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"'Look out,' cried the detective, 'or you will get yourself into trouble,' and he tightened his grip on the old creature's arm.—(Page 43.) *(Frontispiece.)*

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HAND AND RING

BY

ANNA KATHARINE GREEN

AUTHOR OF "THE LEAVENWORTH CASE," "THE SWORD OF DAMOCLES," "THE DEFENCE OF THE BRIDE," ETC., ETC.

"For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak with most miraculous organ."

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

NEW YORK: 27 & 29 WEST 23D STREET

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"'Look out,' cried the detective, 'or you will get yourself into trouble,' and he tightened his grip on the old creature's arm." . . . . . *Frontispiece*

"Taking her hand in his, he looked at her long and searchingly. 'Imogene,' he exclaimed, 'there is something weighing on your heart.'" 58

"He paused, sick and horror-stricken. Her face had risen upon him from the back of the chair, and was staring at him like that of a Medusa." 252

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NOTE.—A portion of these illustrations originally appeared in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, and have been used in this volume through the courtesy of Mrs. Leslie.

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HAND AND RING.

BOOK I.

THE GENTLEMAN FROM TOLEDO.

I.

A STARTLING COINCIDENCE.

By the pricking of my thumbs,
Something wicked this way comes.
—MACBETH.

THE town clock of Sibley had just struck twelve. Court had adjourned, and Judge Evans, with one or two of the leading lawyers of the county, stood in the door-way of the court-house discussing in a friendly way the eccentricities of criminals as developed in the case then before the court. Mr. Lord had just ventured the assertion that crime as a fine art was happily confined to France; to which District Attorney Ferris had replied:

"And why? Because atheism has not yet acquired such a hold upon our upper classes that gentlemen think it possible to meddle with such matters. It is only when a student, a doctor, a lawyer, determines to put aside from his path the secret stumbling-block

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to his desires or his ambition that the true intellectual crime is developed. That brute whom you see slouching along over the way is the type of the average criminal of the day."

And he indicated with a nod a sturdy, ill-favored man, who, with pack on his back, was just emerging from a grassy lane that opened out from the street directly opposite the court-house.

"Such men are often seen in the dock," remarked Mr. Orcutt, of more than local reputation as a criminal lawyer. "And often escape the penalty of their crimes," he added, watching, with a curious glance, the lowering brow and furtive look of the man who, upon perceiving the attention he had attracted, increased his pace till he almost broke into a run.

"Looks as if he had been up to mischief," observed Judge Evans.

"Rather as if he had heard the sentence which was passed upon the last tramp who paid his respects to this town," corrected Mr. Lord.

"*Revenons à nos moutons*," resumed the District Attorney. "Crime, as an investment, does not pay in this country. The regular burglar leads a dog's life of it; and when you come to the murderer, how few escape suspicion if they do the gallows. I do not know of a case where a murder for money has been really successful in this region."

"Then you must have some pretty cute detective work

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going on here," remarked a young man who had not before spoken.

"No, no—nothing to brag of. But the brutes are so clumsy—that is the word, clumsy. They don't know how to cover up their tracks."

"The smart ones don't make tracks," interposed a rough voice near them, and a large, red-haired, slightly hump-backed man, who, from the looks of those about, was evidently a stranger in the place, shuffled forward from the pillar against which he had been leaning, and took up the thread of conversation.

"I tell you," he continued, in a gruff tone somewhat out of keeping with the studied abstraction of his keen, gray eye, "that half the criminals are caught because they *do* make tracks and then resort to such extraordinary means to cover them up. The true secret of success in this line lies in striking your blow with a weapon picked up on the spot, and in choosing for the scene of your tragedy a thoroughfare where, in the natural course of events, other men will come and go and unconsciously tread out your traces, provided you have made any. This dissipates suspicion, or starts it in so many directions that justice is at once confused, if not ultimately baffled. Look at that house yonder," the stranger pursued, pointing to a plain dwelling on the opposite corner. "While we have been standing here, several persons of one kind or another, and among them a pretty rough-looking tramp, have gone into the side gate and so around to the kitchen

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door and back. I don't know who lives there, but say it is a solitary old woman above keeping help, and that an hour from now some one, not finding her in the house, searches through the garden and comes upon her lying dead behind the wood-pile, struck down by her own axe. On whom are you going to lay your hand in suspicion? On the stranger, of course—the rough-looking tramp that everybody thinks is ready for bloodshed at the least provocation. But suspicion is not conviction, and I would dare wager that no court, in face of a persistent denial on his part that he even saw the old woman when he went to her door, would bring in a verdict of murder against him, even though silver from her private drawer were found concealed upon his person. The chance that he spoke the truth, and that she was not in the house when he entered, and that his crime had been merely one of burglary or theft, would be enough to save him from the hangman."

"That is true," assented Mr. Lord, "unless all the other persons who had been seen to go into the yard were not only reputable men, but were willing to testify to having seen the woman alive up to the time he invaded her premises."

But the hump-backed stranger had already lounged away.

"What do you think about this, Mr. Byrd?" inquired the District Attorney, turning to the young man before alluded to. "You are an expert in these matters, or

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ought to be. What would you give for the tramp's chances if the detectives took him in hand?"

"I, sir?" was the response. "I am so comparatively young and inexperienced in such affairs, that I scarcely dare presume to express an opinion. But I have heard it said by Mr. Gryce, who you know stands foremost among the detectives of New York, that the only case of murder in which he utterly failed to get any clue to work upon, was that of a Jew who was knocked down in his own shop in broad daylight. But this will not appear so strange when you learn the full particulars. The store was situated between two alley-ways in Harlem. It had an entrance back and an entrance front. Both were in constant use. The man was found behind his counter, having evidently been hit on the head by a slung-shot while reaching for a box of hosiery. But though a succession of people were constantly passing by both doors, there was for that very reason no one to tell which of all the men who were observed to enter the shop, came out again with blood upon his conscience. Nor were the circumstances of the Jew's life such as to assist justice. The most careful investigation failed to disclose the existence of any enemy, nor was he found to possess in this country, at least, any relative who could have hoped to be benefited by the few dollars he had saved from a late bankruptcy. The only conclusion to be drawn is that the man was secretly in the way of some one and was as secretly put out of it, but for what purpose or by whose hand, time has never disclosed."

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"There is one, however, who knows both," affirmed Judge Evans, impressively.

"The man himself?"

"God!"

The solemnity with which this was uttered caused a silence, during which Mr. Orcutt looked at his watch.

"I must go to dinner," he announced, withdrawing, with a slight nod, across the street.

The rest stood for a few minutes abstractedly contemplating his retreating figure, as with an energetic pace all his own he passed down the little street that opened opposite to where they stood, and entered the unpretending cottage of a widow lady, with whom he was in the habit of taking his mid-day meal whenever he had a case before the court.

A lull was over the whole village, and the few remaining persons on the court-house steps were about to separate, when Mr. Lord uttered an exclamation and pointed to the cottage into which they had just seen Mr. Orcutt disappear. Immediately all eyes looked that way and saw the lawyer standing on the stoop, having evidently issued with the utmost precipitation from the house.

"He is making signs," cried Mr. Lord to Mr. Ferris; and scarcely knowing what they feared, both gentlemen crossed the way and hurried down the street toward their friend, who, with unusual tokens of disturbance in his manner, ran forward to meet them.

"A murder!" he excitedly exclaimed, as soon as he

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came within speaking distance. "A strange and startling coincidence. Mrs. Clemmens has been struck on the head, and is lying covered with blood at the foot of her dining-room table."

Mr. Lord and the District Attorney stared at each other in a maze of surprise and horror easily to be comprehended, and then they rushed forward.

"Wait a moment," the latter suddenly cried, stopping short and looking back. "Where is the fellow who talked so learnedly about murder and the best way of making a success of it. He must be found at once. I don't believe in coincidences." And he beckoned to the person they had called Byrd, who with very pardonable curiosity was hurrying their way. "Go find Hunt, the constable," he cried; "tell him to stop and retain the humpback. A woman here has been found murdered, and that fellow must have known something about it."

The young man stared, flushed with sudden intelligence, and darted off. Mr. Ferris turned, found Mr. Orcutt still at his side, and drew him forward to rejoin Mr. Lord, who by this time was at the door of the cottage.

They all went in together, Mr. Ferris, who was of an adventurous disposition, leading the way. The room into which they first stepped was empty. It was evidently the widow's sitting-room, and was in perfect order, with the exception of Mr. Orcutt's hat, which lay on the centre-table where he had laid it on entering. Neat, without

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being prim, the entire aspect of the place was one of comfort, ease, and modest luxury. For, though the Widow Clemmens lived alone and without help, she was by no means an indigent person, as a single glance at her house would show. The door leading into the farther room was open, and toward this they hastened, led by the glitter of the fine old china service which loaded the dining-table.

"She is there," said Mr. Orcutt, pointing to the other side of the room.

They immediately passed behind the table, and there, sure enough, lay the prostrate figure of the widow, her head bleeding, her arms extended, one hand grasping her watch, which she had loosened from her belt, the other stretched toward a stick of firewood, that, from the mark of blood upon its side, had evidently been used to fell her to the floor. She was motionless as stone, and was, to all appearance, dead.

"Sickening, sickening!—horrible!" exclaimed Mr. Lord, recoiling upon the District Attorney with a gesture, as if he would put the frightful object out of his sight. "What motive could any one have for killing such an inoffensive woman? The deviltry of man is beyond belief!"

"And after what we have heard, inexplicable," asserted Mr. Ferris. "To be told of a supposable case of murder one minute, and then to see it exemplified in this dreadful way the next, is an experience of no common order.

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I own I am overcome by it." And he flung open a door that communicated with the lane and let the outside air sweep in.

"That door was unlocked," remarked Mr. Lord, glancing at Mr. Orcutt, who stood with severe, set face, looking down at the outstretched form which, for several years now, had so often sat opposite to him at his noonday meal.

With a start the latter looked up. "What did you say? The door unlocked? There is nothing strange in that. She never locked her doors, though she was so very deaf I often advised her to." And he allowed his eyes to run over the wide stretch of low, uncultivated ground before him, that, in the opinion of many persons, was such a decided blot upon the town. "There is no one in sight," he reluctantly admitted.

"No," responded the other. "The ground is unfavorable for escape. It is marshy and covered with snake grass. A man could make his way, however, between the hillocks into those woods yonder, if he were driven by fear or understood the path well. What is the matter, Orcutt?"

"Nothing," affirmed the latter,—"nothing, I thought I heard a groan."

"You heard me make an exclamation," spoke up Mr. Ferris, who by this time had sufficiently overcome his emotion to lift the head of the prostrate woman and look in her face. "This woman is not dead."

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"What!" they both cried, bounding forward.

"See, she breathes," continued the former, pointing to her slowly laboring chest. "The villain, whoever he was, did not do his work well; she may be able to tell us something yet."

"I do not think so," murmured Mr. Orcutt. "Such a blow as that must have destroyed her faculties, if not her life. It was of cruel force."

"However that may be, she ought to be taken care of now," cried Mr. Ferris. "I wish Dr. Tredwell was here."

"I will go for him," signified the other.

But it was not necessary. Scarcely had the lawyer turned to execute this mission, when a sudden murmur was heard at the door, and a dozen or so citizens burst into the house, among them the very person named. Being coroner as well as physician, he at once assumed authority. The widow was carried into her room, which was on the same floor, and a brother practitioner sent for, who took his place at her head and waited for any sign of returning consciousness. The crowd, remanded to the yard, spent their time alternately in furtive questionings of each other's countenances, and in eager lookout for the expected return of the strange young man who had been sent after the incomprehensible humpback of whom all had heard. The coroner, closeted with the District Attorney in the dining-room, busied himself in noting certain evident facts.

