An attempt at burglary? Oh, Mrs. Brane!” This was almost as perfect an imitation of the stereotyped exclamation of perfect ignorance as Henry's get-up was of the English house-servant. I blushed at it, but Mrs. Brane did not notice.

“My husband died of paralysis, a sudden stroke. He could not speak. And that

is why I have never been able to leave 'The Pines.'"

"I don't understand," said I, honestly this time.

"Of course you don't. You see, there were secrets in my husband's life. He had an adventurous past. I fear he was very wild." She sighed, but I could see that his wildness was a pleasure to her. She was one of those foolish women to whose sheltered virtue the fancy picture of daring vice appeals very strongly. I was far wiser than she. There were some sordid memories in my life.

"When he married me, he was a man of quite forty-five, and he reformed completely. I think he had had a shock, a fright of some kind which served as a warning. Sometimes I fancied that he lived under a dread of trouble. Certainly, he was very watchful and secret in his ways, and, from being such a globe-trotter, he became the veriest stick-at-home. He never left 'The Pines,' winter or summer, though he would send Robbie and me away,"—she gave the pitiful, little sigh that came always now with Robbie's name. "He was not at all rich, though we were sufficiently comfortable on my small fortune. But at times he talked like a very wealthy man. He made plans, he was very strange about it. At last, towards the end of his life he began to drop hints. He would tell me that some day Robbie would be rich beyond dreams; that, if he died, I would be left provided for like a queen. He said, always very fearfully, very stealthily, that he had left everything to me, everything—and of course I thought I knew that he had very little to leave. He said that I must be braver than he had been. 'With a little caution, Edna, a very little caution, you can reap the fruits of it all.' Of course I questioned him, but he teased me and pretended that he had been talking nonsense. He made his will, though, at about this time, and left me everything he had, everything, and he underlined the 'everything.' One night we were sitting at dinner. He had been perfectly well all day, but he had taken a ride in the sun and complained of a slight headache. We had wine for dinner. I've never been able to touch a drop since—is n't it odd? Suddenly, while he was talking, he put his hand to his head. 61 feel queer,' he said, and his voice was thick. He grabbed the arms of his chair, and fixed his eyes upon me. 'Perhaps I had better tell you now, Edna,' the words were all heavy and blurred, 'it is in the house, you know—the old part.' He stood up, went over to the door, closed it carefully; he looked into the pantry to be sure that the waitress was not there. He came back and stood beside my chair, looking down at me. His face was flushed. 'You will find the paper,' he began; and then the words began to come queer, he struggled with them, his tongue seemed to stick to his mouth. Suddenly he threw up his arms and fell down on the floor." Mrs. Brane wiped her eyes. "Poor Theodore! Poor fellow! He never spoke again. He lived for several days, and his eyes followed

me about so anxiously, so yearningly, but he was entirely helpless, could not move a finger, could not make a sound. He died and left me tormented by the secret that he could not tell. It has been like a curse. It *has* been a curse. It has killed Robbie. I believe that it will some day kill me."

Here the poor woman sank down on a log and cried. I comforted her as well as I could, and begged her to forget this miserable business. "No problematic fortune is worth so much misery and distress," I said, "and if, in all this time, in spite of your searching—and I suppose you have searched very thoroughly—"

"Oh, yes," she sighed, "I have worn myself out with it. Every scrap of paper in the house has been gone over a hundred times, every drawer and closet. Why, since Sara stirred me up with her cleaning in the old part of the house, I have been over everything again during this last fortnight, but with not the slightest result."

"You see. It is useless. And, dear Mrs. Brane, I hope you won't mind my suggesting it, but, perhaps, the whole idea is a mistake, or some fantastic obsession of your husband's mind. He was ill towards the last, probably more ill than you knew. You may be wasting your health and life in the pursuit of a mere chimera. You have no further suspicions of any attempt at burglary, have you?"

"No." My words had had some effect. She stood up and began to walk home thoughtfully and calmly. "No. There have been no disturbances for a long time. Sara and Henry have not been frightened nor have you. Mary has seen no ghosts. Perhaps you are right, dear, and the whole thing is a fiction." She sighed. One does not relinquish the hope of a fabulous fortune without a sigh.

We were rather silent on the way home. I was planning an interview with Sara, my first move in the difficult and dangerous game that I had set myself to play. I was frightened, yes, but terribly interested. I left Mrs. Brane after lunch and went down to the kitchen. Sara was seated by the table peeling potatoes, the most commonplace and respectable of figures. She lifted her large, handsome face and stood up, setting down the bowl.

"Go on with your work, Sara," I said, "I shall not keep you but a moment."

She sat down and I stood there, my hand resting on the table. My heart was beating fast, and I was conscious of a tightening in my throat. Unconsciously, I narrowed my eyes, and tightened my lips till my expression must have been something like that mask of wickedness I had seen in the doorway of the book-room. I spoke in a low, hard voice, level and cruel, and I put my whole theory to the test at once; foolishly enough, I think, for I might have given myself away if my guess had not been correct in this detail.

“How goes it, *Maida?*” I asked. It was the name the Baron had used.

She started; the knife stopped its work. She looked up, glancing nervously about the room.

“God!” she said. “You're gettin' nervy, ain't you?”

No speech could have been more unlike the speech of the smooth and respectful Sara.

I smiled as evilly as I could. “Once in a while I take a risk, that's all. Don't refer to it again. But answer my questions, will you? Anything new?”

“God, no! I'm about done with this game. Housework is no holiday to me, and since they nabbed the Nobleman my heart's gone out of me. Our game's about up, unless we get that—“here she used a string of vile, whispered epithets—“this afternoon, and I don't think it's likely. He's got nine lives, that cat of a Hovey!”

My heart thumped. I dared not ask her meaning.

Sara went on, only it was certainly Maida that spoke in the coarse, breathless, furtive voice. “If the Nobleman has talked, they're coming back for us. There's a dozen chances the bridge trick won't work. And, even if it does, the whole pack will be down here to investigate. All very well for you to say that we need just twenty-four free hours to pull the thing off, but I tell you what, madam, Jaffrey and me are gettin' pretty sick—we'd like a glimpse of them jools.”

One phrase of this speech had struck me deaf and half blind. I made a sign of caution to the horrible creature, and I went out. I stopped in the hall to look at the tall grandfather's clock ticking loudly and solemnly. It was already very nearly five o'clock. Paul Dabney's train was in, and he was on his way to “The Pines.” I stood there stupidly repeating “the bridge trick” over and over to myself. The bridge trick! Henry had had a saw and an axe. He might just as easily have been weakening a plank as strengthening it. Had it not been for my presence, his entire reliance on my skill in diverting Mrs. Brane's suspicion, we should not have seen him at his work. But thinking me his leader, the real instigator of the crime, he had probably decided that for some reason I had brought Mrs. Brane purposely to watch him at his task. It was five o'clock. Paul Dabney would be near the bridge. He was probably bringing with him a detective, this Hovey, of whom Sara had spoken so vilely. And the red-haired woman did not mean them to reach “The Pines” that night. By this time she probably had some knowledge of the secret of the bookcase, and she must feel that she had successfully frightened away my desire to take out a book at night. She would rob the bookcase some time within the next twenty-four hours, before any one found the smothered bodies of Paul Dabney and his companion, and

with her treasure she would be off. Sara and Henry would give notice. I stood there as though movement were impossible, and yet I knew that everything depended upon haste.

I began to reckon out the time. The train got in to Pine Cone at four-thirty, and it would probably be late. It was always late. It would take two men walking at a brisk pace at least an hour to reach the swamp. It was now just five o'clock. I had thirty minutes, therefore, in which to save the secret of the bookcase and to rescue the man I loved. It would take me at least twenty minutes to get to the bridge; once below the top of the hill I could run as fast as I liked. Every second was valuable now. I went into the bookroom and shut the door. Kneeling on the floor I tumbled out the books as I had seen the Baron, doubtless Sara's "Nobleman," do. Then I removed the middle shelf and began tapping softly with my fingers. There was the hollow spot, and there, just back of the shelf I had removed, was a tiny metal projection. I pushed it. Down dropped a little sliding panel, and I thrust my hand into the shallow opening. I was cold and shuddering with haste and fear and excitement. My fingers touched a paper, and I drew it out. I did not even glance at it. I hid it in my dress, closed the panel, restored the shelf, and returned the books as quickly and quietly as I could. Then I went out into the hall.

The clock had ticked away fifteen of my precious minutes. If the train was late, I still had time. I went out of the front door and began, with as good an air of careless sauntering as I could force my body to assume, to stroll down the winding driveway. I longed to take a short cut, but I did not dare. I was sure that my double was on the watch. She would not leave that driveway unguarded on such an afternoon. I felt that my life was not a thing to wager on at that moment. I doubted if I should be allowed to reach the bridge alive. The utter importance of my doing so gave me the courage to use some strategy. I actually forced myself to return, still sauntering, to the house and I got a parasol. Then I walked around to the high-walled garden. Here I strolled about for a few moments, and then slipped away, plunged through a dense mass of bushes at the back, followed the rough course of a tiny stream, and, climbing a stone wall, came out on the road below the hill and several feet outside of "The Pines" gateway. My return for a parasol and the changed direction of my walk would be certain to divert suspicion of my going towards the bridge. Nevertheless, I felt like a mouse who allows itself a little hope when the watchful cat, her tail twitching, her terrible eyes half shut, allows it to creep a perilous little distance from her claws. As soon as I was well out of sight of the house, I chose a short cut at random, shut my parasol, and ran as I had never run before.

CHAPTER X—THE SWAMP

I HAVE always loved pine trees since that desperate afternoon, for the very practical reason that the needles prevent the growth of underbrush. My skirts were left free, and my feet had their full opportunity for speed, and I needed every ounce of strength and breath. Before I came to the top of the last steep slope that plunged down to the stream, I heard a hoarse, choking cry, that terrible cry for “Help! Help! Help!” It was a man's voice, but so thick and weak and hollow that I could not recognize it for Paul Dabney's. I did not dare to answer it, such was my dread of being stopped by some murderess lurking in the gnarled and stunted trees. But I fairly hurled myself down the path. There was the bridge. I saw that a great gap yawned in the middle of it. I hurried to the edge. Down below me in the gray, rotten-smelling shadows floated a desperate, white face. Paul Dabney's straining eyes under his mud-streaked hair looked up at me, and the faint hope in them went out.

“You again!” he gasped painfully. “You've come back to see the end...” He smiled a twisted, ironical smile. “If I could get my hand out of this infernal grave I'd let you wrap some of that hair of yours around my fingers. That's your trade-mark, is n't it? Did you come back for that?” He sank an inch lower, his chin had gone under. He lifted it out, bearded with filthy mud, and leaned back as though against a pillow, closing his eyes. He had given up hope.

All this, of course, took but a moment of time. I had been looking about, searching the place for help. Near the edge of the horrible, sluggish stream lay a board, left there by Henry after his devilish work, or, else, fallen when Paul Dabney had broken through. It lay on the farther bank. I stood up, measured the distance of the break in the bridge, and, going back a few paces, ran and jumped across. It was a good jump. I hardly looked to see, however, but hurried down the opposite bank and shoved out the board towards Paul Dabney. Only his face now glimmered like a death-mask on the surface of the mud.

“Paul,” I cried desperately, urgently, commandingly, “pull out your arm. I have come to save you.”

His eyes opened. He stared at me. Then life seemed to come back to his face. He made a frantic, choking, gasping struggle; once he went altogether down; then, with a sucking sound his arm came up, the fingers closed on my board. I caught his poor, cold, slimy hand. I pulled with all my strength. His grip was like

a convulsion. Inch by inch I dragged him towards the bank. The stream surrendered its victim with a sort of sticky sob, and he lay there on the ground beside me, lifeless as a log, hardly to be recognized as a human being, so daubed and drenched was he with the black ooze that had so nearly been his death. My attempts to restore him were soon successful, for it was exhaustion, not suffocation, that had made him faint. He had taken very little of the mud into his mouth, but, struggling there in the bottomless, horrible slough for nearly half an hour had taxed his strength to the last gasp.

He opened his eyes and looked up at me with an expression of grave astonishment. I knew that he had not expected me to be such a serious criminal as to make this deliberate attempt on his life, and, yet, I was sure as his large, gray eyes searched me that he was deliberating the possibility. He sat up presently, and, taking my handkerchief, he wiped off his face and hair and hands.

“The rest is hopeless,” he said.

“The other man?” I asked him shudderingly, my eyes fixed on the smooth and oily water.

He looked at me with a puzzled face. “The other man! There was not any other man...” Then, stilt looking at me, a faint, unwilling flush stole up his cheek.

“Miss Gale,” he said, “you are without doubt my guardian angel. And yet, strangely enough, I had a dreadful vision of what you might be as another kind of angel. When I was going down,”—he shivered all over and glanced at the stream, whose surface was now as smooth as it would have been had he sunk beneath it,—“when I was going down, and at the last of my strength,—I was delirious, I suppose,—but I had a sort of vision. I thought you stood there on the bank above me, and looked down with your narrow face between its two wings of red hair, and mocked me. Just as I was settling down to death, you disappeared. And, just a few moments later, there you were again, this time with the aura of a saint... Miss Gale,”—and here he looked at me with entire seriousness, dropping his tone of mockery,—“do you believe in dual personalities?”

“Really, Mr. Dabney,” I said, “I don't think it's a very good time to take up the subject.”

He looked away from me, and spoke low with an air of confusion. “You called me 'Paul' when you shoved out that blessed board, which has gone down in my place...”

I paid no attention to this remark, but stood up. Silently he, too, rose and we

laid a log across the deadly opening of the bridge and balanced carefully back to safety. I could not think of my leap of a few minutes before without a feeling of deathly sickness.

“You risked your life,” murmured Paul Dabney; “you risked your life to save me...” He stopped me as we climbed up the hill. It was very dark there amongst the trees. He took me by the wrists, and, “Janice Gale,” he said desperately, speaking through his teeth, “look up at me, for the love of God.”

I did look up, and he plunged his eyes into mine as though he were diving for a soul.

I put up no barriers between my heart and his searching eyes. It was so dusky there that he could not read any of my secrets. I let him search till at last he sighed from the bottom of his soul, and let my hands fall, passing his own across his forehead with a pitiful air of confusion and defeat.

“'La belle dame sans merci has thee in thrall,'” he murmured, and we went up into the glimmering twilight of the open spaces where the swallows were still wheeling high in search of the falling sun.

When we reached the house, I asked Paul Dabney timidly if he did not think it best to change and not to alarm Mrs. Brane by any sight of his condition. He agreed with a wry sort of smile, and went slowly up the stairs. I saw that he held tight to the railing, and that his feet dragged. He was very near, indeed, to collapse; the walk up the hill had been almost too much for him.

Nevertheless, he appeared at dinner-time as trim and neat as possible, with the air of demure boyishness, which was so disarming, completely restored.

Not only was he neat and trim in person, but he was mentally alert and gay. He ate hardly anything, to be sure, drank not at all, and sat, tight-strung, leaning a little forward in his chair, his hand in his pocket, as he laughed and talked. His eyes held, beneath bright, innocent surfaces, rather a harried, hunted look. But he was very entertaining, so much so that his pallor, the little choking cough that bothered him, and my own condition of limp reaction to the desperate excitement of the afternoon, passed entirely unnoticed by Mrs. Brane. Her better spirits of the morning had returned in force. She was very glad to see Paul Dabney, so glad that I suffered a twinge of heart.

“Oh,” she laughed, “but it's good to have a man in the house. Shakespeare is right, you know, when he says, 'a woman naturally born to fears.'”

“I don't think he was right at all,” Paul Dabney took her up. “I believe that the man is naturally the more fearful animal. Shakespeare ought to have said, 'a woman naturally feigning fear.' I'm with the modern poet, 'the female of the

species is more deadly than the male.' Take the lady spider, for instance."

"What does the lady spider do?" asked Mrs. Brane.

"She devours her lover while she is still in his embrace."

"How horrible!"

"Horrible, but the creature is a very faithful and devoted mother. I think there are many women"—here his hunted and haggard look rested upon me—"who would be glad to rid themselves of a lover when his—particular—usefulness is over."

"All women kill the thing they love," I smiled, and I had a dreadful feeling that my smile was like the cruel and thin-lipped smile of the woman who had planned Paul Dabney's death.

That was one of the most terrifying consequences of the nervous shock I had suffered, that I had quite often now this obsession, as though the vixen were using me, obsessing my body with her blackened soul, as though gradually I were becoming her instrument. The smile left my shaken lips, and I saw a sort of reflection of it draw Dabney's mouth stiffly across his teeth. His pallor deepened; he looked away and began to crumble his bread with restless fingers.

Henry passed through, and we followed him into the drawing-room, where coffee was always served. When Paul Dabney had first come into the dining-room I had glanced shrewdly at Henry. The jaw behind the whiskers had dropped, the eyes had blinked, then discretion was perfectly restored. But I felt a threatening sort of gloom emanate from the man towards me, and I realized that my position was doubly dangerous. There was a spirit of mutiny in my supposed accomplices. I trusted my double, however, to control the pair. Their fear of her was doubtless greater than their dread of detection, and Henry probably was relieved of some portion of his fears by the non-appearance of the Hovey, whom Sara had so befouled with epithets, and whom she evidently so greatly feared.

Mrs. Brane excused herself early, and I, too, rose shortly after she had left the room. I moved slowly towards the door. Paul Dabney stood by the high mantel, one hand in his pocket, the other resting on the shelf, his head a little bent, looking somberly at me from under his handsome brows. He looked very slim and young. The thought of his loneliness, of his danger, so much greater than he suspected, smote my heart. I wanted to go back and tell him everything, even my love. I was hesitating, ready to turn, when he spoke. The voice, sharp and stinging as a lash, fell with a bite across my heart.

"Good-night, *sleep-walker*," he said.

My hand flew to my breast because of the pain he caused me. He watched me narrowly. His pale face was rigid with the guard he kept upon some violent feeling. My hurt turned to anger.

“You suspect me of sinister things, Paul Dabney,” I said hotly; “you think that I prowl about Mrs. Brane's house while she sleeps, in search of something valuable, perhaps.” I laughed softly. “Perhaps you are right. I give you leave to pursue your investigations, though I can't say I consider you a very ingenious detective.”

He started, and the color came in a wave across his face. For some reason the slight upon his amateur detecting seemed to sting. I was glad. I would have liked to strike him, to cause him physical pain. I came in a sort of rush straight over to him, and he drew warily back till he stood against the wall, his eyes narrowed upon me, his head bent, as I have seen the eyes and heads of men about to strike.

“Listen to me,” I said; “I give you fair warning. This afternoon I saved your life at the risk of my own. I may not be able to do that again. I advise,”—here I threw all the contempt possible into my voice,—“I advise you to keep out of this, to stay in your room and lock your door at night. Don't smile. It is a very serious warning. Good-night, *dreamer*, and—*lover without faith*.”

At this he put his hand to his eyes, and I left him standing with this gesture of ashamed defeat.

It was a night of full and splendid moon; my room was as white as the calyx of a lily, so white that its very radiance made sleep impossible. Besides, I was excited by my battle with Paul Dabney, and by the thought of that paper in my dress. God willing, now, the struggle would soon be over. If I lived through the next twenty-four hours, I would find the treasure, capture the thieves, confront Paul Dabney with my innocence and my achievement, and leave “The Pines” forever. My ordeal was not so nearly over as I hoped. There were further tangles in the female spider's web. It makes me laugh now and blush to think how, all the while, the creature made her use of me, how the cat let the little mouse run hither and thither in its futile activity; no, not altogether futile, I did play an extraordinary rôle. I did that very afternoon save Paul Dabney's life; I did bewilder the queen spider and disturb and tear her web, but, when all is said and done, it was she who was mistress of “The Pines” that night.

I did not light my gas, so splendid was the moon, but crouching near my open window on the floor, I took out the paper and spread it open on my knee. It was covered with close lines in the Russian script. The writing was so fine and delicate that, to read it, I should need a stronger light. I rose, drew my shade and

lit the gas. Again I spread out the paper, then gave a little exclamation of dismay. It was the Russian script, perfectly legible to me, but, alas! the language was not that of modern Russian speech. It was the old Slavonic language of the Church. The paper was as much a mystery to me as though it were still hidden in the bookcase.

CHAPTER XI—THE SPIDER

IN vain I tortured my wits; here and there a word was comprehensible. I made out the number 5 and fairly ground my teeth. Here was the key to the secret; here was my chart, and I could not decipher it. I folded up the paper with great care, ripped open a seam of my mattress, and folded the mystery in. By night I would keep it there; by day I would carry it about on my body. Somehow, I would think out a way to decipher it; I would go to New York and interview a priest of the Greek Church. If necessary I would bribe him to secrecy... my brain was full of plans, more or less foolish and impossible. At any rate, I reasoned that the Red-haired Woman, not finding any paper in the bookcase, would do one of two things—either she would suspect a previous theft and disposal of the treasure and give up her perilous mission, or she would suspect me whom she had found once at night before the book-shelves. In this case I was, of course, both in greater danger, and, also, providentially protected. At least, she would not kill me till she had got that paper out of my possession. My problem was, first, to find the meaning of my valuable chart, then to put it in her way, and, while she endeavored to get a translation—I could not believe her to possess a knowledge of ecclesiastical Russian—it was my part to rifle the hoard and to set the police on her track. When I had the meaning of the paper, I would send word to the police at Pine Cone. Till then, I would play the game alone. So did my vanity and wounded feelings lead me on, and so very nearly to my own destruction.

After I had finished sewing up my mattress-seam, I put out my light and went to stand near my window. Unconsciously affected by my fears, I kept close to the long, dark curtain, and stood still, looking down at the silvered garden paths, the green-gray lines of the box, the towering, fountain-like masses of the trees, waving their spray of shadow tracery across the turf. I stood there a long time brooding over my plans—it must have been an hour—before I saw a figure come out into the garden. It was Paul Dabney. He was walking quietly to and fro, smoking and whistling softly. I could hear the gravel crunch beneath his feet.

All at once he stopped short and threw up his head as though at a signal. He tossed away his cigarette. He stared at the arbor, the one where poor Mary used to watch her little charge at play, and then, as though he were drawn against his will, he went slowly towards it, hesitated, bent his head a little, and stepped in. I heard the low murmur of his voice. I thought that Mrs. Brane was in the arbor,

and my heart grew sick with jealousy. I was about to drag myself away from the window when another figure came out of the arbor and stood for an instant in the bright moonlight looking straight up to my window. I grew cold. I stood there holding my breath. I heard a little, low, musical, wicked laugh. The creature—my own cloak drooping from her shoulders—turned and went back into the shelter of the vine. My God! What was she about to do to Paul, the blind fool to sit there with that horrible thing and to fancy that he sat with me? Having failed in her attempt to drown him, she was now beguiling him out of the house for a few hours, in order to give one of her accomplices a chance to search the bookcase. I had no scruples about playing eavesdropper. I took off my shoes and hurried noiselessly down the stairs. I stole to a shuttered window in the dining-room, and, inch by inch, with infinite caution, I raised the sash. I was so near to the arbor that a hand stretched out at the full length of its arm could touch the honeysuckle vines. I stood there and strained my ears.

The woman was speaking so low that it was but a gentle thread of voice. It was extraordinarily young and sweet, the tone—sweeter than my voice, though astonishingly like it.

“Why did I save you, Paul Dabney?” she was murmuring, “can't you guess? *Now*, can't you guess?”

There came the sound of a soft, long-drawn, dreadful kiss. I burned with shame from head to foot.

“You devil—you she-devil!” said Paul Dabney in low, hot speech; “you can kiss!”

I could bear no more. She must be in his arms. What was the reason for this deviltry, this profanation of my innocence and youth, this desecration of my name? I hated and loathed Paul Dabney for his hot voice, for his kiss. He thought that he held *me* there in his arms, that he insulted *me*, tamely submissive, with his words, “You devil, you she-devil...” I fled to my room. I threw myself upon my bed. I sobbed and raved in a crazed, smothered fashion to my pillow. I struck the bed with my hands. I do not know how long that dreadful meeting lasted; I realized, with entire disregard, that *while* it lasted Sara was searching the bookcase. To this day I can think of it only with a sickness of loathing. Once I fancied that I heard Paul Dabney's step under my window. But I hid my head, covered my ears. I lay in a still fever of rage and horror all that night. The insult—so strange and unimaginable a one—to my own unhappy love was more than I could bear. I wanted to kill, and kill, and kill these two, and, last, myself.

CHAPTER XII—NOT REG'LAR

I MEANT to ask Mrs. Brane the next morning to excuse me from my work of cataloguing the books of her husband's library. I had no courage to face Paul Dabney. Unluckily, Mrs. Brane did not come down to breakfast. She had a severe headache. I did not like to disturb her with my request, nor did I like to give up my duty without permission, for the catalogue was nearly completed and Mrs. Brane was very impatient about it, so I dragged myself into the bookroom at the usual time. Paul Dabney was not yet there. He breakfasted late, going out first for a long tramp and a swim. I hoped that he would not come at all this morning.

I went languidly to work. I did not feel the slightest interest to know whether or not Sara Lorrence had taken advantage of the decoying of Paul Dabney and had made an investigation of the Russian book-shelves. I felt utterly wretched and drained of life, and of the desire to live.

When at last Paul Dabney's footstep came along the hall, and, somewhat hesitatingly, in at the door, I did not turn my head. He stopped at sight of me, and stood still. I could feel that his eyes were on me, and I struggled against a nervous curiosity to see the expression of his look. But I would not yield. I kept on doggedly, taking down a volume, dusting it, clapping its leaves together, putting it back and making a note of its title and author in the book that Mrs. Brane had given me for the purpose. My face burned, my finger-tips turned to ice. Anger, disgust, shame, seemed to have taken the place of the blood along my veins. At last, “You are not as affable a companion by day as you are by night,” drawled the young man, and came strolling a step nearer to me across the floor.

“I know you made me promise,” he went on, “not to speak of any moonlight madness by the common light of day, but, strangely enough, your spell does n't hold. I feel quite able to break my word to you now.”

He paused. I wondered if he could feel the tumult of my helpless rage. “I have been very much afraid of you,” he said, “but that is changed. No man can be afraid of the serpent he has fondled, even when he knows that its fang is as poisonous as sin. I am not afraid of you at all.”

The book slid to the floor. My head seemed to bend of its own weight to meet my hands. A great strangling burst of laughter tore my throat, pealed from my

lips, filled the room. I laughed like a maniac. I rocked with laughter. Then, staggering to my feet, I went over to the window bench, and sat there sobbing and crying as though my heart must break.

Paul Dabney shut the door, swore, paced the room, at last came over to me and bade me, roughly, to “stop my noise.”

“Don't make a fool of yourself,” he said coldly. “You won't make one of me, I assure you.”

At that I looked up at him through a veil of tears, showing him a face that must have been as simple as an angry child's.

“Look at me, Paul Dabney,” I gasped. “Look hard—as hard as you looked yesterday afternoon down there near the swamp after I had saved your life. And, when you have looked, tell me what you know about me—me—me—Janice Gale.”

He caught me by the hands and looked. My tears, falling, left my vision clear, and his face showed so haunted and haggard and spent, so wronged, that with a welcome rush, tenderness and pity and understanding came back for a moment to my heart. I realized, for just that moment, what he must be suffering from this dreadful tangle in which he had been caught. How could he know me for what I really was when that demon came to him with my face and voice and hands and eyes? And yet—the moment passed and left me hard again—I felt that he ought to have known. Some glimmer of the truth should have come to him. In fact, after a moment he dropped my hands and put his own over his eyes. He went over to the window and stood there, staring out, unseeing, I was sure. His shoulders sagged, his whole slight, energetic body drooped. I saw his fist shut and open at his side. After a long time, he turned and came slowly back to stand before me.

“Janice Gale,” he said, in a changed and much more gentle voice, “I wish you would tell me what the accursed—mystery means. Do you remember last night? Do you remember—do your lips remember our kisses? I can't look at the sweetness and the sorrow of them and believe it. Is this your real self, or is that? Are you possessed by a night-demon, or is this a mask of youth and innocence? I do believe you must be a victim of that strange psychic affliction of a divided personality. Janice—tell me, do you know what you do”—he dropped his voice as a man who speaks of ghostly and unhallowed things—“after you have gone to sleep?”

I wanted to tell him, but I wanted more strongly to triumph over him. The rush of tenderness had passed. I could not forget the insult of his tone to me, the

jeering, biting contempt of his speeches. I longed passionately to bring him down to my feet, to humble him, and then—to raise him up. Love is a cruel sort of madness, a monster perfectionist. My love for him could not forgive his blindness. He ought to have known, he ought to have seen my soul too clearly to be so easy a dupe, and his love for me ought to have driven him shuddering from those other lips. It ought to have been his shield and weapon of defense, instead of his lure.

“I have nothing to confess,” I told him coldly. “Why should I confess to you? You have come to this house to persecute and to insult me. How do you dare”—I shook with a resurgent rage and disgust—“to speak to me of—*kisses?* When are you going away from this house? Or must I go, and begin to struggle again, to hunt for work? If I had a brother or a father or any protector strong enough to deal with the sort of man you are, I should have you horse-whipped for your conduct to me! Oh, I could strike you myself! I hate and loathe you!” I sobbed, having worked myself up almost to the frenzy of the past night. “I want to punish you! You have hurt and shamed me!” I fought for self-control. “Thank God! It will soon be over.”

I stood up, and tried to pass him. He held out his arms to bar me, and, looking down at me, his face flushed and quivering, he said between his teeth: “When it is over, as you must know, my dear Sphinx, one of us two will be dead. I am not the first man, I fancy, that you have driven to madness or worse. I hope I shall have the strength to make the world safe from you before I go. That's what I live for now, though you've made my life rather more of a hell than even I ever thought life could be made.”

Our eyes met, and the looks crossed like swords.

“Let me go out. Your faith is not much greater than your skill, Master Detective-Lover. I think the outcome will astonish you. Let me go out, I say.”

He moved away, grim and pale, his jaws set, and I went out.

On my way to my room Mary met me in the hall. “I want to speak to you,” she began; then broke off, “Oh, Miss Gale, dear, how bad you look!” she said.

I was so glad to see her dear, honest, trusting, truthful face that I put my head down on her shoulder, and cried like a baby in her arms. She made me go to my room and lie down, she bathed my face and laid a cold, wet cloth across my temples.

“Poor blessed girl!” she said in her nursey way, “she's all wore out. Poor soul! Poor pretty!” A dozen such absurd and comforting ejaculations she made use of, how comforting my poor motherless youth had never till then let me know.

When I was quieter she brought her sewing and sat beside my bed, rocking and humming. She asked no questions; just told me when I tried to apologize to “hush now and try to get a little nap.” And actually I did go to sleep.

I woke up as though on the crest of a resurgent wave of life. I sat on my bed and smiled at Mary; then, gathering my knees in my hands, I said, “Now, I'm all right again, nursey; tell me what you wanted to ask me when you met me in the hall.”

It was extraordinary how calm and clear I felt, how sufficient to myself and able to meet what was coming and bring it to a triumphant end. With what good and healing spirits do we sometimes walk when we are asleep.

“Don't hesitate, dear Mary. I'm done with my nonsense now. I'm perfectly able to face any domestic crisis, from ghosts to broken china.”

“Well, ma'am,” said Mary, beginning to rock in an indignant, staccato fashion —there are as many ways of rocking as there are moods in the one who rocks —“it's that there Sara. Never, in all my days of service in the old country and here, have I met with the like of her!”

“In what way? I mean, what *is* she like?”

“Why, ma'am, she's like a whited sepulcher”—this time she pronounced it “sep-looker”—“that's what she's like. She's as smooth and soft-spoken as a pet dove, that she is”—Mary's similes were quite extraordinary—“she fair coos, and so full of her 'ma'ams' and 'if you pleases.' She's a good worker, too, steady and quiet, too quiet to be nacheral. And, indeed, ma'am, nacheral it ain't, not for her. A murderess at heart, miss, that's what she is.”

I was startled. I gripped my knees more tightly.

“Yes, miss. Up to this mornin', though I can't say I had a likin' for her, for that would n't be the truth, and I always hold to my mother's sayin' of 'tell the truth and shame the devil'; but this mornin', ma'am, I run into her quite by accident, a-standin' in the nursery—and what she should be doin' in my blessed lamb's room I can't say, and a-cursin' and a-swearin', and her face like a fury—O Lor', miss! I can't give you no notion of what she was like, nor the langwidge; filth it was, ma'am, though I should n't use the word. And, miss, I made sure it was you she was in a rage with, a-stampin' and a-mouthin' there like the foul fiend. She did n't know I was seein' her first-off, but when she did, the shameless hussy went on as bad as before. Never did I see nor hear the like of it. I tried to shame her, but it was like tryin' to shame a witch's caldron, a-boilin' with cats' tongues and vipers', and dead men's hands. Awful it was, to make your blood run cold! Miss Gale, you had n't ought to keep the creature in the house. It ain't safe.”