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"I am, perhaps, forestalling my duties in interfering before the woman is dead," intimated the former. "But it is only a matter of a few hours, and any facts we can glean in the interim must be of value to a proper conduct of the inquiry I shall be called upon to hold. I shall therefore make the same note of the position of affairs as I would do if she were dead; and to begin with, I wish you to observe that she was hit while setting the clock." And he pointed to the open door of the huge old-fashioned timepiece which occupied that corner of the room in which she had been found. "She had not even finished her task," he next remarked, "for the clock is still ten minutes slow, while her watch is just right, as you will see by comparing it with your own. She was attacked from behind, and to all appearances unexpectedly. Had she turned, her forehead would have been struck, while, as all can see, it is the back of her head that has suffered, and that from a right-hand blow. Her deafness was undoubtedly the cause of her immobility under the approach of such an assailant. She did not hear his step, and, being so busily engaged, saw nothing of the cruel hand uplifted to destroy her. I doubt if she even knew what happened. The mystery is that any one could have sufficiently desired her death to engage in such a cold-blooded butchery. If plunder were wanted, why was not her watch taken from her? And see, here is a pile of small change lying beside her plate on the table,—a thing a tramp would make for at once."

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"It was not a thief that struck her."

"Well, well, we don't know. I have my own theory," admitted the coroner; "but, of course, it will not do for me to mention it here. The stick was taken from that pile laid ready on the hearth," he went on. "Odd, significantly odd, that in all its essential details this affair should tally so completely with the supposable case of crime given a moment before by the deformed wretch you tell me about."

"Not if that man was a madman and the assailant," suggested the District Attorney.

"True, but I do not think he was mad—not from what you have told me. But let us see what the commotion is. Some one has evidently arrived."

It was Mr. Byrd, who had entered by the front door, and deaf to the low murmur of the impatient crowd without, stood waiting in silent patience for an opportunity to report to the District Attorney the results of his efforts.

Mr. Ferris at once welcomed him.

"What have you done? Did you find the constable or succeed in laying hands on that scamp of a hump-back?"

Mr. Byrd, who, to explain at once, was a young and intelligent detective, who had been brought from New York for purposes connected with the case then before the court, glanced carefully in the direction of the coroner and quietly replied:

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"The hump-backed scamp, as you call him, has disappeared. Whether he will be found or not I cannot say. Hunt is on his track, and will report to you in an hour. The tramp whom you saw slinking out of this street while we stood on the court-house steps is doubtless the man whom you most want, and him we have captured."

"You have?" repeated Mr. Ferris, eying, with good-natured irony, the young man's gentlemanly but rather indifferent face. "And what makes *you* think it is the tramp who is the guilty one in this case? Because that ingenious stranger saw fit to make him such a prominent figure in his suppositions?"

"No, sir," replied the detective, flushing with a momentary embarrassment he however speedily overcame; "I do not found my opinions upon any man's remarks. I only—— Excuse me," said he, with a quiet air of self-control that was not without its effect upon the sensible man he was addressing. "If you will tell me how, where, and under what circumstances this poor murdered woman was found, perhaps I shall be better able to explain my reasons for believing in the tramp as the guilty party; though the belief, even of a detective, goes for but little in matters of this kind, as you and these other gentlemen very well know."

"Step here, then," signified Mr. Ferris, who, accompanied by the coroner, had already passed around the table. "Do you see that clock? She was winding it

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when she was struck, and fell almost at its foot. The weapon which did the execution lies over there; it is a stick of firewood, as you see, and was caught up from that pile on the hearth. Now recall what that humpback said about choosing a thoroughfare for a murder (and this house is a thoroughfare), and the peculiar stress which he laid upon the choice of a weapon, and tell me why you think he is innocent of this immediate and most remarkable exemplification of his revolting theory?"

"Let me first ask," ventured the other, with a remaining tinge of embarrassment coloring his cheek, "if you have reason to think this woman had been lying long where she was found, or was she struck soon before the discovery?"

"Soon. The dinner was still smoking in the kitchen, where it had been dished up ready for serving."

"Then," declared the detective with sudden confidence, "a single word will satisfy you that the humpback was not the man who delivered this stroke. To lay that woman low at the foot of this clock would require the presence of the assailant in the room. Now, the humpback was not here this morning, but in the court-room. I know this, for I saw him there."

"You did? You are sure of that?" cried, in a breath, both his hearers, somewhat taken aback by this revelation.

"Yes. He sat down by the door. I noticed him particularly."

"Humph! that is odd," quoth Mr. Ferris, with the

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testiness of an irritable man who sees himself contradicted in a publicly expressed theory.

"Very odd," repeated the coroner; "so odd, I am inclined to think he did not sit there every moment of the time. It is but a step from the court-house here; he might well have taken the trip and returned while you wiped your eye-glasses or was otherwise engaged."

Mr. Byrd did not see fit to answer this.

"The tramp is an ugly-looking customer," he remarked, in what was almost a careless tone of voice.

Mr. Ferris covered with his hand the pile of loose change that was yet lying on the table, and shortly observed:

"A tramp to commit such a crime must be actuated either by rage or cupidity; that you will acknowledge. Now the fellow who struck this woman could not have been excited by any sudden anger, for the whole position of her body when found proves that she had not even turned to face the intruder, much less engaged in an altercation with him. Yet how could it have been money he was after, when a tempting bit like this remained undisturbed upon the table?"

And Mr. Ferris, with a sudden gesture, disclosed to view the pile of silver coin he had been concealing.

The young detective shook his head but lost none of his seeming indifference. "That is one of the little anomalies of criminal experience that we were talking about this morning," he remarked. "Perhaps the fellow

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was frightened and lost his head, or perhaps he really heard some one at the door, and was obliged to escape without reaping any of the fruits of his crime."

"Perhaps and perhaps," retorted Mr. Ferris, who was a quick man, and who, once settled in a belief, was not to be easily shaken out of it.

"However that may be," continued Mr. Byrd, without seeming to notice the irritating interruption, "I still think that the tramp, rather than the humpback, will be the man to occupy your future attention."

And with a deprecatory bow to both gentlemen, he drew back and quietly left the room.

Mr. Ferris at once recovered from his momentary loss of temper.

"I suppose the young man is right," he acknowledged; "but, if so, what an encouragement we have received this morning to a belief in clairvoyance." And with less irony and more conviction, he added: "The humpback *must* have known something about the murder."

And the coroner bowed; common-sense undoubtedly agreeing with this assumption.

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II.

AN APPEAL TO HEAVEN.

Her step was royal—queen-like.—LONGFELLOW.

IT was now half-past one. An hour and a half had elapsed since the widow had been laid upon her bed, and to all appearance no change had taken place in her condition. Within the room where she lay were collected the doctor and one or two neighbors of the female sex, who watched every breath she drew, and stood ready to notice the slightest change in the stony face that, dim with the shadow of death, stared upon them from the unruffled pillows. In the sitting-room Lawyer Orcutt conversed in a subdued voice with Mr. Ferris, in regard to such incidents of the widow's life as had come under his notice in the years of their daily companionship, while the crowd about the gate vented their interest in loud exclamations of wrath against the tramp who had been found, and the unknown humpback who had not. Our story leads us into the crowd in front.

"I don't think she 'll ever come to," said one, who from his dusty coat might have been a miller. "Blows like that have 'nt much let-up about them."

"Doctor says she will die before morning," put in a pert young miss, anxious to have her voice heard.

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"Then it will be murder and no mistake, and that brute of a tramp will hang as high as Haman."

"Don't condemn a man before you 've had a chance to hear what he has to say for himself," cried another in a strictly judicial tone. "How do you know as he came to this house at all?"

"Miss Perkins says he did, and Mrs. Phillips too; they saw him go into the gate."

"And what else did they see? I warrant he was n't the only beggar that was roaming round this morning."

"No; there was a tin peddler in the street, for I saw him my own self, and Mrs. Clemmens standing in the door flourishing her broom at him. She was mighty short with such folks. Would n't wonder if some of the unholy wretches killed her out of spite. They 're a wicked lot, the whole of them."

"Widow Clemmens had a quick temper, but she had a mighty good heart notwithstanding. See how kind she was to them Hubbells."

"And how hard she was to that Pratt girl."

"Well, I know, but——" And so on and so on, in a hum and a buzz about the head of Mr. Byrd, who, engaged in thought seemingly far removed from the subject in hand, stood leaning against the fence, careless and *insouciant*. Suddenly there was a lull, then a short cry, then a woman's voice rose clear, ringing, and commanding, and Mr. Byrd caught the following words:

"What is this I hear? Mrs. Clemmens dead? Struck

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down by some wandering tramp? Murdered and in her own house?"

In an instant, every eye, including Mr. Byrd's, was fixed upon the speaker. The crowd parted, and the young girl, who had spoken from the street, came into the gate. She was a remarkable-looking person. Tall, large, and majestic in every proportion of an unusually noble figure, she was of a make and possessed a bearing to attract attention had she borne a less striking and beautiful countenance. As it was, the glance lingered but a moment on the grand curves and lithe loveliness of that matchless figure, and passed at once to the face. Once there, it did not soon wander; for though its beauty was incontestable, the something that lay behind that beauty was more incontestable still, and held you, in spite of yourself, long after you had become acquainted with the broad white brow, the clear, deep, changing gray eye, the straight but characteristic nose, and the ruddy, nervous lip. You felt that, young and beautiful as she was, and charming as she might be, she was also one of nature's unsolvable mysteries—a woman whom you might study, obey, adore, but whom you could never hope to understand; a Sphinx without an Œdipus. She was dressed in dark green, and held her gloves in her hand. Her appearance was that of one who had been profoundly startled.

"Why don't some one answer me?" she asked, after an instant's pause, seemingly unconscious that, alike to

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those who knew her and to those who did not, her air and manner were such as to naturally impose silence. "Must I go into the house in order to find out if this good woman is dead or not?"

"Shure she is n't dead yet," spoke up a brawny butcher-boy, bolder than the rest. "But she 's sore hurt, miss, and the doctors say as how there is no hope."

A change impossible to understand passed over the girl's face. Had she been less vigorous of body, she would have staggered. As it was, she stood still, rigidly still, and seemed to summon up her faculties, till the very clinch of her fingers spoke of the strong control she was putting upon herself.

"It is dreadful, dreadful!" she murmured, this time in a whisper, and as if to some rising protest in her own soul. "No good can come of it, none." Then, as if awakening to the scene about her, shook her head and cried to those nearest: "It was a tramp who did it, I suppose; at least, I am told so."

"A tramp has been took up, miss, on suspicion, as they call it."

"If a tramp has been taken up on suspicion, then he was the one who assailed her, of course." And pushing on through the crowd that fell back still more awe-struck than before, she went into the house.

The murmur that followed her was subdued but universal. It made no impression on Mr. Byrd. He had leaned forward to watch the girl's retreating form, but,

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finding his view intercepted by the wrinkled profile of an old crone who had leaned forward too, had drawn impatiently back. Something in that crone's aged face made him address her.

"You know the lady?" he inquired.

"Yes," was the cautious reply, given, however, with a leer he found not altogether pleasant.

"She is a relative of the injured woman, or a friend, perhaps?"

The old woman's face looked frightful.

"No," she muttered grimly; "they are strangers."

At this unexpected response Mr. Byrd made a perceptible start forward. The old woman's hand fell at once on his arm.

"Stay!" she hoarsely whispered. "By strangers I mean they don't visit each other. The town is too small for any of us to be strangers."

Mr. Byrd nodded and escaped her clutch.

"This is worth seeing through," he murmured, with the first gleam of interest he had shown in the affair. And, hurrying forward, he succeeded in following the lady into the house.

The sight he met there did not tend to allay his newborn interest. There she stood in the centre of the sitting-room, tall, resolute, and commanding, her eyes fixed on the door of the room that contained the still breathing sufferer, Mr. Orcutt's eyes fixed upon her. It seemed as if she had asked one question and been answered; there had not been time for more.

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"I do not know what to say in apology for my intrusion," she remarked. "But the death, or almost the death, of a person of whom we have all heard, seems to me so terrible that——"

But here Mr. Orcutt interrupted gently, almost tenderly, but with a fatherly authority which Mr. Byrd expected to see her respect.

"Imogene," he observed, "this is no place for you; the horror of the event has made you forget yourself; go home and trust me to tell you on my return all that it is advisable for you to know."

But she did not even meet his glance with her steady eyes. "Thank you," she protested; "but I cannot go till I have seen the place where this woman fell and the weapon with which she was struck. I want to see it all. Mr. Ferris, will you show me?" And without giving any reason for this extraordinary request, she stood waiting with that air of conscious authority which is sometimes given by great beauty when united to a distinguished personal presence.

The District Attorney, taken aback, moved toward the dining-room door. "I will consult with the coroner," said he.