“Could you find out why she was so angry?”

“Indeed, ma'am, there was so much cursin' and sputterin' that I could n't make out much sense to her, but it was somethin' about bein' made a mock of and gettin' nothin' for your pains. She'd been glum all mornin', miss, I seen that, and I'd left her alone. Her and Henry had been havin' words at breakfast time, but *this* was fair awful. Seems like as if she had just kept the whole rumpus in her wickit breast till it boiled over and she run into the nursery and let it go off, like some poison bottle with the cork blown away, if you know what I mean. Miss, it ain't safe to keep her in the house!”

I laughed a little.

“No, Mary, I don't believe it is very safe.”

“Yes, miss. And that's not all. There is doin's I don't like in this house, and I'd have come to you before, but it seems like I've made you so much trouble in this place and you've been lookin' peaky—”

“You've been a perfect godsend to me, Mary!” I cried. “Please tell me anything, everything. Never hesitate to come to me. Never delay an instant.”

“Well, ma'am, there's two or three things that has been vexin' me, little things in themselves, but not reg'lar—now, that's what I say, ma'am, you can stand anything so long as it's reg'lar. In the old country now, as I told you, I worked in a haunted house, and the help was told to expect a ghost and it come reg'lar every night a-draggin' its chains up the stairs; but, bless me, did we mind it? Not a bit.'T was all reg'lar and seemly, if you know what I mean, nothin' that you could n't expect and prepare your mind for. What I don't like about the happenin's here is they're most irreg'lar. There's no tellin' whatever where they'll break out nor how.”

This typically English distinction as to the desirable regularity of apparitions amused me so much that I did not hurry Mary in her story. She got back to it presently.

“Miss Gale, you know that long, gray cloak of yours with the rose-silk linin'?”

“Yes, Mary.” My heart did beat a trifle faster.

“And the little hat you leave with the cloak down in the front hall on the rack behind the door?”

“Yes, Mary.”....

“Well, miss,”—the rocking grew impressive, portentous, climatic. “Somebody has been usin' 'em at night.”

“Oh, Mary!”

“Yes, miss. And it must'a' been that Sara. Like as not she sneaks off and meets some feller down the road, or even over to Pine Cone. And her a married woman! Pleased she'd be to fix the blame of her bad doin's on you. What would Mrs. Brane think, miss, if she seen you, one of these moonlight nights as bright as day, a-walkin' away from her house at some unseemly hour. Ir-reg'lar, she'd call it! Yes, miss. It makes my blood boil!”

“It is certainly not a pleasant idea,” I said dryly—“No, miss; to put it mild, not pleasant, not a bit. Well, miss, I found your cloak this morn-in' hangin' in its place and the hem drenched with dew. You can see for yourself if you go down in the hall. Now, it stands to reason, if you'd worn it yourself, the hem would n't'a' touched the grass hardly, but a short woman like Sara is—”

“Unless I had sat down on a low rustic bench,” I put in.

“Well, *miss*, was you out last night?”

“No, Mary—unless I've been walking in my sleep.”

She looked a little startled, and stared at me with round, anxious eyes to which tears came.

“Oh, miss, I don't think it. Really and truly I don't.”

She had not seen the strand of red-gold hair about Robbie's fingers and the kind soul had diligently weeded out any suspicions even of my unconscious complicity in Robbie's death.

“Nor do I, Mary dear. In fact, I was broad awake all last night. I never closed my eyes. Perhaps I drank too much coffee after dinner, or, perhaps, it was the moon.”

“There now!” The rocking became triumphant. “That proves it. Sara, it must'a' been.”

“What else, Mary? What are the other little things?”

“Why, ma'am, it seems foolish to mention 'em, but I just think I kinder ought.”

“Indeed you ought, Mary.”

“I had to go down to the kitchen late last Friday night. Mrs. Brane could n't sleep, and I thought I'd give her a glass of warm milk same as I ust to give my poor lamb. Well, miss, I found the kitchen door locked; the one at the foot of the back stairs, not the one that goes outdoors, which nacherly would be fastened at night. The key was n't on my side of the door, so it stands to reason't was locked on the kitchen side, and Sara and Henry must'a' been in that kitchen, though it was dark, not a glimmer under the door or through the keyhole, and not a sound —or else they'd gone out the back way. Why should Sara lock her kitchen door

and go round the other way? Don't it seem a bit odd to you, ma'am? And when I axed her the next mornin', she kinder snarled like and told me to mind my own business, that the kitchen door was her affair, and that if I valued my soul I'd best keep to my bed nights in this house."

We were silent for a moment while I digested this sinister injunction, and the rocker "registered" the indignation of a respectable Englishwoman.

"Anything else, Mary?" I asked at last.

Mary stopped rocking. She folded her hands on her work and her round eyes took on a doubting, puzzled look.

"Yes, ma'am. One other thing. And maybe it means naught, and, maybe, it means a lot. Deviltry it must be of some kind, I says, or else mere foolishness." She paused, and I saw her face pucker tearfully. "You know how I did love that pitiful little Robbie, miss?"

"Yes, Mary dear."

"Well, times when I feel like my heart would bust out with grievin', I go off and away by myself somewhere and kinder mourn."

"Yes, you dear, faithful soul!"

"And I'm like to choose some spot that 'minds me of my lamb."

"Yes."

"Well, 't was only this mornin' that I woke up and missed him out of common, so sweet he was when he waked up, and cheery as a robin! So, 't was early, early mornin', the sun just up, and I crep' out quiet and went out to the garden and sat down in the arbor where I ust to sit and watch the little darlin' at his play—well, miss, I have to tell you that I sat there cryin' like a baby, and 't was a while before I seen that there lay a paper under the bench, like as if it might have fallen there from a body's pocket. I picked it up, and't was covered with heathenish writin'. Here. I kep' it in my apron to show you, miss."

She took the paper from her pocket, and I sprang up and seized it eagerly. I had no doubt whatever that it had been lost by my double as she sat with Paul last night. It was a letter in the Russian script. I read it rapidly.

"Ever dear and honored madame, I await the summons of your necessity. A message received here"—there followed a name and address of some town in the county, unknown to me—"will bring me to Pine Cone in a few hours by motor-cycle. I hold myself at your commands, and will lend you the service of my knowledge in translating the Slavonic curiosity you have described to me so movingly. I need not remind you of your promises. One knows that they are

never broken, even to death. Appoint a place and hour. Meet me or send some accredited messenger. It could all be arranged between sunrise and sunset or—should you prefer—between sunset and sunrise. Do not forget your faithful servant, and the servant of that Eternal Eye that watches the good and evil of this earthly life.”

CHAPTER XIII—THE SPIDER BITES

I WAS so excited by the importance of Mary's accidental discovery that I folded up the paper, thrust it into my pocket, and was turning towards the desk, when Mary, in an aggrieved voice, recalled herself to my attention.

“Well, miss, maybe it ain't my business, and, maybe, it is, and I don't want to push myself forward, but—”

“Oh, Mary,” I said, “indeed it is your business, and a very important business, too, and just as soon as I think it safe to tell you, I will, every word of it; only I have to ask you to trust me just a little bit further, and to let me make use of this paper. You don't imagine how terribly important it is to me!”

I could see that Mary was shocked by my uncanny knowledge. “Indeed, Miss Gale, if you can make anything out of that heathen writin'—”

I smiled as reassuringly as I could. “It is not heathenish. It is Russian, and it was written by a sort of clergy man.”

“Oh, miss! And under the rustic bench in our arbor!”

“Yes, Mary. I know it all sounds as wild as a dream, and I can't explain it just yet, but you will trust me, Mary, a little longer, and keep the secret of this paper to yourself? Don't mention it; don't even whisper of it; don't show that you have ever heard of such a thing—everything depends upon this.”

Mary had stood up, and now smoothed down her apron and drew in a doubtful, whistling breath which she presently expelled in sharp, little tongue-clicks—“Teks! Teks! Teks!” I translated all this readily. She did not like my superior and secret knowledge; she did not like my air of cool captaincy; she did not like my reserve, nor my disposal of her “devil-paper.” But the good soul could not help but be loyalty itself. She made no more protest than that of the “Teks!”—then said, in a rather sad but perfectly dependable voice, “Very good, miss.”

I came over and patted her on the shoulder.

“Mary, you are the best woman in the world and the best friend I ever had.”

This brought her around completely. Her natural, honest, kindly smile broke out upon her face.

“Bless you, miss,” she said heartily, “I'd do most anything for you. You can

trust me not to speak of the paper."

"I know I can, Mary dear."

When she had gone I did go over to my desk and took out a slip of paper. After some careful thinking I printed in ink a few lines in Russian script.

"At eleven o'clock of next Wednesday morning I will meet you in the ice-cream parlor of the only drug-store in Pine Cone. Be prepared to translate the Slavonic curiosity, and be assured of a reward." I dared not risk any signature, but, for fear there might be something in these lines that would rouse the suspicion of their authenticity, I racked my brain for some signal that might be a convincing one. At last I pulled out a red-gold hair from my head, placed it on the paper as though it had fallen there, and folded it in. Then I put my paper into a blank envelope, which I sealed and secreted in my dress. This done, I tore the letter Mary had found into a hundred minute pieces and burned them, hiding the ashes in my window-box of flowers. I had memorized the address and name of Mr. Gast.

At lunch I asked Mrs. Brane, who had sufficiently recovered from her headache to appear, whether she would n't like me to go over to Pine Cone and buy her the shade hat for which she had been longing ever since Mary had reported the arrival of some Philippine millinery in the principal shop. I said that I felt the need of a good, long walk.

Henry, without a flicker of interest in my request, went on with perfect and discreet performance of table-duty, but I felt that he was mentally pricking up his ears. He must have wondered what the purpose of my expedition really was. I hoped that, if any rumor of it reached the ears of my double, she would take the precaution of keeping close in her mysterious hiding-place during my absence. It was absurd how I felt responsible for the life of every member of the household. Paul Dabney did not ask to accompany me on my walk, though Mrs. Brane evidently expected him to. He was absent and silent at lunch, crumbled his bread, and wore his air of demure detachment like a shield. He was as white as the table napery, but had a cool, self-reliant expression that for some reason annoyed me.

I started on my long and lonely walk about half an hour after lunch. I was nervous and fearful, and wished that I, too, had a pocket such as Paul Dabney's bulging one where, so often, I fancied he kept his right hand on the smooth handle of an automatic. I thought scornfully of his timidity. My own danger was so enormously greater than his, and his own was so enormously greater than he could possibly suspect.

I must confess, however, that it taxed my nerve severely to cross the bridge over the quicksand that afternoon. It had been mended, of course, the very evening of Paul's accident but I tested every plank before I gave it my weight, and I clung to the railing with both clammy hands. Not until I reached the other bank did I let the breath out of my lungs.

On the dusty, shady highroad courage returned to me, and I walked ahead at a good pace. I did want very strongly to reach that bridge again before dark. I would not trust my letter to the rural delivery box near “The Pines” lane. I was determined to mail it at the post-office, and to be sure that it went out by the evening mail. I was successful, addressed the blank envelope, and slipped it in, bought Mrs. Brane's hat, and, hurrying home, found myself in time for five o'clock tea. I had met with no misadventure of any kind; not even a shadow had fallen on my path; but I was as tired as though I had been through every terror that had tormented my imagination. I went to bed that night and slept well.

The four days that followed the mailing of my letter were as still as the proverbial lull before the storm. We all went quietly about our lives. Whatever mutiny was hidden in the souls of Henry and his female accomplice smouldered there without explosion. Sara, indeed, was sullen, and obeyed my orders with an air of resentment. Paul Dabney seemed to be immersed in study. It looked to me sometimes as though every one in the house was waiting, as breathlessly and secretly as I was, for the meeting with that unknown Servant of the Eternal Eye. Certainly it was curious that on the very Wednesday morning Mrs. Brane should have decided to send Gregory, the old horse, to Pine Cone, for a new pair of shoes, and that she should herself have suggested my going with George for a little outing. Her face was perfectly innocent, but I could not refrain from asking her, “What made you think of sending me, Mrs. Brane?”

She gave me a knowing, teasing little look. “Somebody takes a great interest in your health, proud Maisie,” she said.

Paul Dabney! I was not a little startled by the opportuneness of his interest. It was, to say the least, a trifle odd that he should want me to drive to Pine Cone on the very morning of my appointment. I was half minded to refuse to drive with George, then decided that this refusal would only serve to point any suspicion that Paul Dabney might be entertaining of me, so I agreed meekly to the arrangement and set off in due time seated in the brake-cart by George's substantial side. He was undoubtedly a comfort to me, and I kept him chattering all the way. He had lost the air of bravado he had shown on our first drive together, for “The Pines” had been, to all appearances, a place of supreme tranquillity since Robbie's death. His talk was all of the country-side, a string of

complaints. The roads needed mending, the fences were down, “government don't do nothin' fer this yere po' place.” He pointed out a tall, ragged, dead pine near a turn in the road, I remember, and groaned, “Jes a tech to send that tree plum oveh yeah on the top of us-all, missy.” This complaint was one of a hundred and stuck in my mind because of later happenings.

We jogged into Pine Cone at eleven, and I occupied myself variously till the hour of the appointment, when, with a sickish feeling of nervous suspense, I forced my steps towards the drug-store. I went in through the fly-screen door, and passed the soda-water fountain and the counters where stale candy and coarse calicoes beckoned for a purchaser, and I went on between green rep, tasseled portières to the damp, dark, inner room where the marble-topped tables, vacant of food, seemed to attract, by some mysterious promise, a swarm of dull and sluggish flies whose mournful buzzing filled the stagnant air.

There was one person in the ice-cream parlor—a man. I moved doubtfully towards him, and he lifted his head. This head was a replica of the pre-Raphaelite figures of Christ, a long, oval, high-browed countenance, with smooth, long, yellow hair parted in the middle of the brow, with oblong eyes, a long nose, a mouth drooping exaggeratedly at the corners, and a very long, silky, yellow beard, also parted in the middle and hanging in two rippling points almost to his waist. He was dressed in a rusty black suit, the very long sleeves of which hung down quite over his hands.

At sight of me he turned pale, rose, the dolorous mouth drooping more extremely. “Madame,” he said in the lisping, clumsy speech of those whose supply of teeth falls short of lingual demands, “is as prompt as the justice of Heaven.” And he bowed and cringed painfully.

I sat down opposite to him, and gave the languid, pimply-faced youth who came an order for two plates of ice-cream. I was horribly embarrassed and confused, but by a mighty effort I maintained an air of self-possession. The priest—I should have known him for a renegade priest anywhere—sat meekly with his hidden hands resting on the table before him, and his great, smooth lids pulled down over his eyes. Once he looked up for an instant.

“Madame preserves her youth,” he lisped, “as though she had lived upon the blood of babes.” And he ran the tip of his tongue over his lips.

This horrible speech was, no doubt, exactly suited to the taste of my counterpart. I knew that I was expected to laugh, and I dragged my lips across my teeth in imitation of the ghastly smile. It passed muster.

He fell upon his ice-cream, when it was brought to him, like a starved

creature, and then I noticed the horrible deformity of his hands. He hooked a twisted stump about the handle of his spoon. Nearly all the fingers were gone; what was left were mere torn fragments of bone and tendon. His hands must have been horribly crushed, the top part of the hands crushed off entirely. It made me sick to look at them.

I produced my chart, and passed it over to him. He paused in his repast, wiped off his lips and beard, took out a blank sheet of paper from one of his ragged pockets, and translated with great rapidity, scribbling down the lines with a stump of a pencil about which he wrapped his crooked index stump very cleverly. He grew quite hot with excitement as he wrote; his enormous forehead turned pink. He smacked his lips: "*Nu*, madame, *Boje moe*, what a reward for your great, your excellent courage!"

He handed back both pages to me, and began on his ice-cream again. I took the translation and read it eagerly.