But she waited for no man's leave. Following close behind him, she entered upon the scene of the tragedy.

"Where was the poor woman hit?" she inquired.

They told her; they showed her all she desired and asked her no questions. She awed them, all but Mr. Orcutt—him she both astonished and alarmed.

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"And a tramp did all this?" she finally exclaimed, in the odd, musing tone she had used once before, while her eye fell thoughtfully to the floor. Suddenly she started, or so Mr. Byrd fondly imagined, and moved a pace, setting her foot carefully down upon a certain spot in the carpet beneath her.

"She has spied something," he thought, and watched to see if she would stoop.

But no, she held herself still more erectly than before, and seemed, by her rather desultory inquiries, to be striving to engage the attention of the others from herself.

"There is some one surely tapping at this door," she intimated, pointing to the one that opened into the lane.

Dr. Tredwell moved to see.

"Is there not?" she repeated, glancing at Mr. Ferris.

He, too, turned to see.

But there was still an eye regarding her from behind the sitting-room door, and, perceiving it, she impatiently ceased her efforts. She was not mistaken about the tapping. A man was at the door whom both gentlemen seemed to know.

"I come from the tavern where they are holding this tramp in custody," announced the new-comer in a voice too low to penetrate into the room. "He is frightened almost out of his wits. Seems to think he was taken up for theft, and makes no bones of saying that he did take a spoon or two from a house where he was let in for a bite. He gave up the spoons and expects to go to jail,

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but seems to have no idea that any worse suspicion is hanging over him. Those that stand around think he is innocent of the murder."

"Humph! well, we will see," ejaculated Mr. Ferris; and, turning back, he met, with a certain sort of complacence, the eyes of the young lady who had been somewhat impatiently awaiting his reappearance. "It seems there are doubts, after all, about the tramp being the assailant."

The start she gave was sudden and involuntary. She took a step forward and then paused as if hesitating. Instantly, Mr. Byrd, who had not forgotten the small object she had been covering with her foot, sauntered leisurely forward, and, spying a ring on the floor where she had been standing, unconcernedly picked it up.

She did not seem to notice him. Looking at Mr. Ferris with eyes whose startled, if not alarmed, expression she did not succeed in hiding from the detective, she inquired, in a stifled voice:

"What do you mean? What has this man been telling you? You say it was not the tramp. Who, then, was it?"

"That is a question we cannot answer," rejoined Mr. Ferris, astonished at her heat, while Lawyer Orcutt, moving forward, attempted once more to recall her to herself.

"Imogene," he pleaded,—"Imogene, calm yourself. This is not a matter of so much importance to you that you need agitate yourself so violently in regard to it.

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Come home, I beseech you, and leave the affairs of justice to the attention of those whose duty it is to look after them."

But beyond acknowledging his well-meant interference by a deprecatory glance, she stood immovable, looking from Dr. Tredwell to Mr. Ferris, and back again to Dr. Tredwell, as if she sought in their faces some confirmation of a hideous doubt or fear that had arisen in her own mind. Suddenly she felt a touch on her arm.

"Excuse me, madam, but is this yours?" inquired a smooth and careless voice over her shoulder.

As though awakening from a dream she turned; they all turned. Mr. Byrd was holding out in his open palm a ring blazing with a diamond of no mean lustre or value.

The sight of such a jewel, presented at such a moment, completed the astonishment of her friends. Pressing forward, they stared at the costly ornament and then at her, Mr. Orcutt's face especially assuming a startled expression of mingled surprise and apprehension, that soon attracted the attention of the others, and led to an interchange of looks that denoted a mutual but not unpleasant understanding.

"I found it at your feet," explained the detective, still carelessly, but with just that delicate shade of respect in his voice necessary to express a gentleman's sense of presumption in thus addressing a strange and beautiful young lady.

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The tone, if not the explanation, seemed to calm her, as powerful natures are calmed in the stress of a sudden crisis.

"Thank you," she returned, not without signs of great sweetness in her look and manner. "Yes, it is mine" she added slowly, reaching out her hand and taking the ring. "I must have dropped it without knowing it." And meeting the eye of Mr. Orcutt fixed upon her with that startled look of inquiry already alluded to, she flushed, but placed the jewel nonchalantly on her finger.

This cool appropriation of something he had no reason to believe hers, startled the youthful detective immeasurably. He had not expected such a *dénouement* to the little drama he had prepared with such quiet assurance, and, though with the quick self-control that distinguished him he forbore to show his surprise, he none the less felt baffled and ill at ease, all the more that the two gentlemen present, who appeared to be the most disinterested in their regard for this young lady, seemed to accept this act on her part as genuine, and therefore not to be questioned.

"It is a clue that is lost," thought he. "I have made a mess of my first unassisted efforts at real detective work." And, inwardly disgusted with himself, he drew back into the other room and took up his stand at a remote window.

The slight stir he made in crossing the room seemed to break a spell and restore the minds of all present to their

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proper balance. Mr. Orcutt threw off the shadow that had momentarily disturbed his quiet and assured mien, and advancing once more, held out his arm with even more kindness than before, saying impressively :

"Now you will surely consent to accompany me home. You cannot mean to remain here any longer, can you, Imogene?"

But before she could reply, before her hand could lay itself on his arm, a sudden hush like that of awe passed solemnly through the room, and the physician, who had been set to watch over the dying gasps of the poor sufferer within, appeared on the threshold of the bedroom door, holding up his hand with a look that at once commanded attention and awoke the most painful expectancy in the hearts of all who beheld him :

"She stirs; she moves her lips," he announced, and again paused, listening.

Immediately there was a sound from the dimness behind him, a low sound, inarticulate at first, but presently growing loud enough and plain enough to be heard in the utmost recesses of the furthermost room on that floor.

"Hand! ring!" was the burden of the short ejaculation they heard. "Ring! hand!" till a sudden gasp cut short the fearful iteration, and all was silent again.

"Great heavens!" came in an awe-struck whisper from Mr. Ferris, as he pressed hastily toward the place from which these words had issued.

But the physician at once stopped and silenced him.

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"She may speak again," he suggested. "Wait."

But, though they listened breathlessly, and with ever-growing suspense, no further break occurred in the deep silence, and soon the doctor announced:

"She has sunk back into her old state; she may rouse again, and she may not."

As though released from some painful tension, the coroner, the District Attorney, and the detective all looked up. They found Miss Dare standing by the open window, with her face turned to the landscape, and Mr. Orcutt gazing at her with an expression of perplexity that had almost the appearance of dismay. This look passed instantly from the lawyer's countenance as he met the eyes of his friends, but Mr. Byrd, who was still smarting under a sense of his late defeat, could not but wonder what that gentleman had seen in Miss Dare, during the period of their late preoccupation, to call up such an expression to his usually keen and composed face.

The clinch of her white hand on the window-sill told nothing; but when in a few moments later she turned toward them again, Mr. Byrd saw, or thought he saw, the last lingering remains of a great horror fading out of her eyes, and was not surprised when she walked up to Mr. Orcutt and said, somewhat hoarsely: "I wish to go home now. This place is a terrible one to be in."

Mr. Orcutt, who was only too glad to comply with her request, again offered her his arm. But anxious as they evidently were to quit the house, they were not al-

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lowed to do so without experiencing another shock. Just as they were passing the door of the room where the wounded woman lay, the physician in attendance again appeared before them with that silently uplifted hand.

"Hush!" said he; "she stirs again. I think she is going to speak."

And once more that terrible suspense held each and every one enthralled: once more that faint, inarticulate murmur eddied through the house, growing gradually into speech that this time took a form that curdled the blood of the listeners, and made Mr. Orcutt and the young woman at his side drop apart from each other as though a dividing sword had passed between them.

"May the vengance of Heaven light upon the head of him who has brought me to this pass," were the words that now rose ringing and clear from that bed of death. "May the fate that has come upon me be visited upon him, measure for measure, blow for blow, death for death."

Strange and awe-inspiring words, that drew a pall over that house and made the dullest person there gasp for breath. In the silence that followed—a silence that could be felt—the white faces of lawyer and physician, coroner and detective, turned and confronted each other. But the young lady who lingered in their midst looked at no one, turned to no one. Shuddering and white, she stood gazing before her as if she already beheld that retributive hand descending upon the head of the guilty; then,

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as she awoke to the silence of those around her, gave a quick start and flashed forward to the door and so out into the street before Mr. Orcutt could rouse himself sufficiently from the stupor of the moment to follow her.

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III.

THE UNFINISHED LETTER.

Faith, thou hast some crotchets in thy head now.
—MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR.

"WOULD there be any indiscretion in my asking who that young lady is?" inquired Mr. Byrd of Mr. Ferris, as, after ascertaining that the stricken sufferer still breathed, they stood together in a distant corner of the dining-room.

"No," returned the other, in a low tone, with a glance in the direction of the lawyer, who was just re-entering the house, after an unsuccessful effort to rejoin the person of whom they were speaking. "She is a Miss Dare, a young lady much admired in this town, and believed by many to be on the verge of matrimony with——" He nodded toward Mr. Orcutt, and discreetly forbore to finish the sentence.

"Ah!" exclaimed the youthful detective, "I understand." And he cast a look of suddenly awakened interest at the man who, up to this time, he had merely regarded as a more than usually acute criminal lawyer.

He saw a small, fair, alert man, of some forty years of age, of a good carriage, easy manner, and refined cast of countenance, overshadowed now by a secret anxiety

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he vainly tried to conceal. He was not as handsome as Coroner Tredwell, nor as well built as Mr. Ferris, yet he was, without doubt, the most striking-looking man in the room, and, to the masculine eyes of the detective, seemed at first glance to be a person to win the admiration, if not the affection, of women.

"She appears to take a great interest in this affair," he ventured again, looking back at Mr. Ferris.

"Yes, that is woman's way," replied the other, lightly, without any hint of secret feeling or curiosity. "Besides, she is an inscrutable girl, always surprising you by her emotions—or by her lack of them," he added, dismissing the topic with a wave of his hand.

"Which is also woman's way," remarked Mr. Byrd, retiring into his shell, from which he had momentarily thrust his head.

"Does it not strike you that there are rather more persons present than are necessary for the purposes of justice?" asked the lawyer, now coming forward with a look of rather pointed significance at the youthful stranger.

Mr. Ferris at once spoke up. "Mr. Orcutt," said he, "let me introduce to you Mr. Byrd, of New York. He is a member of the police force, and has been rendering me assistance in the case just adjourned."

"A detective!" repeated the other, eying the young man with a critical eye. "It is a pity, sir," he finally observed, "that your present duties will not allow you

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to render service to justice in this case of mysterious assault." And with a bow of more kindness than Mr. Byrd had reason to look for, he went slowly back to his former place near the door that hid the suffering woman from sight.

However kindly expressed, Mr. Byrd felt that he had received his dismissal, and was about to withdraw, when the coroner, who had been absent from their midst for the last few minutes, approached them from the foot of the stairs, and tapped the detective on the arm.

"I want you," said he.

Mr. Byrd bowed, and with a glance toward the District Attorney, who returned him a nod of approval, went quickly out with the coroner.

"I hear you are a detective," observed the latter, taking him up stairs into a room which he carefully locked behind them. "A detective on the spot in a case like this is valuable; are you willing to assume the duties of your profession and act for justice in this matter?"

"Dr. Tredwell," returned the young man, instantly conscious of a vague, inward shrinking from meddling further in the affair, "I am not at present master of my proceedings. To say nothing of the obedience I owe my superiors at home, I am just now engaged in assisting Mr. Ferris in the somewhat pressing matter now before the court, and do not know whether it would meet with his approval to have me mix up matters in this way."

"Mr. Ferris is a reasonable man," said the coroner. "If his consent is all that is necessary——"

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"But it is not, sir. I must have orders from New York."

"Oh, as to that, I will telegraph at once."

But still the young man hesitated, lounging in his easy way against the table by which he had taken his stand.

"Dr. Tredwell," he suggested, "you must have men in this town amply able to manage such a matter as this. A woman struck in broad daylight and a man already taken up on suspicion! 'T is simple, surely; intricate measures are not wanted here."

"So you still think it is the tramp that struck her?" quoth the coroner, a trifle baffled by the other's careless manner.

"I still think it was not the man who sat in court all the morning and held me fascinated by his eye."

"Ah, he held you fascinated, did he?" repeated the other, a trifle suspiciously.