"The crown alone is worth every risk, almost every crime. Each jewel is a fortune to dream about. The robe is encrusted with the wealth of magic. If each stone is taken out and offered cautiously for sale at different and widely separated places, the danger of detection would now be very slight. You will have at each sale the dowry of a queen. And all of this splendor is hidden in the wall. There are two ways of reaching it. The easier is through the hole in the kitchen closet, the closet under the stairs. These are directions, easy to remember and easier to follow: Go up the sixteen steps, go along the passage to the inclined plane. Ascend the inclined plane. Count five rafters from the first perpendicular rafter from the top of the plane on your left side. The fifth rafter, if strongly moved, pulls forward. Behind it, on end, stands the iron box. The key is hidden back of the eighteenth brick to the left of the fifth rafter on the row which is the thirtieth from the floor of the passage. Have courage, have self-control, have always a watchful eye for Her. She knows."

This was not signed. Now, I did a careful thing. I read this translation over five or six times. And then I memorized the directions. Sixteen steps up, ascend the inclined plane, five rafters from the one on your left at the top of the plane, the eighteenth brick to the left of the fifth rafter in the thirtieth row. And then I repeated "sixteen, five, eighteen, thirty," till they made an unforgettable jingle in my brain.

"You will not forget me, madame?" murmured the priest, this time in Russian. "Madame ruined me, and madame will lift me up." I lifted my eyes from the paper and smiled that horrible smile.

“I will not forget you,” I said in the same tongue. “You will still be at the address?”

“Until you advise me to change it,” he said cringingly.

“Excellent. *Do svedania*.”

He stood up and blessed me. I bent my head, and he stalked out, his long, light hair flapping against his shoulders as he walked. The clerks at the drug-store counter gaped and tittered at him. I followed him to the door. There he made me another bow, smiled a big, toothless smile, mounted his motor-cycle, and went off at a tremendous speed, his deformed hands hooked over the bars, the wind of his own motion sending the long points of his beard flying behind him like pennons.

A few moments after his departure another man came out of the saloon opposite, walked quickly to another motor-cycle, mounted it, and went humming after the cloud of dust that hid my mysterious translator.

It was odd that sleepy Pine Cone should at the same time entertain two such travelers on this vehicle; it was even more odd that the second traveler bore so extraordinary a likeness to one of Mrs. Brane's outdoor men, those whom she had described to me as her pet charity.

I might have followed this train of thought to its logical conclusion, I might even have remembered that one of these same men had followed the Baron's departure from “The Pines,” had I not, at the moment, glanced in the opposite direction and seen, far along the wide, dusty highway, the departing brake-cart with George's fat person perched upon its seat. I was possessed by indignation. He was actually leaving Pine Cone without me. He was already too far away to hear my angry shout even if he had not been deaf. As I watched helplessly, Gregory reached the top of the hill, deliberately passed it, and pulled the brake-cart, dilapidated whip, fat George, and all, out of my sight. There was nothing for it but a walk home. I got a wretched lunch in the ice cream parlor, and set out in no very good humor. As soon as I was out of sight of the town, I took out my translation of the chart, refreshed my memory for the last time, tore it into a thousand tiny bits, and buried the shreds deep in the sandy soil of the roadside. I kept the original Slavonic writing in the bosom of my dress. I meant in my own good time to let this paper fall into the hands of the thieves, and so, having notified the police, to catch them in the very hiding-place.

I stepped along rapidly. It was now past noon, a mild November day of Indian summer warmth and softness; the pines swung their fragrant branches against the sky. It was very still and pleasant on the woody road. I was really glad that

George had forgotten me. As I came round one of the pretty turns of the road I heard a great, groaning rush of sound, and, hurrying my steps, found that the great dead pine George had pointed out to me had, indeed, true to his prophecy, fallen across the road. It was a great, ragged giant of a tree, and as the bank on one side of the road was steep and high, I was forced to go well into the woods on the other, and to circle about the enormous root which stood up like a wall between me and the road. Back of the tree I stepped down into a hollow, and, as I stepped, looking carefully to my footing, for the ground was very rough, a heavy smother of cloth fell over my head and shoulders, and I was thrown violently backward to the ground. At the same instant the stuff was pulled tight across my mouth. I could hardly breathe, much less cry out. I was half suffocated and blind as a mole. My arms were seized, and drawn back of me and tied at the wrists. The hands that did this were fine and cold, and strong as steel. They were a woman's hands, and I could feel the brush of skirts. It froze my blood to know that I was being handled and trussed up by a pitiless image of myself.

Having made me entirely blind, dumb, and helpless as a log, the creature proceeded to search me with the most intolerable thoroughness. Of course, the paper I had taken from the bookcase was promptly found, and I heard a little gasp of satisfaction, followed by a low oath when she discovered the nature of the script. She was no doubt furious at not being able to find any translation. I was roughly handled, dragged about on the stony ground, tossed this way and that, while the cold, hurried, clever fingers thrust themselves through my clothing. At last they fairly stripped me, every article was shaken out or torn apart, a knife cut off the top of my head-covering, leaving my face in its tight smother, my hair was taken down, shaken out, combed with hasty and painful claws. When, after a horrible lifetime of fear and disgust, anger and pain, the thing that handled me discovered that there was really nothing further of any value to her upon me, she gave way to a fury of disappointment. There, in the still woods, she cursed with disgusting oaths, she beat me with her hands, with branches she found near me on the ground.

“Discipline,” she said, “discipline, and be thankful, my girl, that I don't do you a worse injury. I can't stand being angry unless I make somebody squirm for it. Besides, I mean you to lie quiet for a day or two, till I need you again.”

I did squirm, and she showed no mercy.

Nevertheless, she began to be afraid, I suppose, of being discovered at her cruelty. She threw my clothes over me, laughed at my plight, and I heard her light footsteps going away from me into the woods.

I lay there, raging, sobbing, struggling, till long after dusk, then, my hands

becoming gradually loosened, I wriggled one hand free, tore the rope from the other, rid myself of the sacking on my head and sat up, panting, trembling, exhausted, bathed in sweat. Slowly I got into my clothes and smoothed my torn hair, crying with the pain of my hurts. It had been an orgy of rage and cruelty, and I had been, God knows, a helpless victim. Nevertheless, the discipline inflicted upon me did not break my spirit. I was lashed and stung to a cold rage of hatred and disgust. I would outwit the creature, hunt her down, and give her to justice so that she might suffer for her sins. I could not well understand the furious boldness of her action of this afternoon. Why did she leave me to make my escape, to go back to “The Pines,” to tell my story and so to set the police on her track? For some reason she must rely on my holding my tongue. As I stumbled on my painful way, the reason came to me with some certainty. She thought that I, too, meant to steal the fortune. It would not enter the head of a criminal that such a temptation could be resisted by a penniless girl of my history. And, indeed, what other explanation could she possibly entertain for my previous secretiveness? Naturally, she could not understand my desire to triumph over Paul Dabney. And this desire was as strong in me as ever it had been. Indeed, I felt that in a certain way the events of the afternoon left me with slight advantage over my double. It was now a race between us. She knew that I was on the track of the treasure; she knew that I knew of her intentions. I had the translation; she had not. She would have it soon enough, I was sure; therefore I must be quick. No later than that night, or, at farthest, the following night, while she still fancied me laid up by the beating I had received, I must contrive to get at Mrs. Brane's fortune. Dreadful as my experience had been, I was still bent upon the success of my venture; truly I believe I was more bent upon it.

If I failed now, there was no knowing what consequences might fall upon “The Pines” household and upon me. Very easily—I trembled to think how easily—some member of the family might be murdered and I be made to appear the murderess. I had, by my bold course, provided blind justice with a half-dozen witnesses against my innocence. The Baron, the priest, Sara, Henry, Paul Dabney—not one of them but could stand up and swear to my criminality, perhaps to a score of past crimes.

As I limped and stumbled home, wiping the tears from my eyes and the blood from my chafed face, I decided to keep the truth of my adventure to myself. An accident of some kind I must invent to explain my plight. I decided that the fallen pine would have to bear the blame for my cuts and bruises. I would say that I had been caught by the slashing outer branches as it fell.

Before I reached the gateway of “The Pines,” in fact, just as I was dragging

myself up the steep slope from the swamp, a will-o'-the-wisp of light came dancing to meet me. The circle of its glow presently made visible the unmistakable flat feet of George, who, at sight of me, broke into a chant of relief and of reproach.

He set down his lamp before me and held up his hands.

“My lordamassy, Miss Gale, what fo' yo' put dis yere po' ole nigger in sech a wo'ld o' mis'ry? Here am Massa Dabney a-tarin' up de groun' all aroun' about hie an' a-callin' me names coz I done obey yo' instid o' him. An' he done gib me one dolleh, yessa, an' yo'-all done gib me two. I tole him de trufe. Yessa, I says, one dolleh done tuk me to Pine Cone an' two dollehs done bring me back.”

I pushed my hair from my tired forehead. “You mean I told you to drive home without me, George?”

George danced a nigger dance of despair—a sort of cake-walk, grotesque and laughable in the circle of lantern-light.

“Oh, lawsamassy, don' nobody 'member nothin' they done say to a po' ole niggerman like George? Yo' come out, miss, while I was a-harnessin' Gregory, an' yo' gib de dollehs an' yo' say, 'Be sho to drive away back to de house af teh Gregory got his new shoes without waitin' fer me.' Yo' say yo' like de walk. There, now! Yo'-all do commence to begin to recollec', don' yo'?”

“Yes, yes. I do, of course, George,” I agreed faintly—what use to disclaim this minor action of my double? “Give me your arm, there's a good fellow. I've been hurt.”

He was as tender as a “mammy,” all but carried me up to the house and handed me over to Paul Dabney, who was pacing the hall like a caged tiger, and who received me with a feverish eagerness, rather like the pounce of a watchful beast of prey. I told my story—or, rather, my fabrication—to him and Mrs. Brane and Mary. Paul did not join in the ejaculation of sympathy and affection; he tried to be stoically cynical even in the face of my quite apparent weakness and pain, but I thought his eyes and mouth corners rather betrayed his self-control, and he helped me carefully, with a sort of restrained passion, up to my room, where I refused poor Mary's offers of help and ministered to myself as best I could.

I was really in a pitiful condition; the beating had been delivered with the intention of laying me up, and I began to think that it would be successful. I don't mind admitting that I cried myself to sleep that night.

CHAPTER XIV—MY FIRST MOVE

THE woman who had so unmercifully used me had not taken into account the fact that the spirit is stronger than the flesh. Certainly, the next morning I wanted nothing so much as to lie still in my bed for a week. My cuts and bruises were stiff and sore; I ached from head to foot. But my resolution was strong. I had my meals sent up to me that day, however, but in the evening, after dinner, I sent for Sara.

She came and presented herself, sullen and impassive, at the foot of my bed. I fixed my eyes on her as coldly and malevolently as I could.

“Sara,” I said, “as you see, I chose to be laid up to-day.”

She grinned.

“Now, without a moment's delay I want you to leave for Pine Cone and stay there for the next twenty-four hours, or until I send for you.”

She looked surprised and reluctant, a red flush came up into her big face.

“So's you can make off with the swag,” she muttered; then shrank at the scowl I gave her, and made an awkward and unwilling apology.

“All right, then,” she said. “How about the work? What about Mrs. Brane?”

“I'll make it right with Mrs. Brane,” I said crisply. “Trust me for that. Now, before you go, step over to the desk there and write what I tell you.”

She obeyed, and I dictated slowly: “Meet me on bridge at eleven o'clock to-night. Wait for me till I come. Maida.”

She looked at me with her lids narrowed suspiciously, and my heart quailed, but the moment of inspection passed. In fact, nobody could have imagined the resemblance that undoubtedly existed between the leader of the enterprise and my wretched, daring self.

“Who's that for?” she asked, “and what's up? Ain't I to know anything? What price all this?”

“What price!” I echoed, “just our lives—that's all. Do as I say, and you'll be a wealthy woman in a fortnight. Don't do it, even a little of it, and—and perhaps you can guess where and what you will be.”

She gave me a hunted look, glanced about the room over her shoulder, and, obedient to my gesture, handed me the paper she had written.

“And no questions asked,” I added sternly. “Don't let me hear another word of it. Now, get my cloak and hat and leave them in the kitchen on the chair near the stove. Get out as soon as you can; don't wait a minute. And leave the kitchen door unlocked. Go all the way to Pine Cone and stay in the room above the drug-store. The woman is always ready to take a boarder. I'll send you word before to-morrow night. Get out, and be quick. Above all, don't be on the bridge to-night.”

She vanished like a shadow, and I sat waiting with a pounding heart. If she fell in with that red-haired double now, my game was up. Everything depended upon her leaving the house without any conflicting orders, without her suspecting my duplicity.

I sat up in bed till it seemed to me that she had had time to get my hat and cloak and to make her own preparations. Then, wincing with pain, I dragged myself up and limped over to my window. A moment later Sara came round the corner of the house and started down the road. There was just enough twilight for me to make her out. She walked slowly and doggedly, carrying a little bag in her hand. I wondered if Mary would come flying to me with the news of this departure, or if Mrs. Brane and Paul Dabney would observe it. No attempt was made to stop her, however, or to call her back. She went on stolidly, and stolidly passed out of my sight. It was in strange circumstances that I saw her big, handsome face again.

I waited till I thought she must have had time to reach the lane outside of “The Pines” gate, then I began painfully, slowly to creep into my clothes. Often I had to rest; several times I stopped to cry for pain. But I kept on, and at last I stood fully dressed before my mirror. My mouth was cut and torn; my face scratched; a raw patch on one cheek; the marks of the branch lay red across the base of my neck, and burned about my shoulders. The sight of my injuries and the pain of them, throbbing afresh with movement, inflamed my anger and my courage. I moved about the room several times, gradually limbering myself; then I went quietly out of my room and down the hall towards the kitchen stairs. It was then about ten o'clock. Mrs. Brane and Paul Dabney were probably in the drawing-room, quietly sipping their coffee; Mary would be upstairs preparing Mrs. Brane's bedroom for the night; Henry would have washed up his dishes and be gone upstairs to his room, unless he had received some further orders from the hidden mistress of the house. I had to take this risk. I stole down the kitchen stairs, and, opening the door a crack, I peeped into the kitchen. The lamp had been turned low, the fire was banked up for the night. A plate, with cup and fork and spoon, was laid out on the kitchen table, and on the back of the stove a frying-pan full of food was set to keep warm. What a *gourmande* Sara must

think her leader whom she saw eating heartily enough at Mrs. Brane's table, but who insisted, besides, on a heavy meal at night! I thought I knew who would presently appear to enjoy her supper. She would fancy the kitchen door securely locked; she would fancy that I was successfully laid by the heels. I wondered what her plans for the night might be. I set my teeth hard to keep down the rage that mounted in me at the very thought of her. Sara had obediently placed my cloak and hat on one of the kitchen chairs. I decided that there was no time to waste. I slipped quickly into the room—I was in stocking feet—locked the kitchen door, hid the key in my pocket, put the note that I had dictated to Sara under the plate on the table, and then, stealing softly to the door of a narrow closet where Sara kept her brooms, I squeezed myself in and locked the door on the inside. When the key was removed, I put my eye to the large, worn keyhole, and had a clear but limited view of the dim, empty room. I knelt as comfortably as I could, for I knew that I should have to keep my position without the motion of a finger when the room should have an occupant. My heart beat heavily and loudly, my hurts throbbed at every beat. It was a painful, a well-nigh unbearable half-hour that I spent cramped there in the closet, waiting, waiting, waiting.... At last—such a long last—there came the ghostly sound of a step.

It drew nearer; I heard a faint noise of shifting boards, the door of the low closet under the stairs opened, and out stepped the hideous image of myself. The shock of that resemblance almost sent me off into a faint. I had seen the creature only once face to face; now, in the dim light of the kitchen lamp, I studied her features. Disfigured by passion and guilt, it was nevertheless my face. This woman was older, certainly, by many years, but a touch of paint and powder, the radiance of moonlight, might easily disguise the lines and shadows. She was as slender as a girl, and a clever actress could simulate a look of innocence. I almost forgave Paul Dabney as I watched this other “Me” move about the kitchen on her noiseless feet.

She went to the stove, took up the frying-pan, and carried it over to the table. On the way she noticed my cloak and hat and stopped, evidently startled, holding the pan in her hands. She glanced nervously about the room, went over to the door that was at the foot of the stairs and tried it. I was thankful that I had taken the precaution of locking it. I hoped she would not notice that the key was gone. She returned to the table and sat down before the plate. Then she saw the note and snatched it up. She bent her fiery head, arranged so carefully in imitation of mine, over the writing. I saw her lips move. She looked up frowning, uncertain, surprised. Then she walked over to the stove, thrust Sara's note into the fire, returned, and stood in deep thought in the middle of the room.

I was sick with suspense. Clouds passed over my eyes. Would she fall into my clumsy trap? Presently she walked slowly over to my cloak and hat and put them on. With the hat pressing her soft hair down about her face, she was so terribly like me that my uncanny fears returned. She must be some spirit clothed in my aura, possessing herself in some infernal fashion of my outward semblance. A cold sweat had broken out over me. I felt it run down my temples.

Another long minute she stood there, debating with herself; then she looked at the clock, made use of her ghastly smile, and stepped quietly across the kitchen and out into the night. I waited—a fortunate precaution—for she came back five minutes later and peered about. There was nothing to alarm her since she could not hear the pounding of my heart. She decided to follow the instructions, and again disappeared. I waited another fifteen minutes, then, cold with fear and excitement, I came out of my hiding-place. I glided over to the door, and looked out. It was a dark and cloudy night. I could hear the swinging and rustling of the trees. There was no other sound, nor could I see anything astir in the little garden except the gate which was ajar and creaking faintly on its hinges. She had gone.

I came back hastily into the kitchen and lighted a candle which was stuck into a tin candlestick on a shelf. I looked at the clock. It was now half-past ten. In half an hour the woman would reach the bridge. She would wait for Maida, perhaps an hour, perhaps not so long; after that, she would be suspicious and return. I had therefore not more than an hour, with any certainty, to follow the directions I had memorized; to rifle the hoard, and to make my escape from the thief's hiding-place. Then I would telephone to the Pine Cone police.

I opened the door of the low closet under the stairs.

CHAPTER XV—THE SECRET OF THE KITCHEN CLOSET

I LIGHTED my candle and stepped into the closet, shutting the door behind me. The small space, no longer cluttered by old odds and ends of gardening tools, was clear to my eyes in every corner, and presented so commonplace an appearance that I was almost ready to believe that nightmares had possessed me lately, and that an especially vivid one had brought me to stand absurdly here in the sleeping house peering at an innocent board wall. Nevertheless, I set down my candle on the floor and attacked the boards put up by Henry with what skill and energy I could.

They moved at once as though they were on oiled hinges, and the whole low side of the closet came forward in my hands. Before me opened the black hole into which I had fallen the morning when Mary and I had explored the kitchen after Delia's departure. I did not know what lay there in the dark, but, unless I had the courage of my final adventure, there was no use in having braved and endured so much. I slid my lighted candle ahead of me and crept along the floor into the hole.

I had to creep only for an instant, then damp, cool space opened above my head and I stood up. I was in a narrow passageway of enormous height; in fact, the whole outer wall of the house stood at my right hand, and the whole inner wall at my left, crossed here and there by the beams of the deep window sills to which Mrs. Brane had called my attention on the evening of my arrival at “The Pines.” It was the most curious place. A foot or two in front of me a narrow stairs made of packing-boxes and odd pieces of lumber nailed together, went up between the walls. Holding my candle high, so that as far as possible I could see before and above me, I began to mount the steps. I was weak with excitement and with the heavy beating of my heart.

I counted sixteen steps, and saw that I had come to the top of the queer flight. The narrow, enormously high, passage, like an alley between towering sky-scrapers led on with an odd look, somewhere ahead of me sloping up. I walked perhaps twenty steps, and saw that I had come to the foot of an inclined plane. Probably Mr. Brane had found it easier of construction than his amateur stairs. I mounted it slowly, stopping to listen and to hold my breath. There was no sound

in the house but the faint scuttling of rats and the faint, faint pressure of my steps. I realized that I must now be on a level with the passage in the northern wing, and that here it was that the various housekeepers and servants had heard a ghostly footfall or a gusty sigh. It would be easy enough to play ghost here; in fact, I felt like an unholy spirit entombed between the walls of the sleeping, unsuspecting house.

I reached the top of the inclined plane, and stopped with my left hand against the wall. Here I could see a long row of parallel rafters between which ran horizontal beams. In the spaces so enclosed lay the rows of bricks, hardened cement curling along their edges. My hand rested against the first parallel rafter on the left side. I began to count: one, two, three, four, five. This was certainly the fifth rafter on the left wall from the top of the inclined plane. I put down my candle. If my chart was right, and not the crazy fiction of a diseased brain as I half imagined it to be, this fifth rafter hid the iron box in which lay a treasure thought by the writer of the directions to be “worthy of any risk, almost of any crime.” I put my arms out at a level with my shoulders, and grasped the beam in both hands. I pulled. Instantly, a section about as long as myself moved forward. I pulled again. This time the heavy beam came out suddenly, and I fell with it. The thud seemed to me loud enough to wake the dead. I crouched, holding my breath, where I had fallen, then, freeing myself from the beam which had caught my skirt, I stood up. I peered into the opening behind the beam. In the narrow darkness of the space there seemed to be a narrower, denser darkness. I put my hand on it, and touched the edge of a long, narrow box.

Instantly the fascination of all stories of hidden treasure, the wonder thrill of Ali Baba's hidden cave, the spell of Monte Cristo, had me, and I felt no fear of any kind. Wounds, and pains, and terrors dropped from me. I pulled out the box as boldly and as eagerly as any pirate in a tale. It was heavy, the box. I eased it to the floor and laid it flat. It was an old, shallow box of iron, rusted and stained. There was no mark of any kind upon it, just a keyhole in the front. I must now find the eighteenth brick in the thirtieth row in order to possess myself of the key to my treasure. I counted carefully, pressing each brick with an unsteady, feverish finger. On the thirtieth row from the floor, eighteen bricks from the fifth rafter... yes, this was certainly the thirtieth row. I counted twice to make sure, and now, from the rafter, the eighteenth brick. It looked quite as secure as any other, and, indeed, I had to work hard to clear away the cement that held it in place. When that was done, I had no difficulty in loosening it. I took it out—yes, there behind it lay an iron key. I did not stop to replace the brick, but, hurrying back to my box, knelt down before it. My hands were shaking so that I had to

steady my right with my left in order to fit in the key.

It would not turn. I worked and twisted and poked. Nothing would move the rusty lock. Sweat streamed down my face. There was nothing for it but to go back to the kitchen, get some kerosene, pour it into the lock, and so oil the rusty contrivance. Every minute was as precious as life itself. I made the trip at desperate speed, returned with a small bottle full of oil, and saturated the lock. After another five minutes of fruitless twisting, suddenly the key turned. I grasped the lid. It opened with a faint, protesting squeak.

It seemed to me at first that the box was full of bright and moving life; then I saw, with a catching breath, that the flame of my candle played across the surface of a hundred gems. There lay in the box an ecclesiastical robe of some kind, encrusted all over with jewels. And at one end rested a slender circlet, like a Virgin's crown, studded with crimson, and blue, and white, and yellow stones. So did the whole bewildering, beautiful thing gleam and glisten and shoot sparks that it seemed indeed to be on fire. I have never till that night felt the mysterious lure of precious stones. Kneeling there alone in the strange hiding-place, I was possessed by an intolerable longing to escape with these glittering things, and to live somewhere in secret, to fondle and cherish their unearthly fires. It was a thirst, an appetite, the explanation of all the terrible digging and delving, the sweat and the exhaustion of the mine... it was something akin to the hypnotism that the glittering eye of the serpent has for its victim, a desire, a peril rooted deep in the hearts of men, one of the most mysterious things in our mysterious spirit. I knelt there, forgetful of my danger, forgetful of my life, forgetful of everything except the beauty of those stones. Then, with a violent start, I remembered. I carefully drew out the robe, laid it over my arm, and, taking the heavy circlet in my hand, I prepared myself for flight. The load was extraordinarily heavy. I bent under it.

I had taken perhaps six steps towards safety when I heard a sound.

It was not the sound of rats, it was not the sound of my own light step... it was something else. I did not know what that sound was, but some instinct told me that it was a danger signal. I put out my candle and flattened myself against the wall. Then I did distinctly hear an approaching step. It was not anywhere else in the house. It was between those two walls. It was ascending the steps, it was coming up the plane. Through the pitchy darkness it advanced, bringing with it no light, but moving surely as though it knew every step of the way. There was hardly room for two people between those high walls; any one passing me, where I stood, must brush against me. I dared not move even to lay down my treasure and put myself into an attitude of self-defense.

I thought that my only chance lay in the miracle of being passed without notice. Near to me the footsteps stopped, and I remembered that any foot coming along the passage would perforce strike against the box and the fallen beam. There was no hope. Nevertheless, like some frozen image, I stood there clasping the robe and crown, incapable of motion, incapable of thought.

I could hear a faint breathing in the dark. It was not more than two feet away from me. It seemed to my straining eyeballs that I could make out the lines of a body standing there, its blank face turned in my direction. Then—my heart leaped with the terror of it—the invisible being laughed.

“You have n't gone,” said the low, sweet, horrible voice; “I can smell the candle, so you must have put it out when you heard me. If I had n't struck my foot against a board, I'd have come upon you in the midst of your interesting work. There's no place to hide here. You've either run back to the end of the passage and crept in under my bedclothes, or you're flattened up against the wall. I think you're near me. I think I hear your heart...” No doubt, she did; it was laboring like a ship in a storm. She paused probably to listen to my pounding blood, then she laughed again. “You're badly scared, aren't you? It's a feeling of security, my girl, compared to the fright you'll get later. Why don't you scream? Too scared? Or are you afraid you'll kill somebody else, besides Robbie, of fright. A ghost screaming in the wall! Grrrrrr!”

I can give no idea of the terrible sound she made in her throat. And the truth was I could n't scream. I was pinned there against the wall as though there were hands around my neck.

She made a step forward—it was like a ghastly game of Blind Man's Buff; most of those games must be based on fearful race-memories of outgrown terrors; then she gave a sudden spring to one side, an instinctive, beastlike movement, and her hand struck my face. Instantly she had flung herself upon me. I let fall my booty and fought with all my strength. I might as well have struggled with a tigress. She was made of strings of steel. Her arms and legs twisted about me like serpents, her furious strength was disgusting, loathsome, her breath beat upon my face. I fell under her, and she turned up my skirt over my head, fastening it in the darkness with such devilish quick skill that I could not move my arms. Also she crammed fold after fold into my mouth till I was gagged, my jaws forced open till they ached. The pain in my throat and neck was intolerable.

Then, groping about, she found the candle and I heard her strike a match. Afterwards she inspected the treasure, drawing deep sighs of satisfaction and murmuring to herself. After a long time of enjoyment, she sat down beside me,

placing the candle so that it shone upon me. I could see the light through the thinnish stuff over my face.

“Now, Janice,” she said, “I shall make you more comfortable, and then I shall afford you some of the most excellent entertainment you can well imagine. There are people all over the world who would give ten years of their lives to hear what you are going to hear to-night. I have some interesting stories to tell. There is plenty of time before us. I shall not have to leave you till just before daybreak, and we might as well have a pleasant time together. I was too busy the other afternoon in the woods and too hurried to give you any real attention. This time I shall do my duty by you. You are really rather a remarkable girl, and I am proud of you. That beating I gave you would have laid up most young women for a fortnight. But you are made of adventurous stuff.” She sighed, a strange sound to come from her lips; then, skillfully, she drew the skirt partially from my face, possessed herself of my hands which she bound securely with a string she took from her pocket—a piece of twine which, if I stirred a finger, cut into my wrists like a knife. She gradually drew the gag out of my mouth, keeping a strangling hold on my throat as she did so, and when my jaw snapped back in place—it had been almost out of its socket—still keeping that grip on my wind-pipe, she tied a silk handkerchief over my mouth, knotting it tightly behind my head. Then she released me and moved a little away. I looked at her, no doubt, with the eyes of a trapped animal, so that, bending down to inspect me, she laughed again.

“I'm not going to kill you, you know,” she said sweetly,—“not yet. I could have killed you the other day if it had n't been more to my purpose to let you live. I could have killed you any time these past few weeks. Don't you know that, you silly, reckless child? All of you here in this absurd house lay in the hollow of my hand.” She held out one of her very long, slender hands, so like my own, as she spoke, and slowly, tensely, drew her fingers together as though she were crushing some small live thing to death. “I did n't really mean to kill Robbie. But I did mean to get him out of that room, alive or dead. He killed himself, which saved me the trouble. I don't like killing children—it's quite untrue what they say of me in that respect—though I've been driven to it once or twice. It's being too squeamish about babies' lives that's put an end to most careers of burglary. That's the God's truth, Janice. You're shaking, are n't you? How queer it must be to have nerves like that—young, innocent, ignorant nerves! Poor Janice! Poor little red-haired facsimile of myself! What explanation did you find for that resemblance? I fancied you'd frighten yourself into a superstitious spasm over it, and stop your night-meddling for good. But you didn't. I'll be bound, though, that the true

explanation never occurred to you.”

I had been staring up into her beautiful, ghastly face, but now I closed my eyes. A most intolerable thought had come to me. It came slowly, gropingly, out of the remote past, and it turned my heart into a heavy gray stone.

“Are you remembering, Janice? No, that's not possible. You were too young.” She leaned over me again, and pushed back a lock of hair that had been troubling my eyes. “You've grown to be a very beautiful girl.”

I groaned aloud, and writhed there. I knew the truth now. There was a mother from whom I had been taken when I was a few months old—a mother of whom my father would never let me speak, a mother I had been told to forget, to blot out of my imagination as though she had never been. What dreadful reason my father must have had for his secret, sordid manner of living! What a shadow had lain on my childhood with its drab wanderings, its homelessness, its disgraceful shifts and pitiful poverty! All that far-off misery, which I had tried so hard to forget in the new land, came back upon me now with an added, crushing weight. I lay there and longed to die.

The woman began to talk again.

“Yes,” she said, “I am your mother. My name was Wenda Tour, and I married Sergius Gale, who was your father. I am Polish-French, and he was Russian-French. When I married him he was an innocent, little, pale-faced student at the University of Moscow. I was only sixteen, myself, training for a dancer, acting... a clever, abused, gifted young waif, and fairly innocent, too, though I'd always been light-fingered and skillful at all sorts of tricks. I think I was in love with Sergius; at any rate, I was anxious to escape from the trainer, who was a brute. But Sergius began to bore me. Oh, my God! how insufferably he bored me! And he was so wearisomely weak, weaker than most men, and, the Lord knows, they're mostly made of butter, or milk-and-water mixtures. And you bored me dreadfully, too; the very thought of you before you came filled me with a real distaste for life. By the time you made your squalling entrance into the world, I had got myself into rather complicated trouble, and managed to make a scapegoat of your father, the poor fool! It was a sharp business, and it might have made us both rich, but I was clumsier than I am now, and Sergius was a hindrance. It did n't quite go through, and I had to make a get-away, a quick one. I've made some even quicker since then. After he'd spent some sobering and salutary months in a Russian prison, your father came out, reformed and completely cured of his passion for red-haired vixens with a natural taste for crime. I've often wondered how he treated you, little miniature of myself as you were even in your cradle. I don't believe you had a very comfortable childhood,

Janice. The crudest thing I ever did, and the wickedest, was to let you come into the world, or, having let you come, to allow you to remain here. I ought to have put you out of your misery before it had really begun. You wouldn't be lying here shaking. You would n't have to pay the piper for me as I fear I shall be forced to make you pay before I leave you to-night. I hate to do it. I honestly do. There must be a soft spot left in me somewhere, but there's no use balking. It's got to be done. It's too good a chance to miss. I can wipe out my past as though it had been written on a slate. You can't blame me yourself, Janice. The jewels mean wealth, and your death means my freedom. When they find you here—and they will find you—they will think that they have found my corpse. Don't you see? Even Maida, even the Baron, even Jaffrey, even the priest, will swear to it—you see. If you had n't been so clever, or a little bit cleverer, you would n't have played my game, or you'd have taken more pains to keep your plan a secret from me. Once I was sure you did n't think your double a ghost, I began to suspect you; when you pulled that lover of yours"—she laughed, and even in my misery I felt the sting of anger and of shame—"of ours, I should say—when you pulled him out of the mud, why, I found myself able to read you like a child's first primer. Oh, you've been a nuisance to me, kept me on pins and needles. I knew you would n't dare to search the house. I suppose you guessed that would mean the end of your life, but you've certainly given me some unhappy minutes. That fool of a Baron, blabbing out his secret to you... but I made it all work out to my salvation. They've nabbed the Baron and the priest; I suppose they'll get Maida to-night; Jaffrey will be caught snoring in his bed"—she chuckled—"and there's an end to all my partners, all the fools that thought they'd come in for a share of booty. The only thing that bothers me is that they'll never know how neatly I bagged them all, and made a get-away myself. They will think me dead. They'll bear witness. They'll point at your dead body, Janice, and say, 'Yes, that's she.' Oh, it's a rare trick I'm playing on the police, on the gang, on every one—especially that cat of a Hovey with his eyes." She rubbed her lips angrily, a curious, to me inexplicable, gesture. "But it's a poor joke for you, my girl. Playing your hand alone against a lot of hardened old hands like us is a fool's work. That's what it is! Did you think I'd let you run off with a fortune under my very nose? No; you'll have to pay for that insolence. Daughter or no daughter, you'll have to pay. At least, I'll be saving your soul alive. If I had n't got back to you to-night, you'd be a thief flying out into the world. Perhaps your dying to-night is the best thing that could happen to you. I don't know. Looking back—well, it's hard to say."