"Well, that is," Mr. Byrd allowed, with the least perceptible loss of his easy bearing, "he made me look at him more than once. A wandering eye always attracts me, and his wandered constantly."

"Humph! and you are sure he was in the court every minute of the morning?"

"There must be other witnesses who can testify to that," answered the detective, with the perceptible irritation of one weary of a subject which he feels he has already amply discussed.

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"Well," declared the other, dropping his eyes from the young man's countenance to a sheet of paper he was holding in his hand, "whatever *rôle* this humpback has played in the tragedy now occupying us, whether he be a wizard, a secret accomplice, a fool who cannot keep his own secret, or a traitor who cannot preserve that of his tools, this affair, as you call it, is not likely to prove the simple matter you seem to consider it. The victim, if not her townsfolk, knew she possessed an enemy, and this half-finished letter which I have found on her table, raises the question whether a common tramp, with no motive but that of theft or brutal revenge, was the one to meditate the fatal blow, even if he were the one to deal it."

A perceptible light flickered into the eyes of Mr. Byrd, and he glanced with a new but unmistakable interest at the letter, though he failed to put out his hand for it, even though the coroner held it toward him.

"Thank you," said he; "but if I do not take the case, it would be better for me not to meddle any further with it."

"But you are going to take it," insisted the other, with temper, his anxiety to secure this man's services increasing with the opposition he so unaccountably received. "The officers at the detective bureau in New York are not going to send another man up here when there is already one on the spot. And a man from New York I am determined to have. A crime like this shall not go

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unpunished in this town, whatever it may do in a great city like yours. We don't have so many murder cases that we need to stint ourselves in the luxury of professional assistance."

"But," protested the young man, still determined to hold back, whatever arguments might be employed or inducements offered him, "how do you know I am the man for your work? We have many sorts and kinds of detectives in our bureau. Some for one kind of business, some for another; the following up of a criminal is not mine."

"What, then, is yours?" asked the coroner, not yielding a jot of his determination.

The detective was silent.

"Read the letter," persisted Dr. Tredwell, shrewdly conscious that if once the young man's professional instinct was aroused, all the puerile objections which influenced him would immediately vanish.

There was no resisting that air of command. Taking the letter in his hand, the young man read:

"DEAR EMILY:—I don't know why I sit down to write to you to-day. I have plenty to do, and morning is no time for indulging in sentimentalities; but I feel strangely lonely and strangely anxious. Nothing goes just to my mind, and somehow the many causes for secret fear which I have always had, assume an undue prominence in my mind. It is always so when I am not quite well. In vain I reason with myself, saying that respectable people do not lightly enter into crime. But there are so many to whom my death would be more than welcome, that I constantly see myself in the act of being——"

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"Struck, shot, murdered," suggested Dr. Tredwell, perceiving the young man's eye lingering over the broken sentence.

"The words are not there," remonstrated Mr. Byrd; but the tone of his voice showed that his professional complacency had been disturbed at last.

The other did not answer, but waited with the wisdom of the trapper who sees the quarry nosing round the toils.

"There is evidently some family mystery," the young man continued, glancing again at the letter. "But," he remarked, "Mr. Orcutt is a good friend of hers, and can probably tell us what it all means."

"Very likely," the other admitted, "if we choose to ask him."

Quick as lightning the young man's glance flashed to the coroner's face.

"You would rather not put the question to him?" he inquired.

"No. As he is the lawyer who, in all probability, will be employed by the criminal in this case, I am sure he would rather not be mixed up in any preliminary investigation of the affair."

The young man's eye did not waver. He appeared to take a secret resolve.

"Has it not struck you," he insinuated, "that Mr. Orcutt might have other reasons for not wishing to give any expression of opinion in regard to it?"

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The surprise in the coroner's eye was his best answer.

"No," he rejoined.

Mr. Byrd at once resumed all his old nonchalance.

"The young lady who was here appeared to show such agitated interest in this horrible crime, I thought that, in kindness to her, he might wish to keep out of the affair as much as possible."

"Miss Dare? Bless your heart, she would not restrict him in any way. Her interest in the matter is purely one of curiosity. It has been carried, perhaps, to a somewhat unusual length for a woman of her position and breeding. But that is all, I assure you. Miss Dare's eccentricities are well known in this town."

"Then the diamond ring was really hers?" Mr. Byrd was about to inquire, but stopped; something in his memory of this beautiful woman made it impossible for him to disturb the confidence of the coroner in her behalf, at least while his own doubts were so vague and shadowy.

The coroner, however, observed the young detective's hesitation, and smiled.

"Are you thinking of Miss Dare as having any thing to do with this shocking affair?" he asked.

Mr. Byrd shook his head, but could not hide the flush that stole up over his forehead.

The coroner actually laughed, a low, soft, decorous laugh, but none the less one of decided amusement. "Your line is not in the direction of spotting criminals, I must allow," said he. "Why, Miss Dare is not only as

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irreproachable a young lady as we have in this town, but she is a perfect stranger to this woman and all her concerns. I doubt if she even knew her name till to-day."

A laugh is often more potent than argument. The face of the detective lighted up, and he looked very manly and very handsome as he returned the letter to the coroner, saying, with a sweep of his hand as if he tossed an unworthy doubt away forever :

"Well, I do not wish to appear obstinate. If this woman dies, and the inquest fails to reveal who her assailant is, I will apply to New York for leave to work up the case ; that is, if you continue to desire my assistance. Meanwhile——"

"You will keep your eyes open," intimated the coroner, taking back the letter and putting it carefully away in his breast-pocket. "And now, mum ! "

Mr. Byrd bowed, and they went together down the stairs.

It was by this time made certain that the dying woman was destined to linger on for some hours. She was completely unconscious, and her breath barely lifted the clothes that lay over the slowly laboring breast ; but such vitality as there was held its own with scarcely perceptible change, and the doctor thought it might be midnight before the solemn struggle would end. "In the meantime, expect nothing," he exclaimed ; "she has said her last word. What remains will be a mere sinking into the eternal sleep."

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This being so, Mr. Orcutt and Mr. Ferris decided to leave. Mr. Byrd saw them safely out, and proceeded to take one or two private observations of his own. They consisted mostly in noting the precise position of the various doors in reference to the hearth where the stick was picked up, and the clock where the victim was attacked. Or, so the coroner gathered from the direction which Mr. Byrd's eye took in its travels over the scene of action, and the diagram which he hastily drew on the back of an envelope. The table was noticed, too, and an inventory of its articles taken, after which he opened the side-door and looked carefully out into the lane.

To observe him now with his quick eye flashing from spot to spot, his head lifted, and a visible air of determination infused through his whole bearing, you would scarcely recognize the easy, gracefully indolent youth who, but a little while before, lounged against the tables and chairs, and met the most penetrating eye with the sleepy gaze of a totally uninterested man. Dr. Tredwell, alert to the change, tapped the letter in his pocket complacently. "I have roused up a weasel," he mentally decided, and congratulated himself accordingly.

It was two o'clock when Mr. Byrd went forth to join Mr. Ferris in the court-room. As he stepped from the door, he encountered, to all appearance, just the same crowd that had encumbered its entrance a half hour before. Even the old crone had not moved from her former position, and seeing him, fairly pounced upon

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him with question after question, all of which he parried with a nonchalant dexterity that drew shout after shout from those who stood by, and, finally, as he thought, won him the victory, for, with an angry shake of the head, she ceased her importunities, and presently let him pass. He hastened to improve the chance to gain for himself the refuge of the streets; and, having done this, stood for an instant parleying with a trembling young girl, whose real distress and anxiety seemed to merit some attention. Fatal delay. In that instant the old woman had got in front of him, and when he arrived at the head of the street he found her there.

"Now," said she, with full-blown triumph in her venomous eyes, "perhaps you will tell me something! You think I am a mumbling old woman who don't know what she is bothering herself about. But I tell you I 've not kept my eyes and ears open for seventy-five years in this wicked world without knowing a bit of the devil's own work when I see it." Here her face grew quite hideous, and her eyes gleamed with an aspect of gloating over the evil she alluded to, that quite sickened the young man, accustomed though he was to the worst phases of moral depravity. Leaning forward, she peered inquiringly in his face. "What has *she* to do with it?" she suddenly asked, emphasizing the pronoun with an expressive leer.

"She?" he repeated, starting back.

"Yes, she; the pretty young lady, the pert and haughty

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Miss Dare, that had but to speak to make the whole crowd stand back. What had she to do with it, I say? Something, or she would n't be here!"

"I don't know what you are talking about," he replied, conscious of a strange and unaccountable dismay at thus hearing his own passing doubt put into words by this vile and repellent being. "Miss Dare is a stranger. She has nothing to do either with this affair or the poor woman who has suffered by it. Her interest is purely one of sympathy."

"Hi! and you call yourself a smart one, I dare say." And the old creature ironically chuckled. "Well, well, well, what fools men are! They see a pretty face, and blind themselves to what is written on it as plain as black writing on a white wall. They call it sympathy, and never stop to ask why she, of all the soft-hearted gals in the town, should be the only one to burst into that house like an avenging spirit! But it 's all right," she went on, in a bitterly satirical tone. "A crime like this can't be covered up, however much you may try; and sooner or later we will all know whether this young lady has had any thing to do with Mrs. Clemmens' murder or not."

"Stop!" cried Mr. Byrd, struck in spite of himself by the look of meaning with which she said these last words. "Do you know any thing against Miss Dare which other folks do not? If you do, speak, and let me hear at once what it is. But—" he felt very angry, though he could not for the moment tell why—"if you are only talking to

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gratify your spite, and have nothing to tell me except the fact that Miss Dare appeared shocked and anxious when she came from the widow's house just now, look out what use you make of her name, or you will get yourself into trouble. Mr. Orcutt and Mr. Ferris are not men to let you go babbling round town about a young lady of estimable character." And he tightened the grip he had taken upon her arm and looked at her threateningly.

The effect was instantaneous. Slipping from his grasp, she gazed at him with a sinister expression and edged slowly away.

"I know any thing?" she repeated. "What should I know? I only say the young lady's face tells a very strange story. If you are too dull or too obstinate to read it, it 's nothing to me." And with another leer and a quick look up and down the street, as if she half feared to encounter one or both of the two lawyers whose names he had mentioned, she marched quickly away, wagging her head and looking back as she went, as much as to say: "You have hushed me up for this time, young man, but don't congratulate yourself too much. I have still a tongue in my head, and the day may come when I can use it without any fear of being stopped by you."

Mr. Byrd, who was not very well pleased with himself or the way he had managed this interview, watched her till she was out of sight, and then turned thoughtfully toward the court-house. The fact was, he felt both agitated and confused. In the first place, he was discon-

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certed at discovering the extent of the impression that had evidently been made upon him by the beauty of Miss Dare, since nothing short of a deep, unconscious admiration for her personal attributes, and a strong and secret dread of having his lately acquired confidence in her again disturbed, could have led him to treat the insinuations of this babbling old wretch in such a cavalier manner. Any other detective would have seized with avidity upon the opportunity of hearing what she had to say on such a subject, and would not only have cajoled her into confidence, but encouraged her to talk until she had given utterance to all that was on her mind. But in the stress of a feeling to which he was not anxious to give a name, he had forgotten that he was a detective, and remembered only that he was a man; and the consequence was that he had frightened the old creature, and cut short words that it was possibly his business to hear. In the second place, he felt himself in a quandary as regarded Miss Dare. If, as was more than possible, she was really the innocent woman the coroner considered her, and the insinuations, if not threats, to which he had been listening were simply the result of a wicked old woman's privately nurtured hatred, how could he reconcile it to his duty as a man, or even as a detective, to let the day pass without warning her, or the eminent lawyer who honored her with his regard, of the danger in which she stood from this creature's venomous tongue.

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As he sat in court that afternoon, with his eye upon Mr. Orcutt, beneath whose ordinary aspect of quiet, sarcastic attention he thought he could detect the secret workings of a deep, personal perplexity, if not of actual alarm, he asked himself what he would wish done if he were that man, and a scandal of a debasing character threatened the peace of one allied to him by the most endearing ties. "Would I wish to be informed of it?" he queried. "I most certainly should," was his inward reply.