She sat there thinking, forgetful of me, and I opened my miserable eyes and

stared hopelessly at the clear, hard profile, so beautiful, so evil, so unutterably merciless. She had been sixteen when I was born, twenty years ago. She was now only thirty-six, and yet her face was almost old.

She turned upon me again with her ghastly smile. “You don't look pleased to see your mother, my dear. Perhaps I was a trifle rough with you at our first interview, but you've been spared a great many worse thrashings by having been separated from me at such an early age. I have a devilish temper, as you know. I'd probably have flogged you to death before you were out of your pinafores. I'd like to hear your history—oh, I've kept track of its outlines, I always thought you might some day be useful—but I don't dare take that handkerchief off of your mouth. That handkerchief belonged to my second husband, the Comte de Trème.... Yes, I went up in the world after I'd put Sergius into prison. I've been a great lady. It's a tremendous advantage to any career, to learn the grand air and to get a smattering of education. Poor Trème! He was n't quite the weakling that most of them have been. I have a certain respect for him actually. He was a good man, and no milk and water in his veins, either. If any one could have exorcised the devil in me, it was he. He did his best, but I was too much for him... and in the end, poor fool, he put a bullet into his brain because—oh, these idiot aristocrats!—of the *disgrace*. It was after Trème, a long while after Trème, when I was queening it in St. Petersburg,—because, you see, I did n't fall into disgrace at all; I let Trème shoulder it; he was dead, and it could n't hurt him, and I was glad to stab that high-nosed family of his,—about three years after his death, I suppose, when the ex-army captain came along. Brane, you know, Theodore Brane——He was a handsome chap, long and lean and blue-eyed. I lost my head over him. I was still pretty young, twenty or thereabouts. He would n't marry me, d—— him! And I was a fool. That's where I lost my footing. Well, this is going to put me back again and revenge me on that cold-blooded coward. We lived together, and we lived like princes—on Trème's fortune. You should have seen his family! It was when the Trème estate was bled dry that I happened to remember those jewels. Yes. I'd seen them in the cathedral at Moscow in a secret crypt, down under the earth. I was a child at the time, a little red-haired imp of nine or ten, and I got round a silly old sheep of a priest, and begged him so hard to let me go down through the trapdoor with him that he consented. He thought it could do no harm, I suppose,—a child of that age! I saw the Beloved Virgin of the Jewels! She stood there blazing, a candlestick made of solid gold burning on her right hand and her left—an unforgettable sight—the robe and the circlet that are here beside us now in Brane's double wall in North Carolina... God! it's strange—this life!

“I often thought of that Holy Wealthy Lady in her crypt. When Brane and I were at an end of our means, and of our wits, and he beginning to get tired of the connection, I made up my mind to have a try at the Moscow Virgin's wardrobe. I did n't tell Brane, though he was a thief himself, cashiered from the British army for looting in India. I thought this scheme would be a bit too stiff for him. I went alone to Moscow, and I became the most pious frequenter of ikons, the most devout of worshipers, a generous patron to all droning priests. And there was one—one with a big, oval Christ-face—that I meant to corrupt. He was rotten to the core, anyway, a grayish-white sepulcher if ever there was one. I got him so that he cringed at my feet. He was a white, soft worm—ugh! I chose him for the scapegoat. That's the real secret of my success, Janice. I never forgot to provide a scapegoat, some one upon whom the police were bound to tumble headlong at the very first investigation. I am afraid you are the scapegoat this time—you and 'Dabney'—this will give his fool-heart a twist, set him to rights until next time.

“It's a rotten trick to play on you, but you should n't have mixed up in it. A sensible girl would n't have taken the bait—a slip of paper handed to her in the street! For shame, Janice! It was my first idea, and I laughed at it. I thought I'd have to think up something better. But it worked. Folly is just as deserving of punishment as crime—more so, I believe. It's only just that a fool should lie tied up and gagged. That's the way the world works, and it's not such a bad world, after all, if you make yourself its master and kick over a few conventions....

“Well, Father Gast ate out of my hand, and thought me as beautiful as one of God's angels, only a little more merciful to the desires of men... and one day he gave me a permit, got a young acolyte of the cathedral to take me down to worship at the shrine of the Most Beloved Virgin of the Jewels. It was dark in the crypt, except for the candle that poor boy carried above his head. The Virgin stood there glistening. I knelt down to pray. The boy knelt down. I snatched the candlestick of gold that stood on the Virgin's right hand and cracked his skull. He dropped without so much as a whimper. Then I stripped our Holy Lady, and came up out of the crypt.”

She stopped to draw a long, long breath, as she must have stopped when, in the dim Kremlin, she had come up out of the bowels of the earth carrying her treasure, leaving the boy acolyte senseless before the naked shrine. For all the terrible preoccupation of my mind, racing with death, I could not help but listen to her story. My imagination seemed to be stimulated by the terror of my plight. I might have been in the crypt; I seemed to smell the damp, incense-laden, close smell of candle-lighted chapels. I felt the weight of the jeweled robe, the fearful necessity for escape.

After her long breath, she began again eagerly.

“I came up out of the crypt, and I called to my Christ-faced *baba*. He was waiting for me near the altar at his hypocritical prayers. He came quickly over to me, staring at the bundle in my arms, and I kept him fascinated by the smile I wore. I can command the look in my eyes at such moments. It's the eyes that give away a secret. You can see the change of mood, the intention to deceive, the fear, the suspicion, the decision to kill—but even in those days I knew how to guard my eyes. Father Gast looked at me, and I smiled.

“'Hist!' I said to him, 'I have something amusing to show you. Kneel down by this opening and look at the little acolyte. Lean forward.'

“The fool obeyed. He knelt, his big hands holding to the edge of the trap, and peered into the darkness below. I let the door of the trap fall. It was a square of solid masonry, easy enough to let fall, but too heavy for one man to lift alone. But he was a trifle too quick for me, drew back his head like a snake. It caught his hands. He howled like a dog. I tore off a fastening of the Virgin's robe and hid it in his gown. He fainted before I had gone out of the place.

“I had a hand-bag and a waiting droshky; I packed away my jewels and left Moscow by the first train. I went to Paris, traveling at. speed with all the art of disguise and subterfuge I could command. Nevertheless, on my way from the Gare du Nord to the address Brane had given me, I thought that I was being followed. Of course, I gave the *cocher* another number, went in at a certain house I knew, escaped by the back, and made my way on foot to Brane's apartment, unobserved. They made no difficulty about admitting me. I found everything in confusion. Brane had packed his boxes. He was planning a journey.” She laughed bitterly. “I did n't know it then, but, in the interval, he'd met this little black-eyed American woman and he'd made up his mind to be a *bon sujet*. He was going to give me the slip. I opened one of his boxes, wrapped up my booty in a dress-coat of his, well at the bottom, and then I hid myself. I wanted to spy upon my Englishman. Brane came in, locked up his luggage, and went out again at once. He was in the apartments barely five minutes, and I never saw him again—the handsome, good-for-nothing devil! I waited for him to come back. Presently some men came in and carried off the boxes. I waited in the apartment for several hours, but my lover did not return. He had gone to America, Janice—think of it! with that treasure in his box.”

The candle, which had been flickering for several minutes, here went out, and she was busy for a while, taking another from her pocket and lighting it. I wondered what time it was. Surely long past midnight. The minutes seemed to hurry through my brain on wings of fear. If only she would sit there, talking,

talking, telling me the story of her crimes, till daylight! Then there might be some faint hope for me. They would discover my absence, they would hunt. I might be able to work the handkerchief off of my mouth and risk a cry for help. All sorts of impossible hopes kept darting painfully through my despair. They were infinitely more agonizing than any acceptance of fate, but I was powerless to quiet them. Surely they would search for me; surely they would chance upon that hole in the kitchen closet; surely God would lead them to it! Ah, if only I had told Mary! If only my vanity had not led me to trust only in myself!

“Now, you know the history of the robe, Janice,” began the woman after she had settled herself again at my side. “The treasure that has already caused three deaths, the acolyte's, and Robbie's, and—*yours*.

“I can't go into all the details of my adventures after I left Brane's apartments. I soon found that he had been married and had gone to America, and it was not long before I had his address. But it was very long, a lifetime, before I was free to come after my treasure. Other adventures intervened. Other people. I wrote some threatening letters, but Brane never answered them, and I was not foolish enough to ruin myself by trying to ruin him. I suppose he knew that and felt safe in ignoring my attempts at blackmail and intimidation.

“Well, I am triumphant now—to-night. How's that for a moral tale? What does the Bible say, 'the ungodly flourish like a green bay-tree'?

“But you will be interested to hear how I came to 'The Pines,' how I managed to hide myself here, how I rid myself of those three idiotic housekeepers and brought you down to take their place, how I introduced Maida and Jaffrey, how I worked the whole affair. I don't know how much you know. But I think there are several things that may surprise you. Now, listen; we have still several hours. You shall have the story—you alone, Janice—the true story of the Pine Cone Mystery. You are my father confessor, Janice. My secrets are as safe with you to-night as though I whispered them into a grave.”

CHAPTER XVI—THE WITCH OF THE WALL

I HAD news of Brane's death from the very priest whose hands I had mutilated in the door of the trap. The fellow had been disciplined, unfrocked, driven from Russia, where it was no longer possible for him to make a living, and, as my method is, I had kept in touch with him. I had even helped him to make a sort of fresh start—oh, by no means an honorable one—in America, and purposely I'd seen to it that his new activities should keep him in the neighborhood of Pine Cone. One who knows the underworld as I do, Janice, has friends everywhere, has a tool to her hand in the remotest corners of the earth. Gast was my spy on Theodore Brane; Gast and the Baron. That nobleman, upon whom I dare say you thought you made such an impression, Janice, was at one time Theodore's valet. I knew him for a thief in the old days, but I kept him in the household and so completely in subjection that the wretch would tremble whenever he caught my eye. He, too, came over to this country, and, ostensibly, his business became that of a cabinet-maker, a dealer in old furniture. He had other, less reputable, business on the side. At various times Brane bought furniture through him—Brane was always ready to do a kindness to his inferiors. It was through the Baron that Theodore got possession of that bookcase, the one with the double back, but our wily ex-valet did n't put me wise to the possible hiding-place,—even after I let him know that Brane had something to hide—till I had bribed him for all I was worth. That is, he never did put me wise. He blabbed his secret to you. It was only by finding you on your knees before the shelves, the night after that fool's visit, that I guessed he'd given himself away to my double. Till then I did n't realize how safe I was in depending upon our resemblance, pretty daughter. But, after that night, I amused myself greatly at your expense. And I admit, Janice, I am forced to admit, that you amused yourself at mine. I had no notion till to-night that you had dared to use Maida, to question her, to force her to write notes! And then, to write to Gast, to meet him, to get his translation and to destroy it—Dieu! you have some courage, some wit, my girl!”

Her tone of pride, of complete power set my heart on fire with anger, so that for a moment, I even lost my fear.

“Who found that letter of Gast's under the arbor seat? Whoever it was—I suppose it must have been you—put me into a rage that was like enough to drive me to any sort of violence. It was the last force of it that you felt in the woods

that afternoon. Dieu! I suffered from that anger. To lie closed up in the wall, gnawing my own vitals, helpless, and to know that you had got the clue, that you would perhaps be making use of it! It was lucky for me that Jaffrey mentioned in my hearing the trip that you were planning to Pine Cone. I enjoyed thrashing you, Janice, and I enjoyed my little game at your friend Dabney's expense.... But I am going too fast, I must get back to the beginning again. What are you shaking for now? Scared? No, I believe you're angry."

She peered into my burning face, and met the look, which must have been a hateful one, blazing in my eyes.

"Remember, my dear," she said tauntingly, "that it behooves you to be in charity with all the world."

Indeed, it was not the least of my torments on that terrible night to know that the last images to possess my brain should be such horrid ones, of treachery, and cruelty, and murder. Sometimes I thought I would close my eyes to her, shut out her presence from my mind, but the feat was impossible. I was too greatly fascinated by her smooth, sweet voice, by her vital presence, by the interest of her story.

"As I was telling you," she went on, "it was through Father Gast that I heard of Brane's sudden death. It gave me the fright of my life, for I thought he must have told about the treasures to his wife. Gast swore that the Englishman had n't the courage to make use of his trove any more than he had the courage to confess its whereabouts, but I decided that there was no time to lose. Mrs. Brane might have a bolder spirit.

"I came over to this country disguised as a meek, brown-haired young widow, named Mrs. Gaskell, and I rented a room above the Pine Cone drug-store. This was last fall, about two months after Theodore Brane's death.

"Ask Mrs. Brane some time—oh, I forgot, you are not apt to see her again—no doubt, if you did ask her, she would tell you about the dear, sweet woman who brought her little runaway Robbie home one afternoon and took a friendly cup of tea with her. Yes, and learned in about half an hour—only this the silly, little chatter-box would n't admit—more about the habits of her husband and about her own life and plans and character than most of the detectives I've hoodwinked could have learned in a month. If it had n't been for Mrs. Gaskell, and for Mrs. Gaskell's popularity with Robbie's nurse, and for Mrs. Gaskell's skill in winning Robbie's confidence, I should never have learned about that hole in the kitchen closet.

"Mary was n't Robbie's nurse in those days. Oh, no, my task would n't have

been so easy in that case. He was being cared for by a happy-go-lucky negro woman from whom he ran away about twice a week. She had a passion for driving over to Pine Cone every time George went for supplies, and she was only too willing to leave her charge with Mrs. Gaskell, who did so adore little children. From that girl I learned all about the habits of 'The Pines' household, and from Robbie himself I got the clue of clues.

“I understood that child. I could play upon him as though he had been a little instrument of strings. He was the kind of secretive, sensitive little animal that can be opened up or shut tight at will. A harsh look would scare him into a deaf-mute, a little kindness would set him chattering. I asked him questions about the house: where his father had worked and spent most of his time; where he himself played; what, especially, were his favorite play-places. He told me there were lots of closets in the house, but that he was 'scared of dark closets,' and he was 'most scared of the closet under the kitchen stairs.' I asked him why, and he told me a long story about going in there and finding his father bent over at one end of it—one of those mixed-up, garbled accounts that children give; but I gathered that his father had been vexed at the child's intrusion, and had told him to keep out of the kitchen and out of the kitchen closet. It was the faintest sort of clue, a mere will-o'-the-wisp, but I decided to follow it up.

“One day, when I knew that all the servants at 'The Pines' were off to a county fair, I met with Robbie and his nurse, and easily persuaded the girl to let me take her charge back to 'The Pines' while she joined the other holiday-seekers. Robbie and I got a lift, and we were dropped at 'The Pines' gate. I asked him to take me up to the house by a short cut, and in through the kitchen garden. I told him to pick me a nice nosegay of flowers, and I went in to get a 'drink of water.' The kitchen was empty, and I lost no time in slipping into the small kitchen closet. I saw at once that it had been purposely crowded with heavy stuff, and I began to search it. Of course I found the hole; I even went into the hollow wall here, and explored the whole passage. Dieu! I was excited, pleased! I knew that I was on the track of my treasure. And I saw how easy it would be for some one to hide in that wall, and live there comfortably enough for an indefinite time. I had what I'd come for, and I decided that Mrs. Gaskell's stay in Pine Cone would come to an end that night.