And so it was that, after the adjournment of court, he approached Mr. Orcutt, and leading him respectfully aside, said, with visible reluctance :

"I beg your pardon, sir, but a fact has come to my knowledge to-day with which I think you ought to be made acquainted. It is in reference to the young lady who was with us at Mrs. Clemmens' house this morning. Did you know, sir, that she had an enemy in this town?"

Mr. Orcutt, whose thoughts had been very much with that young lady since she left him so unceremoniously a few hours before, started and looked at Mr. Byrd with surprise which was not without its element of distrust.

"An enemy?" he repeated. "An enemy? What do you mean?"

"What I say, Mr. Orcutt. As I came out of Mrs. Clemmens' house this afternoon, an old hag whose name I do not know, but whom you will probably have no dif-

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ficulty in recognizing, seized me by the arm and made me the recipient of insinuations and threats against Miss Dare, which, however foolish and unfounded, betrayed an animosity and a desire to injure her that is worthy your attention."

"You are very kind," returned Mr. Orcutt, with increased astonishment and a visible constraint, "but I do not understand you. What insinuations or threats could this woman have to make against a young lady of Miss Dare's position and character?"

"It is difficult for me to tell you," acknowledged Mr. Byrd; "but the vicious old creature presumed to say that Miss Dare must have had a special and secret interest in this murder, or she would not have gone as she did to that house. Of course," pursued the detective, discreetly dropping his eyes from the lawyer's face, "I did what I could to show her the folly of her suspicions, and tried to make her see the trouble she would bring upon herself if she persisted in expressing them; but I fear I only succeeded in quieting her for the moment, and that she will soon be attacking others with this foolish story."

Mr. Orcutt who, whatever his own doubts or apprehensions, could not fail to be totally unprepared for a communication of this kind, gave utterance to a fierce and bitter exclamation, and fixed upon the detective his keen and piercing eye.

"Tell me just what she said," he demanded.

"I will try to do so," returned Mr. Byrd. And calling

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to his aid a very excellent memory, he gave a *verbatim* account of the conversation that had passed between him and the old woman. Mr. Orcutt listened, as he always did, without interruption or outward demonstration ; but when the recital was over and Mr. Byrd ventured to look at him once more, he noticed that he was very pale and greatly changed in expression. Being himself in a position to understand somewhat of the other's emotion, he regained by an effort the air of polite nonchalance that became him so well, and quickly suggested : " Miss Dare will, of course, be able to explain herself."

The lawyer flashed upon him a quick glance.

" I hope you have no doubts on the subject," he said ; then, as the detective's eye fell a trifle before his, paused and looked at him with the self-possession gained in fifteen years of practice in the criminal courts, and said : " I am Miss Dare's best friend. I know her well, and can truly say that not only is her character above reproach, but that I am acquainted with no circumstances that could in any way connect her with this crime. Nevertheless, the incidents of the day have been such as to make it desirable for her to explain herself, and this, as you say, she will probably have no difficulty in doing. If you will, therefore, wait till to-morrow before taking any one else into your confidence, I promise you to see Miss Dare myself, and, from her own lips, learn the cause of her peculiar interest in this affair. Meanwhile, let me request you to put a curb upon your imagination, and

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not allow it to soar too high into the regions of idle speculation."

And he held out his hand to the detective with a smile whose vain attempt at unconcern affected Mr. Byrd more than a violent outbreak would have done. It betrayed so unmistakably that his own secret doubts were not without an echo in the breast of this eminent lawyer.

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IV.

IMOGENE.

You are a riddle, solve you who can.—KNOWLES.

MR. ORCUTT was a man who for many years had turned a deaf ear and a cold eye to the various attractions and beguilements of woman. Either from natural coldness of disposition, or for some other latent cause, traceable, perhaps, to some fact in his past history, and not to be inquired into by gossiping neighbors and so-called friends, he had resisted, even to the point of disdain, both the blandishments of acknowledged belles, and the more timid but no less pleasing charms of the shy country misses that he met upon his travels.

But one day all this was changed. Imogene Dare entered his home, awakening a light in the dim old place that melted his heart and made a man out of what was usually considered a well-ordered machine.

She had been a foundling. Yes, this beautiful, disdainful, almost commanding woman, had in the beginning been that most unfortunate of beings—a child without a name. But though this fact may have influenced the course of her early days, it gradually disappeared from notice as she grew up and developed, till in Sibley, at least, it became wellnigh a fact forgotten. Her beauty,

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as well as the imposing traits of her character, was the cause. There are some persons so gifted with natural force that, once brought in contact with them, you forget their antecedents, and, indeed, every thing but themselves. Either their beauty overawes you or they, by conversation or bearing, so completely satisfy you of their right to your respect, that indifference takes the place of curiosity, and you yield your regard as if you have already yielded your admiration, without question and without stint.

The early years of her life were passed in the house of a poor widow, to whom the appearance of this child on her door-step one fine day had been nothing more nor less than a veritable godsend. First, because she was herself alone in the world, and needed the mingled companionship and care which a little one invariably gives; and, secondly, because Imogene, from the very first, had been a noticeable child, who early attracted the attention of the neighbors, and led to many a substantial evidence of favor from them, as well as from the strangers who passed their gate or frequented their church. Insensibly to herself, and without help of circumstances or rearing, the girl was a magnet toward which all good things insensibly tended; and the widow saw this, and, while reaping the reward, stinted neither her affection nor her gratitude.

When Imogene was eleven, this protector of her infancy died. But another home instantly offered. A wealthy

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couple of much kindness, if little culture, adopted her as their child, and gave her every benefit in life save education. This never having possessed themselves, they openly undervalued. But she was not to be kept down by the force of any circumstances, whether favorable or otherwise. All the graces of manner and refinements of thought which properly belong to the station she had now attained, but which, in the long struggle after wealth, had escaped the honest couple that befriended her, became by degrees her own, tempering without destroying her individuality, any more than the new life of restraint that now governed her physical powers, was able to weaken or subdue that rare and splendid physique which had been her fairest birthright.

In the lap of luxury, therefore, and in full possession of means to come and go and conform herself to the genteel world and its fashions, she passed the next four years; but scarcely had she attained the age of fifteen, when bankruptcy, followed by death, again robbed her of her home and set her once more adrift upon the world.

This time she looked to no one for assistance. Refusing all offers, many of them those of honorable marriage, she sought for work, and after a short delay found it in the household of Mr. Orcutt. The aged sister who governed his home and attended to all its domestic details, hired her as a sort of assistant, rightly judging that the able young body and the alert hand would bring into the household economy just that life and interest

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which her own failing strength had now for some time refused to supply.

That the girl was a beauty and something more, who could not from the nature of things be kept in that subordinate position, she either failed to see, or, seeing, was pleased to disregard. She never sought to impose restraint upon the girl any more than she did upon her brother, when in the course of events she saw that his eye was at last attracted and his imagination fired by the noble specimen of girlhood that made its daily appearance at his own board.

That she had introduced a dangerous element into that quiet home, that ere long would devastate its sacred precincts, and endanger, if not destroy, its safety and honor, she had no reason to suspect. What was there in youth, beauty, and womanly power that one should shrink from their embodiment and tremble as if an evil instead of a good had entered that hitherto undisturbed household? Nothing, if they had been all. But alas for her, and alas for him—they were not all! Mixed with the youth, beauty, and power was a something else not to be so readily understood—a something, too, which, without offering explanation to the fascinated mind that studied her, made the beauty unique, the youth a charm, and the power a controlling force. She was not to be sounded. Going and coming, smiling and frowning, in movement or at rest, she was always a mystery; the depths of her being remaining still in hiding, however calmly she spoke or

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however graciously she turned upon you the light of her deep gray eyes.

Mr. Orcutt loved her. From the first vision he had of her face and form dominating according to their nature at his board and fireside, he had given up his will into her unconscious keeping. She was so precisely what all other women he had known were not. At first so distant, so self-contained, so unapproachable in her pride; then as her passion grew for books, so teachable, so industrious, so willing to listen to his explanations and arguments; and lastly——

But that did not come at once. A long struggle took place between those hours when he used to encourage her to come into his study and sit at his side, and read from his books, and the more dangerous time still, when he followed her into the drawing-room and sat at her side, and sought to read, not from books, but from her eyes, the story of his own future fate.

For, powerful as was his passion and deeply as his heart had been touched, he did not yield to the thought of marriage which such a passion involves, without a conflict. He would make her his child, the heiress of his wealth, and the support of his old age; this was his first resolve. But it did not last; the first sight he had of her on her return from a visit to Buffalo, which he had insisted upon her making during the time of his greatest mental conflict, had assured him that this could never be; that he must be husband and she wife, or else their

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relations must entirely cease. Perhaps the look with which she met him had something to do with this. It was such a blushing, humble—yes, for her, really humble and beautiful — look. He could not withstand it. Though no one could have detected it in his manner, he really succumbed in that hour. Doubt and hesitation flew to the winds, and to make her his own became the sole aim and object of his life.

He did not, however, betray his purpose at once. Neighbors and friends might and did suspect the state of his feelings, but to her he was silent. That vague something which marked her off from the rest of her sex, seemed to have deepened in her temporary sojourn from his side, and whatever it meant of good or of ill, it taught him at least to be wary. At last, was it with premeditation or was it in some moment of uncontrollable impulse, he spoke ; not with definite pleading, or even with any very clear intimation that he desired some day to make her his wife, but in a way that sufficed to tear the veil from their previous intercourse and let her catch a glimpse, if no more, of his heart, and its devouring passion.

He was absolutely startled at the result. She avowed that she had never thought of his possessing such a regard for her ; and for two days shut herself up in her room and refused to see either him or his sister. Then she came down, blooming like a rose, but more distant, more quiet, and more inscrutable than ever. Pride, if

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pride she felt, was subdued under a general aspect of womanly dignity that for a time held all further avowals in check, and made all intercourse between them at once potent in its attraction and painful in its restraint.

"She is waiting for a distinct offer of marriage," he decided.

And thus matters stood, notwithstanding the general opinion of their friends, when the terrible event recorded in the foregoing chapters of this story brought her in a new light before his eyes, and raised a question, shocking as it was unexpected, as to whether this young girl, immured as he had believed her to be in his own home, had by some unknown and inexplicable means run upon the secret involving, if not explaining, the mystery of this dreadful and daring crime.

Such an idea was certainly a preposterous one to entertain. He neither could nor would believe she knew more of this matter than any other disinterested person in town, and yet there had certainly been something in her bearing upon the scene of tragedy, that suggested a personal interest in the affair; nor could he deny that he himself had been struck by the incongruity of her behavior long before it attracted the attention of others.

But then he had opportunities for judging of her conduct which others did not have. He not only had every reason to believe that the ring to which she had so publicly laid claim was not her own, but he had observed how, at the moment the dying woman had made that tell-tale ex-

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clamation of "*Ring* and *Hand!*" Miss Dare had looked down at the jewel she had thus appropriated, with a quick horror and alarm that seemed to denote she had some knowledge of its owner, or some suspicion, at least, as to whose hand had worn it before she placed it upon her own.

It was not, therefore, a matter of wonder that he was visibly affected at finding her conduct had attracted the attention of others, and one of those a detective, or that the walk home after his interview with Mr. Byrd should have been fraught with a dread to which he scarcely dared to give a name.

The sight of Miss Dare coming down the path as he reached his own gate did not tend to greatly allay his apprehensions, particularly as he observed she was dressed in travelling costume, and carried a small satchel on her arm.

"Imogene," he cried, as she reached him, "what is the meaning of this? Where are you going?"

Her face, which wore a wholly unnatural and strained expression, turned slowly toward his.

"I am going to Buffalo," she said.

"To Buffalo?"

"Yes."

This was alarming, surely. She was going to leave the town—leave it suddenly, without excuse or explanation!

Looking at her with eyes which, for all their intense inquiry, conveyed but little of the serious emotions that were agitating his mind, he asked, hurriedly:

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"What takes you to Buffalo—to-day—so suddenly?"

Her answer was set and mechanical.

"I have had news. One of my—my friends is not well. I must go. Do not detain me."

And she moved quickly toward the gate.

But his tremulous hand was upon it, and he made no offer to open a passage for her.

"Pardon me," said he, "but I cannot let you go till I have had some conversation with you. Come with me to the house, Imogene. I will not detain you long."

But with a sad and abstracted gesture she slowly shook her head.

"It is too late," she murmured. "I shall miss the train if I stop now."

"Then you must miss it," he cried, bitterly, forgetting every thing else in the torture of his uncertainty. "What I have to say cannot wait. Come!"

This tone of command from one who had hitherto adapted himself to her every whim, seemed to strike her. Paling quickly, she for the first time looked at him with something like a comprehension of his feelings, and quietly replied:

"Forgive me. I had forgotten for the moment the extent of your claims upon me. I will wait till to-morrow before going." And she led the way back to the house.

When they were alone together in the library, he turned toward her with a look whose severity was the fruit of his condition of mind rather than of any natural harshness or imperiousness.

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"Now, Imogene," said he, "tell me why you desire to leave my house."

Her face, which had assumed a mask of cold impassiveness, confronted him like that of a statue, but her voice, when she spoke, was sufficiently gentle.

"Mr. Orcutt," was her answer, "I have told you. I have a call elsewhere which must be attended to. I do not leave your house; I merely go to Buffalo for a few days."

But he could not believe this short statement of her intentions. In the light of these new fears of his, this talk of Buffalo, and a call there, looked to him like the merest subterfuge. Yet her gentle tone was not without its effect, and his voice visibly softened as he said:

"You are intending, then, to return?"

Her reply was prefaced by a glance of amazement.

"Of course," she responded at last. "Is not this my home?"

Something in the way she said this carried a ray of hope to his heart. Taking her hand in his, he looked at her long and searchingly.

"Imogene!" he exclaimed, "there is something serious weighing upon your heart. What is it? Will you not make me the confidant of your troubles? Tell me what has made such a change in you since—since noon, and its dreadful event."

But her expression did not soften, and her manner became even more reserved than before.

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"Taking her hand in his, he looked at her long and searchingly. 'Imogene,' he exclaimed, 'there is something weighing on your heart.'" — (Page 58.)

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"I have not any thing to tell," said she.

"Not any thing?" he repeated.

"Not any thing."

Dropping her hand, he communed a moment with himself. That a secret of possible consequence lay between them he could not doubt. That it had reference to and involved the crime of the morning, he was equally sure. But how was he to make her acknowledge it? How was he to reach her mind and determine its secrets without alarming her dignity or wounding her heart?

To press her with questions seemed impossible. Even if he could have found words with which to formulate his fears, her firm, set face, and steady, unrelenting eye, assured him only too plainly that the attempt would be met by failure, if it did not bring upon him her scorn and contempt. No; some other method must be found; some way that would completely and at once ease his mind of a terrible weight, and yet involve no risk to the love that had now become the greatest necessity of his existence. But what way? With all his acumen and knowledge of the world, he could think of but one. He would ask her hand in marriage—aye, at this very moment—and from the tenor of her reply judge of the nature of her thoughts. For, looking in her face, he felt forced to acknowledge that whatever doubts he had ever cherished in reference to the character of this remarkable girl, upon one point he was perfectly clear, and this was, that she was at basis honorable in her instincts,

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and would never do herself or another a real injustice. If a distinct wrong or even a secret of an unhappy or debasing nature lay between them, he knew that nothing, not even the bitterest necessity or the most headlong passion, would ever drive her into committing the dishonor of marrying him.

No; if with his declaration in her ears, and with his eyes fixed upon hers, she should give any token of her willingness to accept his addresses, he felt he might know, beyond doubt or cavil, that whatever womanish excitability may have moved her in her demonstrations that day, they certainly arose from no private knowledge or suspicion detrimental to his future peace or to hers.

Bracing himself, therefore, to meet any result that might follow his attempt, he drew her gently toward him and determinedly addressed her.

"Imogene, I told you at the gate that I had something to say to you. So I have; and though it may not be wholly unexpected to you, yet I doubt if it would have left my lips to-night if the events of the day had not urged me to offer you my sympathy and protection."

He paused, almost sickened; at that last phrase she had grown so terribly white and breathless. But something in her manner, nothwithstanding, seemed to encourage him to proceed, and smothering his doubts, trampling, as it were, upon his rising apprehensions, he calmed down his tone and went quietly on:

"Imogene, I love you."

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She did not shrink.

"Imogene, I want you for my wife. Will you listen to my prayer, and make my home forever happy with your presence?"

Ah, now she showed feeling; now she started and drew back, putting out her hands as if the idea he had advanced was insupportable to her. But it was only for a moment. Before he could say to himself that it was all over, that his worst fears had been true, and that nothing but the sense of some impassable gulf between them could have made her recoil from him like this, she had dropped her hands and turned toward him with a look whose deep inquiry and evident struggle after an understanding of his claims, spoke of a mind clouded by trouble, but not alienated from himself by fear.

She did not speak, however,—not for some few minutes, and when she did, her words came in short and hurried gasps.

"You are kind," was what she said. "To be your—wife"—she had difficulty in uttering the word, but it came at last—"would be an honor and a protection. I appreciate both. But I am in no mood to-night to listen to words of love from any man. Perhaps six months hence——"

But he already had her in his arms. The joy and relief he felt were so great he could not control himself. "Imogene," he murmured, "my Imogene!" And scarcely heeded her when, in a burst of subdued agony,

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she asked to be released, saying that she was ill and tired, and must be allowed to withdraw to her room.

But a second appeal woke him from his dream. If his worst fears were without foundation; if her mind was pure of aught that unfitted her to be his wife, there was yet much that was mysterious in her conduct, and, consequently, much which he longed to have explained.

"Imogene," he said, "I must ask you to remain a moment longer. Hard as it is for me to distress you, there is a question which I feel it necessary to put to you before you go. It is in reference to the fearful crime which took place to-day. Why did you take such an interest in it, and why has it had such an effect upon you that you look like a changed woman to-night?"

Disengaging herself from his arms, she looked at him with the set composure of one driven to bay, and asked:

"Is there any thing strange in my being interested in a murder perpetrated on a person whose name I have frequently heard mentioned in this house?"

"No," he murmured, "no; but what led you to her home? It was not a spot for a young lady to be in, and any other woman would have shrunk from so immediate a contact with crime."

Imogene's hand was on the door, but she turned back.

"I am not like other women," she declared. "When I hear of any thing strange or mysterious, I want to understand it. I did not stop to ask what people would think of my conduct."

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"But your grief and terror, Imogene? They are real, and not to be disguised. Look in the glass over there, and you will yourself see what an effect all this has had upon you. If Mrs. Clemmens is a stranger to you; if you know no more of her than you have always led me to suppose, why should you have been so unnaturally impressed by to-day's tragedy?"

It was a searching question, and her eye fell slightly, but her steady demeanor did not fail her.

"Still," said she, "because I am not like other women. I cannot forget such horrors in a moment." And she advanced again to the door, upon which she laid her hand.

Unconsciously his eye followed the movement, and rested somewhat inquiringly upon that hand. It was gloved, but to all appearance was without the ring which he had seen her put on at the widow's house.

She seemed to comprehend his look. Meeting his eye with unshaken firmness, she resumed, in a low and constrained voice:

"You are wondering about the ring that formed a portion of the scene we are discussing. Mr. Orcutt, I told the gentleman who handed it to me to-day that it was mine. That should be enough for the man who professes sufficient confidence in me to wish to make me his wife. But since your looks confess a curiosity in regard to this diamond, I will say that I was as much astonished as anybody to see it picked up from the floor at

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my feet. The last time I had seen it was when I dropped it, somewhat recklessly, into a pocket. How or when it fell out, I cannot say. As for the ring itself," she haughtily added, "young ladies frequently possess articles of whose existence their friends are unconscious."

Here was an attempt at an explanation which, though meagre and far from satisfactory, had at least a basis in possibility. But Mr. Orcutt, as I have before said, was certain that the ring was lying on the floor of the room where it was picked up, before Imogene had made her appearance there, and was therefore struck with dismay at this conclusive evidence of her falsehood.

Yet, as he said to himself, she might have some association with the ring, might even have an owner's claim upon it, incredible as this appeared, without being in the possession of such knowledge as definitely connected it with this crime. And led by this hope he laid his hand on hers as it was softly turning the knob of the door, and said, with emotion :

" Imogene, one moment. This is a subject which I am as anxious to drop as you are. In your condition it is almost cruelty to urge it upon you, but of one thing I must be assured before you leave my presence, and that is, that whatever secrets you may hide in your soul, or whatever motive may have governed your treatment of me and my suit to-night, they do not spring from any real or supposed interest in this crime, which ought from its nature to separate you and me. I ask," he quickly added,

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as he saw her give a start of injured pride or irrepressible dismay, "not because I have any doubts on the subject myself, but because some of the persons who have unfortunately been witness to your strange and excited conduct to-day, have presumed to hint that nothing short of a secret knowledge of the crime or criminal could explain your action upon the scene of tragedy."

And with a look which, if she had observed it, might have roused her to a sense of the critical position in which she stood, he paused and held his breath for her reply.

It did not come.

"Imogene?"

"I hear."

Cold and hard the words sounded—his hand went like lightning to his heart.

"Are you going to answer?" he asked, at last.

"Yes."

"What is that answer to be, Yes or No?"

She turned upon him her large gray eyes. There was misery in their depths, but there was a haughtiness, also, which only truth could impart.

"My answer is No!" said she.

And, without another word, she glided from the room.

Next morning, Mr. Byrd found three notes awaiting his perusal. The first was a notification from the coroner to the effect that the Widow Clemmens had quietly breathed her last at midnight. The second, a hurried line from Mr. Ferris, advising him to make use of the day

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in concluding a certain matter of theirs in the next town; and the third, a letter from Mr. Orcutt, couched in the following terms:

MR. BYRD: *Dear Sir*—I have seen the person named between us, and I here state, upon my honor, that she is in possession of no facts which it concerns the authorities to know.

TREMONT B. ORCUTT.

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V.

HORACE BYRD.

But now, I am cabin'd, cribbed, confin'd, bound in
To saucy doubts and fears.—MACBETH.

HORACE BYRD was by birth and education a gentleman. He was the son of a man of small means but great expectations, and had been reared to look forward to the day when he should be the possessor of a large income. But his father dying, both means and expectations vanished into thin air, and at the age of twenty, young Horace found himself thrown upon the world without income, without business, and, what was still worse, without those habits of industry that serve a man in such an emergency better than friends and often better than money itself.

He had also an invalid mother to look after, and two young sisters whom he loved with warm and devoted affection; and though by the kindness and forethought of certain relatives he was for a time spared all anxiety on their account, he soon found that some exertion on his part would be necessary to their continued subsistence, and accordingly set about the task of finding suitable employment, with much spirit and no little hope.

But a long series of disappointments taught him that

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young men cannot leap at a bound into a fine salary or even a promising situation; and baffled in every wish, worn out with continued failures, he sank from one state of hope to another, till he was ready to embrace any prospect that would insure ease and comfort to the helpless beings he so much loved.

It was while he was in this condition that Mr. Gryce—a somewhat famous police detective of New York—came upon him, and observing, as he thought, some signs of natural aptitude for *fine work*, as he called it, in this elegant but decidedly hard-pushed young gentleman, seized upon him with an avidity that can only be explained by this detective's long-cherished desire to ally to himself a man of real refinement and breeding; having, as he privately admitted more than once to certain chosen friends, a strong need of such a person to assist him in certain cases where great houses were to be entered and fine gentlemen if not fair ladies subjected to interviews of a delicate and searching nature.

To join the police force and be a detective was the last contingency that had occurred to Horace Byrd. But men in decidedly straitened circumstances cannot pick and choose too nicely; and after a week of uncertainty and fresh disappointment, he went manfully to his mother and told her of the offer that had been made him. Meeting with less discouragement than he had expected from the broken-down and unhappy woman, he gave himself up to the guiding hand of Mr. Gryce, and before he realized it,

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was enrolled among the secret members of the New York force.

He was not recognized publicly as a detective. His name was not even known to any but the highest officials. He was employed for special purposes, and it was not considered desirable that he should be seen at police head-quarters. But being a man of much ability and of a solid, reliable nature, he made his way notwithstanding, and by the time he had been in the service a year, was looked upon as a good-fellow and a truly valuable acquisition to the bureau. Indeed, he possessed more than the usual qualifications for his calling, strange as the fact appeared not only to himself but to the few friends acquainted with his secret. In the first place, he possessed much acuteness without betraying it. Of an easy bearing and a polished address, he was a man to please all and alarm none, yet he always knew what he was about and what you were about, too, unless indeed you possessed a power of dissimulation much beyond ordinary, when the chances were that his gentlemanly instincts would get in his way, making it impossible for him to believe in a guilt that was too hardy to betray itself, and too insensible to shame to blush before the touch of the inquisitor.