“It was disconcerting to hear Robbie's voice calling, 'Mithith Gathkell, where are you? I was still in the passageway, but I crawled through that hole in a hurry—too late! I met Robbie face to face. He'd come to find me, and was standing timidly in the closet doorway with his hands full of flowers. I knew that I should have to tie up his tongue for good and all. I fixed him with my eyes, and let my

face change till it must have looked like the face of the worst witch in the worst old fairy-tale he'd ever heard, and then, still staring at him, I slowly lifted off my brown wig and I drew up my own red hair till it almost touched the top of the kitchen closet. And I said, 'Grrrrrrrrr! I'm the witch that lives under the stairs! I'm the witch that lives under the stairs!' in the worst voice I could get out of my throat, a sort of suckling gobble it was, pretty bad!"

She laughed, and again my rage and hatred overwhelmed my fear. "I had to run at him, and put my hand over his mouth or he'd have raised the roof with his screams. I got my wig on again, and I carried him out into the garden, and I told him that if ever he went near that closet or even whispered to any one that he'd seen that red-haired woman, I'd tell her to come and stand by his bed at night and stick her face down at him till he was all smothered by her long red hair. He was all confused and trembling. I don't know what he thought. He seemed to imagine that Mrs. Gaskell and the witch were two distinct people, but, at any rate, he was scared out of his little wits, and I knew when I got through with him that wild horses would n't tear the story of that experience out of him. Children are like that, you know."

I did know, and I lay there and cursed her in my heart. I thought of what agonies the poor little child had suffered in the mysterious silence of his baby mind—that pitiful, terrible silence of childhood that has covered so many cruelties, so much unspeakable fear, since the childhood of the human race began. My heart, crushed as it was, ached for little Robbie, sickened for him. I would have given so much to hold him in my arms, and comfort him, and reassure his little shaken soul. God willing, he was happy now, and reassured past all the powers of earth or hell to disturb his beautiful serenity.

THE next morning"—again I was listening to the story—"Mrs. Gaskell left Pine Cone to the regret of all its inhabitants. I doubt if ever there has been a more popular summer visitor. And not many days afterwards, a gypsy woman came to 'The Pines' to peddle cheap jewelry. Old Delia was in the kitchen, and old Delia refused to take any interest in the wares. She told the woman to clear out, but she refused to go until she had been properly dismissed by the lady of the house. At last, to get rid of her, Delia went off to speak to her mistress, and no sooner had she closed the door, than the gypsy slipped across the kitchen, and got herself into that closet. And the odd part of it is, that she never came out. When Delia returned with more emphatic orders of dismissal, the peddling gypsy had gone. Nobody had seen her leave the place, but that did not cause much distress to any one but Mrs. Brane. I think that she was disturbed; at least I know that she ordered a thorough search of the house and grounds, for footsteps

were running all about everywhere that day, and lights were kept burning in the house all night. I think, perhaps, some of the negroes sat up to keep watch. But the peddler made not so much as a squeak that night. She lay on a pile of blankets she had carried in on her back, and she ate a crust of bread and an apple. She was sufficiently comfortable, and very much pleased with herself. Towards morning she went to sleep and slept far into the next day.

“So you see, Janice, there I was in the house, and I was sure that not far from me was Brane's treasure trove. This double wall of which he had evidently made use—he had built up that queer flight of steps and made a floor and an inclined plane—convinced me that I was hot on the track of the jewels. You can guess how I worked to find them. All to no purpose. I had to be very careful. Rats, to be sure, make a noise in the walls of old houses, but the noise is barely noticeable, and it does not sound like carpentry. However, I had convinced myself, by the end of the third dreary day, that if the robe and crown were hidden in the double wall, they were very secretly and securely hidden, and that I should need some further directions to find them. It was annoying, especially as my provisions had given out, and I knew that I should have to venture down into the kitchen at night and pick up some fragments of food. I was glad then and all the time, that Mrs. Brane's servants were such decrepit old bodies, half-blind and half-deaf, and altogether stupid. Many's the time I've crouched behind the junk in that closet and listened to their silly droning! But it gave me a sad jump when I heard the voice of Mrs. Brane's first housekeeper.

“She was young and nervous, and had a high, breathless manner of talking, and she was bent upon efficiency. Well, so was I. I had decided that, outside of the wall, there were two rooms in the Brane house that must be thoroughly investigated—the bookroom where Theodore kept his collection of Russian books, and the room upstairs in the north wing which he had used as a sort of den, and which, after his death, Mrs. Brane had converted into a nursery. I think she must have had a case of nerves after her husband's death, for she was set on having a housekeeper and a new nurse for Robbie, and she was always flitting about that house like a ghost. Maybe, after all, he had dropped her a hint about some money or jewels being hidden somewhere in the house! That was Maida's notion, for she says Mrs. Brane was as keen as 'Sara' about cleaning out the old part of the house, and never left her alone an instant.

“To get back to the first days I spent in this accursed wall... that housekeeper gave me a lot of misery. In the first place, she slept in the north wing, the room you had, Janice,”—I was almost accustomed to this horrible past tense she used towards me; I was beginning to think of my own life as a thing that was over

—“and she was a terribly light sleeper. Twice, as I was sneaking along that passageway trying to locate the rooms, she came out with a candle in her hand, and all but saw me. I decided that my only chance to really search the place lay in getting rid of the inhabitants of that northern wing. I thought, perhaps, I could give that part of the house a bad name. Once it was empty, I could practically live there. I had n't reckoned with that bull-dog of a Mary.

“It was easy enough to scare the housekeeper. I found out just where the wall of her bedroom stood, and I got close behind it near her bed and groaned. That was quite enough. Two nights, and the miserable thing left. Mrs. Brane got another woman at once, a lazy, absent-minded woman, and I wasted no time getting rid of her. I simply stole near to her bed one pitch-black night, and sighed. She left almost at once.

“Then Mrs. Brane, confound her! sent to New York to Skane for a detective, and he played house-boy for a fortnight. I had to keep as still as a mouse. I was almost starved, for I did n't dare take enough food to hoard, and for a while that detective prowled the house all night. I must have come near looking like a ghost in those days. Thank God, the entire quiet bored Skane's man, and reassured the rest of the household. When he had gone I did n't try ghost-tricks for sometime. I fed myself up, and did a little night-prowling, down in the bookroom, and in some of the empty bedrooms, with no result. Then came the third housekeeper.

“That third housekeeper, my dear daughter, all but did for me. She was a fussy little female with the sort of energy that goes prying about for unnecessary pieces of labor. And she lit upon the kitchen closet. Fortunately, Delia and the other two women were so annoyed by her methods that they did n't take up her instructions to clean out the closet with any zeal. So, one morning, I heard her in the kitchen scolding and carrying on, 'You lazy women, I'll just have to shame you by doing it myself.'

“Now, while I crouched there, listening to her, it occurred to me that I had heard her voice before. I racked my frightened brains. I had never seen the woman, but I was certain that the voice, a peculiar one, belonged somewhere in my memory. I decided there might be some useful association. I risked coming into the closet, and taking a look. Then I fled back and laughed to myself. I had known that little wax-face when she was a very great somebody's maid, and I knew enough about her to send her to the chair. Was n't it luck! I went back into my hole, for all the world like a spider, and sat there waiting for my prey.

“She did a lot of clattering around in the closet; then, I knew by the silence, that she'd lit upon the hole. I crept near, and waited for her, crouched in the dark. She came crawling through the hole—I can see her silly, pale, dust-streaked face

now! I pounced upon her with all the swiftness and the silence of a long-legged tarantula. I stopped her mouth before she could squeal, and I carried her back to the end of the passage here, and I talked to her for about five seconds. At the end of that time every bone in her body had turned to water. She had sworn as though to God to hold her tongue, and to get out of the house; to keep her mouth shut forever and ever, amen. And I let her go. She scuttled out of the closet like a rat, and I heard her tell Delia to leave the place alone. The third housekeeper left the next day, and, as I heard by listening to kitchen gossip, she gave no reason for her going.

“But, of course, I had had a terrible experience myself. I was n't going to risk anything like that again. Besides, I was sick of living in the wall. I got out that night—half the time Delia forgot to lock the outside door, and always blamed her own carelessness when she found it open in the morning. I had decent clothes with me, and I tramped to a station at some distance, and went up to New York. I'd decided to take a few of my pals in on the game. I had several old pals in New York, and some introductions. It's a first-class city for crooks, almost as good as London, and not half so well policed. And there, my girl, I took the trouble of hunting you up.

“It was n't because I meant to use you at 'The Pines.' It was just out of curiosity—motherly love”—I wish I could describe the drawling irony of the expression on her lips. “You are one of the people I've kept track of. I always felt you might be useful, that I might be able to frighten you into usefulness. Many's the time I've seen you when you were a child, and, later, when you were working in Paris. Not much more than a child then, but such a slim, little, white-faced beauty. What was it, the work? Oh, yes, you were a little assistant milliner, and you turned down the chance of being Monsieur le Baron's *maîtresse*, and lost your job for the reward of virtue—little fool! I knew you had gone to America, but I had lost track of your whereabouts. I soon picked up your tracks, though, and found out that you were in New York looking for work. Your beauty has been against you, Janice; it's always against moral and correct living. It's a great help in going to the devil and beating him at his own game, however, as you might discover if I were immoral enough to let you live. The instant I set eyes on you in New York and saw what a ridiculous copy of your mother you had grown to be, I felt that here was an opportunity of some sort if I could only make use of it. I racked my brains, and, as usual, the inspiration came.

“I got Mrs. Brane's advertisement, so far unanswered, and I handed it to you myself in the street. As soon as I was sure that you had got the job, I left for 'The Pines.' I slipped in like a thief at night, one of the nights when Delia forgot to

lock the back door. I had shadowed you pretty closely those days between the time you answered the advertisement, and left for 'The Pines,' and it was n't a difficult matter for me to get a copy of your wardrobe. You don't know what a help it was to me that you chose a sort of uniform. I knew that you'd be wearing one of those four gray dresses most of the time.

“After you were in the house, I grew pretty bold, and it was then I decided to get Robbie out of that nursery. So I made myself up as the witch that lives under the stairs, and waked him by bending down over his bed with my hair hanging in his face. I was nearly caught at it, too, by Mary, and I scared the old women out of the house—which I had n't in the least intended to do.

“I didn't half like Mrs. Brane's plan of getting a man and wife to take the place of the old women, and I saw at once the necessity for Jaffrey and Maida. However, I was determined not to let them know that there were two red-haired women in the house. I was fascinated by this plan of using you, Janice, of getting witnesses to swear to your identity as Madame Trème, of baiting a trap—with you for bait—into which all of my accomplices would tumble, as they have tumbled, and, then, as a last stroke, putting an end to you and making a clean get-away myself. If any one swings for your murder, it will be Maida, who left 'The Pines' so hurriedly and secretly to-night.

“There's another reason why I did n't take them into the secret of your resemblance: I was glad to have them fancy themselves always under my eye. The risk of their giving themselves away to you was very small, for I had arranged a signal, without which they were positively forbidden to show by sign, or look, or word, even when they seemed to be alone with me, that they had any collusion with Mrs. Brane's housekeeper, that they thought her anything in the world but Mrs. Brane's housekeeper. I have my tools pretty well scared, Janice, and I knew they would obey my orders to the letter.”

In this Madame was wrong. Maida and Jaffrey had both disobeyed this order. With no signal from me, they had spoken in their own character to me as though I had indeed been Madame Trème. Like the plans of most generals, Madame's plans had their weak points.

“You know how it all worked,” she went on, unconscious of my mental connotations, “and, then, *sacre nom de Dieu!* came 'Dabney'!

“God! How the rats scuttled in the house the night after he came! I had Maida to thank for putting me wise. That innocent-faced, slim youngster, with his air of begging-off punishment—I admit, he'd have given me very little uneasiness. You see—”

As she talked I had been watching her with the fixity of my despair, but, a few moments before this last speech of hers concerning Dabney, the flickering of the light across her face had drawn my attention to the second candle. It had burned for more than half its length, and I knew that morning was at hand.

Morning, and a faint hope! The story was not finished, and, though I thought I could tell the rest myself, the woman was so absorbed in the delightful contemplation of her triumph and her cleverness, that I knew she would go on to the end. The wild, resurgent hope deafened me for a few minutes to her low murmur of narration. It had come to me like a flash that, with my legs unbound, I might be able to knock over the candle, put it out, get to my feet in one lightning spring, and make a dash for the hole in the closet. Would there not be a chance of my reaching it alive? Would not the noise of my flight, in spite of my stocking feet and the handkerchief over my mouth, be enough to attract the attention even of a sleeping house, much more certainly, of an awakened and suspicious one? It was, of course a desperate hope, but I could not help but entertain it. If I could force myself to wait till morning had surely come, till there was the stir and murmur of awakening life, surely—oh, dear God!—surely, there might be one little hope of life. I was young and strong and active. I must not die here in this horrible wall. I must not bear the infamy of this woman's guilt. I must not lie dead and unspeakably defiled in the sight of the man I loved.

Paul Dabney's face, haggard, wistful, appeared before me, and my whole heart cried out to its gray and doubting eyes for help, for pity, for belief.

Unluckily, the woman, sensitive as a cat, had become aware of the changed current of my thought, of the changed direction of my look. She, too, glanced at the candle and gave a little exclamation of dismay that stabbed the silence like a suddenly bared knife.

“Bah!” she said, “it must be daylight, and I have n't half confessed myself. Pests on the time! We've been here four or five hours. Are you cramped?”

I was insufferably cramped. The pain of my arms and shoulders, the cutting of the twine about my wrists, were torment. I was very thirsty, too. But nothing was so cruel as the sinking of my heart which her words caused me.

“I suppose I shall have to cut it short,” she said. “After all, you must know it almost as well as I do, especially since you had the nerve to play my part with Maida. The worst trick you put over on me was when you pulled Dabney out of the mud—curse the mud, anyway; if it had been a real quicksand he'd have been done for; but his getting back alive that night certainly crossed me, and, as for Maida, she was in a devil's rage. She could n't understand how he'd escaped. She

cursed, and raved, and threatened even me. It was all that Jaffrey and I could do to hold her; she was for giving up the whole game and making a getaway before it was too late. As a matter of fact, it was already too late for any one but me. Hovey had you all just where he wanted you. At any instant he could bag you all. I had known that for some time. If it had n't been for your *beaux yeux*, Janice, and a little bit, perhaps, because of my own pretty ways, all of you would be jailed by now. After you'd rescued your Dabney, I had to play a bold, prompt game. I knew that the spell could n't hold much longer. I could see by the strained look on that boy's face that he was at the snapping point. I told Maida to search the bookcase that night. Action of some kind was necessary to keep her in hand. I did n't know that you had already taken away the paper. Gast had told me about the paper when I was in New York, and the Baron had hinted at its possible hiding-place. He came down here that day to tell me—I'd bribed him for all I was worth. He was going to leave word with Maida. Then, of course, he saw you and the poor fool thought I was playing housekeeper, under 'Dabney's' very nose.

“The night after Dabney's rescue, after you'd saved his life at the risk of your own, I whistled him into the arbor under your window and kissed him for you. Were your maiden dreams disturbed?—No, no, my girl, don't try to get your hands free”—for in my anger at her words I had begun to wrench at my bonds —“you'll just cut your wrists to the bone. Eh, did n't I tell you?” I felt the blood run down my hands, and stopped, gasping with pain. She went on as coolly as before. “I found out that night, when Maida came to me in the wall with her bad news, that you'd got ahead of us. I was n't so much scared as I might have been, for I knew that Brane had had his directions translated into the Slavonic tongue; I suppose the poor, cracked fool did it to protect his treasure from accidental discovery. He was crazed by having all that money in his possession, and not being bold enough to use it. All his actions prove that his mind was quite unbalanced. He just spun a fantastic web of mystery about the hidden stuff because he had n't the nerve to do anything else. I imagine he meant to tell his wife, but he died suddenly of paralysis, and was n't able to do so. He'd hired a priest to help him with the paper, and Gast, shadowing my former lover, and knowing that he had the robe and crown, managed to find out what he'd been doing. Gast did n't get the substance of the paper, but he learned from the priest that an eccentric Englishman, writing a story of adventure, had asked him to translate a paragraph into Old Russian. Gast handed on this information to me, and promised to translate the paragraph when I was lucky enough to find it.