In the second place, he liked the business. Yes, notwithstanding the theories of that social code to which he once paid deference, notwithstanding the frankness and candor of his own disposition, he found in this pursuit a

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nice adjustment of cause to effect and effect to cause that at once pleased and satisfied his naturally mathematical mind.

He did not acknowledge the fact, not even to himself. On the contrary, he was always threatening that in another month he should look up some new means of livelihood, but the coming month would invariably bring a fresh case before his notice, and then it would be: "Well, after this matter is probed to the bottom," or, "When that criminal is made to confess his guilt," till even his little sisters caught the infection, and would whisper over their dolls:

"Brother Horace is going to be a great man when all the bad and naughty people in the world are put in prison."

As a rule, Mr. Byrd was not sent out of town. But, on the occasion of Mr. Ferris desiring a man of singular discretion to assist him in certain inquiries connected with the case then on trial in Sibley, there happened to be a deficiency of capable men in the bureau, and the superintendent was obliged to respond to the call by sending Mr. Byrd. He did not do it, however, without making the proviso that all public recognition of this officer, in his real capacity, was to be avoided. And so far the wishes of his superiors had been respected. No one outside of the few persons mentioned in the first chapter of this story suspected that the easy, affable, and somewhat distinguished-looking young gentleman who honored the village hotel with his patronage was a secret emissary of the New York police.

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Mr. Byrd was, of all men, then, the very one to feel the utmost attraction toward, and at the same time the greatest shrinking from, the pursuit of such investigations as were likely to ensue upon the discovery of the mysterious case of murder which had so unexpectedly been presented to his notice. As a professional, he could not fail to experience that quick start of the blood which always follows the recognition of a "big affair," while as a gentleman, he felt himself recoil from probing into a matter that was blackened by a possibility against which every instinct in his nature rebelled.

It was, therefore, with oddly mingled sensations that he read Mr. Orcutt's letter, and found himself compelled to admit that the coroner had possessed a truer insight than himself into the true cause of Miss Dare's eccentric conduct upon the scene of the tragedy. His main feeling, however, was one of relief. It was such a comfort to think he could proceed in the case without the dread of stumbling upon a clue that, in some secret and unforeseen way, should connect this imposing woman with a revolting crime. Or so he fondly considered. But he had not spent five minutes at the railroad station, where, in pursuance to the commands of Mr. Ferris, he went to take the train for Monteith, before he saw reason to again change his mind. For, there among the passengers awaiting the New York express, he saw Miss Dare, with a travelling-bag upon her arm and a look on her face that, to say the least, was of most uncommon character in a scene of so

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much bustle and hurry. She was going away, then—going to leave Sibley and its mystery behind her! He was not pleased with the discovery. This sudden departure looked too much like escape, and gave him, notwithstanding the assurance he had received from Mr. Orcutt, an uneasy sense of having tampered with his duty as an officer of justice, in thus providing this mysterious young woman with a warning that could lead to a result like this.

Yet, as he stood at the depot surveying Miss Dare, in the few minutes they both had to wait, he asked himself over and over again how any thought of her possessing a personal interest in the crime which had just taken place could retain a harbor in his mind. She looked so noble in her quiet aspect of solemn determination, so superior in her young, fresh beauty—a determination that, from the lofty look it imparted, must have its birth in generous emotion, even if her beauty was but the result of a rarely modelled frame and a health of surpassing perfection. He resolved he would think of her no more in that or any other connection; that he would follow the example of her best friend, and give his doubts to the wind.

And yet such a burr is suspicion, that he no sooner saw a young man approaching her with the evident intention of speaking, than he felt an irresistible desire to hear what she would have to say, and, led by this impulse, allowed himself to saunter nearer and nearer the pair, till he stood almost at their backs.

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The first words he heard were :

"How long do you expect to remain in Buffalo, Miss Dare ?"

To which she replied :

"I have no idea whether I shall stay a week or a month."

Then the whistle of the advancing train was heard, and the two pressed hurriedly forward.

The business which had taken Mr. Byrd to Monteith kept him in that small town all day. But though he thus missed the opportunity of attending the opening of the inquest at Sibley, he did not experience the vivid disappointment which might have been expected, his interest in that matter having in some unaccountable way subsided from the moment he saw Imogene Dare take the cars for Buffalo.

It was five o'clock when he again returned to Sibley, the hour at which the western train was also due. In fact, it came steaming in while he stood there, and, as was natural, perhaps, he paused a moment to watch the passengers alight. There were not many, and he was about to turn toward home, when he saw a lady step upon the platform whose appearance was so familiar that he stopped, disbelieving the evidence of his own senses. Miss Dare returned ? Miss Dare, who but a few hours before had left this very depot for the purpose, as she said, of making a visit of more or less length in the distant city of Buffalo ? It could not be. And yet there

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was no mistaking her, disguised though she was by the heavy veil that covered her features. She had come back, and the interest which Mr. Byrd had lost in Sibley and its possible mystery, revived with a suddenness that called up a self-conscious blush to his hardy cheek.

But why had she so changed her plans? What could have occurred during the few hours that had elapsed since her departure, to turn her about on her path and drive her homeward before her journey was half completed? He could not imagine. True, it was not his present business to do so; and yet, however much he endeavored to think of other things, he found this question occupying his whole mind long after his return to the village hotel. She was such a mystery, this woman, it might easily be that she had never intended to go to Buffalo; that she had only spoken of that place as the point of her destination under the stress of her companion's importunities, and that the real place for which she was bound had been some spot very much nearer home. The fact, that her baggage had consisted only of a small bag that she carried on her arm, would lend probability to this idea, yet, such was the generous character of the young detective, he hesitated to give credit to this suspicion, and indeed took every pains to disabuse himself of it by inquiring of the ticket-agent, whether it was true, as he had heard, that Miss Dare had left town on that day for a visit to her friends in Buffalo.

He received for his reply that she had bought a ticket

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for that place, though she evidently had not used it, a fact which seemed at least to prove she was honest in the expression of her intentions that morning, whatever alteration may have taken place in her plans during the course of her journey.

Mr. Byrd did not enjoy his supper that night, and was heartily glad when, in a few moments after its completion, Mr. Ferris came in for a chat and a cigar.

They had many things to discuss. First, their own case now drawing to a successful close; next, the murder of the day before; and lastly, the few facts which had been elicited in regard to that murder, in the inquiry which had that day been begun before the coroner.

Of the latter Mr. Ferris spoke with much interest. He had attended the inquest himself, and, though he had not much to communicate—the time having been mainly taken up in selecting and swearing in a jury—a few witnesses had been examined and certain conclusions reached, which certainly added greatly to the impression already made upon the public mind, that an affair of great importance had arisen; an affair, too, promising more in the way of mystery than the simple nature of its earlier manifestations gave them reason to suppose.

In the first place, the widow had evidently been assaulted with a deliberate purpose and a serious intent to slay.

Secondly, no immediate testimony was forthcoming calculated to point with unerring certainty to the guilty party.

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To be sure, the tramp and the hunchback still offered possibilities of suspicion; but even they were slight, the former having been seen to leave the widow's house without entering, and the latter having been proved beyond a question to have come into town on the morning train and to have gone at once to court where he remained till the time they all saw him disappear down the street.

That the last-mentioned individual may have had some guilty knowledge of the crime was possible enough. The fact of his having wiped himself out so completely as to elude all search, was suspicious in itself, but if he was connected with the assault it must have been simply as an accomplice employed to distract public attention from the real criminal; and in a case like this, the interest naturally centres with the actual perpetrator; and the question was now and must be: Who was the man who, in broad daylight, dared to enter a house situated like this in a thickly populated street, and kill with a blow an inoffensive woman?

"I cannot imagine," declared Mr. Ferris, as his communication reached this point. "It looks as if she had an enemy, but what enemy could such a person as she possess—a woman who always did her own work, attended to her own affairs, and made it an especial rule of her life never to meddle with those of anybody else?"

"Was she such a woman?" inquired Mr. Byrd, to whom as yet no knowledge had come of the widow's life, habits, or character.

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"Yes. In all the years I have been in this town I have never heard of her visiting any one or encouraging any one to visit her. Had it not been for Mr. Orcutt, she would have lived the life of a recluse. As it was, she was the most methodical person in her ways that I ever knew. At just such an hour she rose; at just such an hour put on her kettle, cooked her meal, washed her dishes, and sat herself down to her sewing or whatever work it was she had to do. The dinner was the only meal that waited, and that, Mr. Orcutt says, was always ready and done to a turn at whatever moment he chose to present himself."

"Had she no intimates, no relatives?" asked Mr. Byrd, remembering that fragment of a letter he had read —a letter which certainly contradicted this assertion in regard to her even and quiet life.

"None that I am aware of," was the response. "Wait, I believe I have been told she has a nephew somewhere— a sister's son, for whom she had some regard and to whom she intended to leave her money."

"She had money, then?"

"Some five thousand, maybe. Reports differ about such matters."

"And this nephew, where does he live?"

"I cannot tell you. I don't know as any one can. My remembrances in regard to him are of the vaguest character."

"Five thousand dollars is regarded as no mean sum in a town like this," quoth Mr. Byrd, carelessly.

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"I know it. She is called quite rich by many. How she got her money no one knows; for when she first came here she was so poor she had to eat and sleep all in one room. Mr. Orcutt paid her something for his daily dinner, of course, but that could not have enabled her to put ten dollars in the bank as she has done every week for the last ten years. And to all appearances she has done nothing else for her living. You see, we have paid attention to her affairs, if she has paid none to ours."

Mr. Byrd again remembered that scrap of a letter which had been shown him by the coroner, and thought to himself that their knowledge was in all probability less than they supposed.

"Who was that horrid crone I saw shouldering herself through the crowd that collected around the gate yesterday?" was his remark, however. "Do you remember a wizen, toothless old wretch, whose eye has more of the Evil One in it than that of many a young thief you see locked up in the county jails?"

"No; that is, I wonder if you mean Sally Perkins. She is old enough and ugly enough to answer your description; and, now I think of it, she *has* a way of leering at you as you go by that is slightly suggestive of a somewhat bitter knowledge of the world. What makes you ask about her?"

"Because she attracted my attention, I suppose. You must remember that I don't know any of these people, and that an especially vicious-looking person like her would be apt to awaken my curiosity."

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"I see, I see; but, in this case, I doubt if it leads to much. Old Sally is a hard one, no doubt. But I don't believe she ever contemplated a murder, much less accomplished it. It would take too much courage, to say nothing of strength. It was a man's hand struck that blow, Mr. Byrd."

"Yes," was the quick reply—a reply given somewhat too quickly, perhaps, for it made Mr. Ferris look up inquiringly at the young man.

"You take considerable interest in the affair," he remarked, shortly. "Well, I do not wonder. Even my old blood has been somewhat fired by its peculiar features. I foresee that your detective instinct will soon lead you to risk a run at the game."

"Ah, then, you see no objection to my trying for the scent, if the coroner persists in demanding it?" inquired Mr. Byrd, as he followed the other to the door.

"On the contrary," was the polite response.

And Mr. Byrd found himself satisfied on that score.

Mr. Ferris had no sooner left the room than the coroner came in.

"Well," cried he, with no unnecessary delay, "I want you."

Mr. Byrd rose.

"Have you telegraphed to New York?" he asked.

"Yes, and expect an answer every minute. There will be no difficulty about that. The superintendent is my friend, and will not be likely to cross me in my expressed wish."

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"But——" essayed the detective.