“Janice, when I found out that I'd been fool enough to lose Gast's letter, which

he'd sent to me through Maida, and by losing it, had put the means of getting a translation into your hands, I gnawed my fingers! I was half mad then. When you made your first trip to Pine Cone, and Dabney had you shadowed so closely that I could n't follow you myself—I knew that you were sending Gast a letter. I was n't sure you'd dare to meet him, though. I thought you might risk sending him the paper. I risked my own life by bribing George to leave you in Pine Cone to foot it home alone, and I risked it again by following you and laying that trap for you in the woods. I risked it because I was certain that you would have the translation hidden in your dress. I pushed the pine tree over after George had passed; it needed only a push. *Nom de Dieu!* You cannot know what frenzy seized me when I found out that again you had outwitted me. I wanted to kill you that day. I wanted to beat you to death there, and leave you dead. But you were a little too valuable. I decided to cripple you, to put you out of running for a few days while I got hold of the fool priest myself. That was only yesterday, but it seems an age. You must be made of iron, Janice! You came near defeating me to-night—the insolence of it! You, a chit of a girl!

"This morning I gave Maida a letter for Gast, and I thought it was to mail it that she went out after supper to-night. When I found her note under my plate I had a shock. I was sure she had found out something important. I went down to the bridge. Yes. You may have the satisfaction. Make the most of it. I did go down to the bridge, but I did n't wait long. Ten minutes was enough. Do you suppose Maida would be late for an appointment with me? Not if she was living. No, my girl, I stood there and realized that you might have worked the trick, that you might have sent Maida out of the way, might have decoyed me, might, even at that instant, be on the track of my jewels. God! How I ran back to the house! When I found the kitchen door locked—*I knew*. I went round to the front door and rang the bell. I was n't going to lose time snooping around for unfastened windows—not with Dabney in the house! I suppose he was sleeping sound because he, too, thought you were safely laid by the heels. Jaffrey answered the bell, and looked surprised, confound him! I gave him some excuse, and went like the wind up to your room. Sure enough, it was empty. I waited till Jaffrey had got back to his bed, and then I hurried down to the kitchen. You know the rest. You know it all now. To the end. But you don't quite know the end."

CHAPTER XVIII—THE LAST VICTIM

I HAD listened to all this as though to voices in a fever. I had been trying to get up my courage for a leap. It seemed to me now a desperate, hopeless undertaking, but it was easier to die in a struggle than to lie there in cold blood while she strangled me with those long, cold, iron hands. She was not calm. I could see that her eyes were shifting, her arms and legs twitched, her fingers moved restlessly. Black and hard as her lost soul must be, it shrank a little from this killing. The murder of her own child gave her a very ague of dread. It was partly, no doubt, the desire to postpone the hideous act that had kept her spinning out her tale so long. But the end had come now. It was—I knew it well—the last moment of my life. I looked at the candle.

At the same instant I heard a window open somewhere in the house. Thank God! It was morning. The household was awake. The sound was all I needed to fire my courage. I flung myself bodily upon the candle, rolled away, scrambled to my feet, and fled along the passageway with the speed of my despair. She was after me like a flash, but I had an instant's start.

Down the inclined plane I slid. I leapt along the steps, and there at the foot she fell upon me, and we lay panting within a stone's throw of the closet wall. And I realized that our flight had been no more noisy than the scuttling of rats. I gave myself up to death.

Madame took me up in her arms as though I had been a little child, and, soft-footed as a panther, carried me back to the side of the iron box. There she laid me down and bound my ankles, not gently, so that the blood flowed under the twine.

Then, with steady hands, she relighted the candle. I saw her face, livid with rage and fear, pitiless, glaring. She slid her hand into the pocket of her dress, that gray dress which she had copied from mine. Again for a fantastic, icy second I had that awful feeling that she was I, that I was she, that we were of the same spirit and flesh. When her hand came out it held a slender knife, fine and keen and delicate as a surgical instrument. With her other hand she sought and found the beating of my heart.

I now knew the manner of my death. I shut my eyes, and prayed that it would be over quickly.

There was the faintest sound above my head, and I opened my eyes. Before the woman saw my deliverance, I saw it. A beam that had made part of the sill, that crossed the passageway above us, slid quietly from its place, and into the opening a figure swung and dropped.

Before even it could reach the ground, the woman had put out the light and vanished like a ghost. I heard not so much as the rustle of her dress.

The figure from above landed lightly beside me, and flashed on an electric lantern. It was Paul Dabney. He bent over me, and drew a quick, sharp breath. I tried to cry out, “Follow the woman!” but my bound lips moved soundlessly.

“I have caught you,” he said dully. “It is the end.”

For me it was indeed the end, a far more bitter one than a knife in my heart. I should be taken. I should be tried for my life. Half a dozen people would swear that I was Madame Trème. Who would believe my incredible story? I was lost. I looked up at Paul Dabney with complete despair.

Footsteps came along the inclined plane, but Dabney did not turn around. Evidently he expected them, and they did not interest him. He was shaking, even his white lips were unsteady. I saw his hands open and shut. The light of the electric lantern, and the light that fell through the trapdoor which he had so mysteriously opened above our heads, made him ghastly visible, made the whole passageway, with its rafters and its red bricks, outlined with plaster, the iron box, the glimmer of jewels, plain to my sight. I saw two men coming towards me. Between them, by her arms, they held up Madame Trème.

“We've got her, sir!” said one of them triumphantly. I recognized Mrs. Brane's outdoors men, and thought confusedly that one of these was Hovey, the detective.

Paul Dabney looked slowly around. He looked and raised a shaking hand to his eyes. He turned again towards me. Then, as though a current of life had been flashed through his veins, he sprang to my side, untied my bonds, tore off the silk handkerchief from my mouth. I was as helpless as a babe, but he lifted me tenderly, and, kneeling, supported me in his arms.

“Janice,” he said brokenly, “Janice, what does it mean?”

My double laughed. “So now, Hovey, you cat, do you understand what a fool my pretty daughter and I have made of you? You think yourself very clever, no doubt. Your reputation is made, is n't it? Now that you've nabbed the famous Madame of the red-gold strand. No, no, my friend, not quite so fast.”

She moved her head from side to side, struggling with her captors. I saw her

bend her mouth to her shoulder, bite and tear at her dress. We all looked at her in a ghastly sort of silence. I could feel Paul Dabney's quivering muscles and his quick breathing. Then, for a second, I saw a white pellet on the woman's tongue. It must have been sewed into the seam of her dress there at the shoulder. She swallowed convulsively, and stood still, her head thrust forward, staring in front of her with eyes like stones.

My face must have showed itself to her through the mists of death, for she spoke once hoarsely: “The girl is quite innocent,” she said; “she wasn't trying for the jewels. Do you get that, Hovey? Keep your claws off her.”

Then she gave a great shiver, her face turned blue. Her head dropped forward, her legs gave way, and the two men held a dead body in their arms.

CHAPTER XIX—SKANE'S CLEVEREST MAN

WITH the death of Madame Trème, and the arrest of Jaffrey and of Maida, the danger to “The Pines” was over. It was a long time, however, before I was allowed to tell my story. I lay in a darkened room, waited upon by Mary, and the least sound or word would send me into a paroxysm of hysterical tears. The first person to whom I recounted my adventures was the detective Hovey, a certain gray-eyed and demure young man whom I had long known by another name. Our interview was very formal. I called him Mr. Hovey, and met his cool and unembarrassed look as rarely as I could. I was propped up in bed to make my statement. Dr. Haverstock was present, his hand often stealing to my pulse, and Mary stood near with a stimulant. She had made me as pretty as she could, the dear soul; had arranged my hair, and chosen my dainty dressing-gown, but I must have looked like a ghost; and it seemed to me that there lay a brand of shame across my face.

Mr. Hovey took down my statement and Dr. Haverstock witnessed it. I was told that I should have to appear in court at the trial of Madame's accomplices. At that, I shrank, and looked helplessly at Dr. Haverstock, and my eyes, in spite of all I could do, filled with tears.

“Oh, my dear,” said the doctor kindly, “it will be a long time yet. You will be strong enough to face anything.”

“There are some things,” I murmured shakily, “that I shall never be able to face.” I covered my eyes with my hands, and turned against the pillow.

I heard Dr. Haverstock whisper something, and I knew that Hovey and he had left the room. Paul had not said a word to me except the necessary questions. His face had been expressionless and pale. What else could I expect? How could any man act otherwise to the daughter of the famous Madame Trème?

The doctor, Mary, Mrs. Brane, were all wonderfully kind. I broke down again under Mrs. Brane's kindness.

“Oh, Janice, my poor child,” she said to me when I was at last allowed to see her, “why did n't you come to me? Why did you try to bear all this terror and misery yourself?”

I held her hand. “I wish I *had* come to you, dear Mrs. Brane. I wish for very many reasons that I had had the humility and good sense to do so. What now is

there, except that statement of my wretched mother, to keep you, the whole world, every one, from thinking that I was a thief myself? From putting that construction upon my insane behavior here?”

“Well, Janice,” she said indulgently, “there is one person to prevent it. I, for one, would never have the courage to suggest such a theory in Paul Hovey's presence. He has written up your rescue of him so movingly, and told the story of it so appealingly, that I think you are rather in danger of being a sort of national heroine. In the papers, my dear, you are painted in the most glowing colors. I should n't wonder if there would be a movie written about you.”

“Paul,” I said,—“Paul has told it?”

“Yes, Paul. And I think he owes you an *amende*. In fact, we all do. I engaged a detective the day after Delia and Jane and Annie left, and very well I knew, of course, that our young student visitor was Skane's cleverest man. But I did not guess that from the first moment he suspected you. Poor child! Poor Janice! What misery you have been through all by your brave, desolate, little self!”

“From the first moment!” I repeated blankly. “From the first moment Paul thought that I was Madame Trème?”

My mind ran back over that meeting in the bookroom. I remembered his sharp, sudden speeches, the slight edge to his voice. I had thought him a coward with that hand in his pocket, and he, meanwhile, had imagined himself always under the eyes of the Red-Gold Strand.

“Yes,” said Mrs. Brane. “One of the force saw you get off the train at Pine Cone, and was struck by your resemblance to the famous criminal.” (I remembered the man whose scrutiny had so annoyed me.) “He reported at headquarters Madame's possible presence, and they realized at once that if she was in it, the Pine Cone case was apt to be both dangerous and interesting. There was big game somewhere. So, without telling me how serious the situation might be, they chose Hovey, and sent him down here as a student of Russian literature. They knew that Madame had never come in contact with him. Paul Hovey has rather a remarkable history, Janice. Would you care to hear it?”

I bent my head.

“He began life as a young man with great expectations, and a super-excellent social position. But he was very careless in his choice of companions. It was the love of adventure, I suppose, like Harry Hotspur and his crew. At a house-party, not a very reputable one I am afraid, on Long Island,—this was a good many years ago—he got mixed up in a very tangled web, and disentangled himself with such cleverness and resource, discovering the guilty man before the police

had even sniffed a trail, that Skane, half as a joke, urged him to turn detective. Hovey, too, treated it as a joke, but, not long after, my dear, the poor boy got himself into trouble—oh, nothing wicked! It was a matter of holding his tongue and keeping other people safe, or telling the truth and clearing himself of rather discreditable folly. He held his tongue, and most people believed his innocence. I think every one would have stood by him, for he was enormously popular, if the very people from whom he had the best right to expect mercy and loyalty had not turned against him—his uncle who had brought him up, and the girl to whom he was engaged. He was disinherited and turned out of doors, and the girl, a worldly little wretch, promptly threw him over. Hovey went straight to Skane, who welcomed him like a long-lost child. Since then Paul Hovey has become famous in his chosen line of work. Now you know his history. I learned it—what was not already public property—from a man, a friend of Paul's dead father, a man who loves Paul dearly, and has known him all his life."

I was not sorry—selfish as the feeling was—to learn that Paul, too, had a grievance against the world; that he, too, was something of a waif and stray, another bit of Fate's flotsam like myself.

"And from the first moment he thought I was Madame Trème?"

"Yes—and fell in love with you. A nice situation for a detective, was n't it? Don't start! You know he did. But I must run away before I tell you any more secrets. I must leave Paul Hovey to make his own apologies, to plead his own cause. I am tiring you, as it is. You are getting much too pink."

"I will never give Mr. Hovey a chance to make his apologies," I said sadly. "And I am certain, dear Mrs. Brane, that he will never try for the chance. Who would? Who would want to—to love the daughter of—"

It was here that I broke down, and she comforted me. "Janice, darling," she said when I was a little quieter, "Love is a very mighty god, and though they say he is blind, I believe that he sees like an immortal. If Paul Hovey loved you in spite of his best will and judgment, against every instinct of self-preservation, loved you to his own shame and anguish when he thought you a woman dyed in crime, a woman who had attempted his life, do you think he will stop loving you when he knows your history and your innocence?"

She left me before I could answer her question, but she left me without a ray of hope. I had made up my mind that I would never marry any one. And I was sure, with the memory of Paul's cold, questioning looks in our recent interview, that he would never come to me again.

But he did come.

We met in the sunny bookroom where I had first led him so long—it seemed very long—ago. I was sitting in the window seat trying listlessly to read, and listening heartbrokenly to the gay music of a mocking-bird in the tree outside, when his step sounded in the hall, and, while I stood, half risen to fly, he came in quietly and stood before me with his boyish and disarming smile.

My knees gave way, and I dropped back into my place, the book falling to the floor. I was trembling all over.

“Don't say you won't let me talk to you, Janice,” he pleaded, and his face was white with earnestness. “Don't try to run away from me. You must in all fairness hear me out.”

“There is nothing for me to listen to,” I stammered; “I have nothing to say to you.”

“Perhaps it is nothing to listen to,” he said, “but it is the most important thing to me in the world. It means my life—that's all.”

“To talk to me?”

“Yes. For God's sake, let us play no tricks with each other now. There has been too much disguise between us. I mistook you for a wicked woman—yes—but you knew that I mistook you, you knew that I loved you better than my own soul, you knew that I suffered damnably, and you did not undeceive me. I kept a policeman's guard upon you—yes—I let you find the paper, I let you get the translation, and, when I could force my heart to give in to my sense of duty, I tracked you down, and found you with the treasure. I saw your double go out through the kitchen-garden that night, and I thought, as I had thought from the beginning, that she was you. I followed her to the bridge. I followed her back to the house. I let her go into her hiding-place, and I set two men to watch that entrance while I went out to make sure of Maida and Jaffrey. Long before that night I had discovered the other opening to the passage—the opening in Robbie's window sill—-and had fastened it up so that none of the gang should light upon it. When I came back at my leisure, thinking to find my quarry in the hands of my two men, they told me that she had not come out, that they had waited according to orders, and had heard a long murmur of voices in the wall. Then I betook myself to the other opening, and dropped on you from above.” Here, all at once, his self-control broke down. He came and took my hands, drawing them up against his heart so that I rose slowly to my feet in front of him. “Do you know what it was like to me to feel that I was handing you over to justice? Even then, I loved you. Even then your beauty and your eyes—Oh, Janice, I can't think of the agony of it all. Don't make me go over it, don't make me explain it in

cold blood. In cold blood? There is n't a drop of cold blood in my body when I hold your hands! Are you going to forgive me? Are you going to let me begin again? May I have my chance?”

I laughed bitterly enough. “Your chance to win the daughter of Madame Trème?”

At that he gripped me in his arms and kissed me till in the tumult of my heart I could not hear the music of the mocking-bird.

“My heart has always known you for the lovely and holy thing you are,” he told me later; “it knew you in spite of my bewildered wits.”

“Did it know me that night in the arbor?” I asked him shakily. And he was silent. I had to forgive him because he made no attempt to defend himself. He sat there, miserable and silent, letting my hand go, till I gave it back to him of my own free will, forgivingly.

And what more is there to tell?

Not long after the trial, Mrs. Brane left “The Pines” to marry Dr. Haverstock, who, to my great surprise, had been her suitor all these months. And as for Mary, she is living with Paul and me, and is the happiest of faithful nurses to our child. Paul's and my daughter is a little fairy, with demure gray eyes, and the blackest hair that I have ever seen.

And the treasure, the robe and crown which so bedazzled the weak head of Theodore Brane, and which drew Madame across the ocean to her death, they are again in the crypt of the cathedral at Moscow, where there stands, glittering once more between her golden candlesticks, our Holy and Beloved Lady of the Jewels.

THE END

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