"We have no time for buts," broke in the coroner. "The inquest begins in earnest to-morrow, and the one witness we most want has not yet been found. I mean the man or the woman who can swear to seeing some one approach or enter the murdered woman's house between the time the milkman left it at half-past eleven and the hour she was found by Mr. Orcutt, lying upon the floor of her dining-room in a dying condition. That such a witness exists I have no doubt. A street in which there are six houses, every one of which has to be passed by the person entering Widow Clemmens' gate, must produce one individual, at least, who can swear to what I want. To be sure, all whom I have questioned so far say that they were either eating dinner at the time or were in the kitchen serving it up; but, for all that, there were plenty who saw the tramp, and two women, at least, who are ready to take their oath that they not only saw him, but watched him long enough to observe him go around to the Widow Clemmens' kitchen door and turn about again and come away as if for some reason he had changed his mind about entering. Now, if there were two witnesses to see all that, there must have been one somewhere to notice that other person, known or unknown, who went through the street but a few minutes before the tramp. At all events, I believe such a witness can be found, and I mean to have him if I call up every man, woman, and child who was in the lane at the time. But

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a little foreknowledge helps a coroner wonderfully, and if you will aid me by making judicious inquiries round about, time will be gained, and, perhaps, a clue obtained that will lead to a direct knowledge of the perpetrator of this crime."

"But," inquired the detective, willing, at least, to discuss the subject with the coroner, "is it absolutely necessary that the murderer should have advanced from the street? Is there no way he could have reached the house from the back, and so have eluded the gaze of the neighbors round about?"

"No; that is, there is no regular path there, only a stretch of swampy ground, any thing but pleasant to travel through. Of course a man with a deliberate purpose before him might pursue that route and subject himself to all its inconveniences; but I would scarcely expect it of one who—who chose such an hour for his assault," the coroner explained, with a slight stammer of embarrassment that did not escape the detective's notice. "Nor shall I feel ready to entertain the idea till it has been proved that no person, with the exception of those already named, was seen any time during that fatal half-hour to advance by the usual way to the widow's house."

"Have you questioned the tramp, or in any way received from him an intimation of the reason why he did not go into the house after he came to it?"

"He said he heard voices quarrelling."

"Ah!"

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"Of course he was not upon his oath, but as the statement was volunteered, we have some right to credit it, perhaps."

"Did he say"—it was Mr. Byrd now who lost a trifle of his fluency—"what sort of voices he heard?"

"No; he is an ignorant wretch, and is moreover thoroughly frightened. I don't believe he would know a cultivated from an uncultivated voice, a gentleman's from a quarryman's. At all events, we cannot trust to his discrimination."

Mr. Byrd started. This was the last construction he had expected to be put upon his question. Flushing a trifle, he looked the coroner earnestly in the face. But that gentleman was too absorbed in the train of thought raised by his own remark to notice the look, and Mr. Byrd, not feeling any too well assured of his own position, forbore to utter the words that hovered on his tongue.

"I have another commission for you," resumed the coroner, after a moment. "Here is a name which I wish you would look at——"

But at this instant a smart tap was heard at the door, and a boy entered with the expected telegram from New York. Dr. Tredwell took it, and, after glancing at its contents with an annoyed look, folded up the paper he was about to hand to Mr. Byrd and put it slowly back into his pocket. He then referred again to the telegram.

"It is not what I expected," he said, shortly, after a

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moment of perplexed thought. "It seems that the superintendent is not disposed to accommodate me." And he tossed over the telegram.

Mr. Byrd took it and read :

"Expect a suitable man by the midnight express. He will bring a letter."

A flush mounted to the detective's brow.

"You see, sir," he observed, "I was right when I told you I was not the man."

"I don't know," returned the other, rising. "I have not changed my opinion. The man they send may be very keen and very well-up in his business, but I doubt if he will manage this case any better than you would have done," and he moved quietly toward the door.

"Thank you for your too favorable opinion of my skill," said Mr. Byrd, as he bowed the other out. "I am sure the superintendent is right. I am not much accustomed to work for myself, and was none too eager to take the case in the first place, as you will do me the justice to remember. I can but feel relieved at this shifting of the responsibility upon shoulders more fitted to bear it."

Yet, when the coroner was gone, and he sat down alone by himself to review the matter, he found he was in reality more disappointed than he cared to confess. Why, he scarcely knew. There was no lessening of the shrinking he had always felt from the possible developments which an earnest inquiry into the causes of this crime might educe. Yet, to be severed in this way from all

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professional interest in the pursuit cut him so deeply that, in despite of his usual good-sense and correct judgment, he was never nearer sending in his resignation than he was in that short half-hour which followed the departure of Dr. Tredwell. To distract his thoughts, he at last went down to the bar-room.

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VI.

THE SKILL OF AN ARTIST.

A hit, a very palpable hit.—HAMLET.

HE found it occupied by some half-dozen men, one of whom immediately attracted his attention, by his high-bred air and total absorption in the paper he was reading. He was evidently a stranger, and, though not without some faint marks of a tendency to gentlemanly dissipation, was, to say the least, more than ordinarily good-looking, possessing a large, manly figure, and a fair, regular-featured face, above which shone a thick crop of short curly hair of a peculiarly bright blond color. He was sitting at a small table, drawn somewhat apart from the rest, and was, as I have said, engrossed with a newspaper, to the utter exclusion of any apparent interest in the talk that was going on at the other end of the room. And yet this talk was of the most animated description, and was seemingly of a nature to attract the attention of the most indifferent. At all events Mr. Byrd considered it so; and, after one comprehensive glance at the elegant stranger, that took in not only the personal characteristics I have noted, but also the frown of deep thought or anxious care that furrowed a naturally smooth forehead, he passed quietly up the

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room and took his stand among the group of loungers there assembled.

Mr. Byrd was not unknown to the *habitués* of that place, and no cessation took place in the conversation. They were discussing an occurrence slight enough in itself, but made interesting and dramatic by the unconscious enthusiasm of the chief speaker, a young fellow of indifferent personal appearance, but with a fervid flow of words and a knack at presenting a subject that reminded you of the actor's power, and made you as anxious to watch his gesticulations as to hear the words that accompanied them.

"I tell you," he was saying, "that it was just a leaf out of a play. I never saw its equal off the stage. She was so handsome, so impressive in her trouble or anxiety, or whatever it was that agitated her, and he so dark, and so determined in *his* trouble or anxiety, or whatever it was that agitated him. They came in at different doors, she at one side of the depot and he at another, and they met just where I could see them both, directly in the centre of the room. 'You!' was her involuntary cry, and she threw up her hands before her face just as if she had seen a ghost or a demon. An equal exclamation burst from him, but he did not cover his eyes, only stood and looked at her as if he were turned to stone. In another moment she dropped her hands. 'Were you coming to see *me*?' came from her lips in a whisper so fraught with secret horror and anguish that it curdled my blood to hear it.

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'Were you coming to see *me*?' was his response, uttered in an equally suppressed voice and with an equal intensity of expression. And then, without either giving an answer to the other's question, they both shrank back, and, turning, fled with distracted looks, each by the way they had come, the two doors closing with a simultaneous bang that echoed through that miserable depot like a knell. There were not many folks in the room just at that minute, but I tell you those that were looked at each other as they had not done before and would not be likely to do again. Some unhappy tragedy underlies such a meeting and parting, gentlemen, and I for one would rather not inquire what."

"But the girl—the man—did n't you see them again before you left?" asked an eager voice from the group.

"The young lady," remarked the other, "was on the train that brought me here. The gentleman went the other way."

"Oh!" "Ah!" and "Where did she get off?" rose in a somewhat deafening clamor around him.

"I did not observe. She seemed greatly distressed, if not thoroughly overcome, and observing her pull down her veil, I thought she did not relish my inquiring looks, and as I could not sit within view of her and not watch her, I discreetly betook myself into the smoking-car, where I stayed till we arrived at this place."

"Hum!" "Ha!" "Curious!" rose in chorus once more, and then, the general sympathies of the crowd

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being exhausted, two or three or more of the group sauntered up to the bar, and the rest sidled restlessly out of the room, leaving the enthusiastic speaker alone with Mr. Byrd.

"A strange scene!" exclaimed the latter, infusing just enough of seeming interest into his usually nonchalant tone to excite the vanity of the person he addressed, and make him more than ever ready to talk. "I wish I had been in your place," continued Mr. Byrd, almost enthusiastically. "I am sure I could have made a picture of that scene that would have been very telling in the gazette I draw for."

"Do you make pictures for papers?" the young fellow inquired, his respect visibly rising.

"Sometimes," the imperturbable detective replied, and in so doing told no more than the truth. He had a rare talent for off-hand sketching, and not infrequently made use of it to increase the funds of the family.

"Well, that is something I would like to do," acknowledged the youth, surveying the other over with curious eyes. "But I hav' n't a cent's worth of talent for it. I can see a scene in my mind now—this one for instance—just as plain as I can see you; all the details of it, you know, the way they stood, the clothes they wore, the looks on their faces, and all that, but when I try to put it on paper, why, I just can't, that 's all."

"Your forte lies another way," remarked Mr. Byrd. "You can present a scene so vividly that a person who

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had not seen it for himself, might easily put it on paper just from your description. See now!" And he caught up a sheet of paper from the desk and carried it to a side table. "Just tell me what depot this was in."

The young fellow, greatly interested at once, leaned over the detective's shoulder and eagerly replied: "The depot at Syracuse."

"Mr. Byrd nodded and made a few strokes with his pencil on the paper before him.

"How was the lady dressed?" he next asked.

"In blue; dark blue cloth, fitting like a glove. Fine figure, you know, very tall and unusually large, but perfect, I assure you, perfect. Yes, that is very like it," he went on watching the quick, assured strokes of the other with growing wonder and an unbounded admiration. "You have caught the exact poise of the head, as I live, and—yes, a large hat with two feathers, sir, two feathers drooping over the side, so; a bag on the arm; two flounces on the skirt; a—oh! the face? Well, handsome, sir, very handsome; straight nose, large eyes, determined mouth, strong, violently agitated expression. Well, I will give up! A photograph could n't have done her better justice. You are a genius, sir, a genius!"

Mr. Byrd received this tribute to his skill with some confusion and a deep blush, which he vainly sought to hide by bending lower over his work.

"The man, now," he suggested, with the least perceptible change in his voice, that, however, escaped the atten-

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tion of his companion. "What was he like; young or old?"

"Well, young—about twenty-five I should say; medium height, but very firmly and squarely built, with a strong face, large mustache, brilliant eyes, and a look—I cannot describe it, but you have caught that of the lady so well, you will, doubtless, succeed in getting his also."

But Mr. Byrd's pencil moved with less certainty now, and it was some time before he could catch even the peculiarly sturdy aspect of the figure which made this unknown gentleman, as the young fellow declared, look like a modern Hercules, though he was far from being either large or tall. The face, too, presented difficulties he was far from experiencing in the case of the lady, and the young fellow at his side was obliged to make several suggestions such as:—"A little more hair on the forehead, if you please—there was quite a lock showing beneath his hat;" or, "A trifle less sharpness to the chin,—so;" or, "Stay, you have it too square now; tone it down a hair's breadth, and you will get it," before he received even the somewhat hesitating acknowledgment from the other of: "There, that is something like him!"

But he had not expected to succeed very well in this part of the picture, and was sufficiently pleased to have gained a very correct notion of the style of clothing the gentleman wore, which, it is needless to state, was most faithfully reproduced in the sketch, even if the exact expression of the strong and masculine face was not.

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"A really remarkable bit of work," admitted the young fellow when the whole was completed. "And as true to the scene, too, as half the illustrations given in the weekly papers. Would you mind letting me have it as a *souvenir?*" he eagerly inquired. "I would like to show it to a chap who was with me at the time. The likeness to the lady is wonderful."

But Mr. Byrd, with his most careless air, had already thrust the picture into his pocket, from which he refused to withdraw it, saying, with an easy laugh, that it might come in play with him some time, and that he could not afford to part with it. At which remark the young fellow looked disappointed and vaguely rattled some coins he had in his pocket; but, meeting with no encouragement from the other, forbore to press his request, and turned it into an invitation to join him in a social glass at the bar.

To this slight token of appreciation Mr. Byrd did not choose to turn a deaf ear. So the drinks being ordered, he proceeded to clink glasses with the youthful stranger, taking the opportunity, at the same time, of glancing over to the large, well-built man whose quiet absorption in the paper he was reading had so attracted his attention when he first came in.

To his surprise he found that person just as engrossed in the news as ever, not a feature or an eyelash appearing to have moved since the time he looked at him last.

Mr. Byrd was so astonished at this that when he left the room a few minutes later he took occasion in passing the gentleman, to glance at the paper he was studying so

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industriously, and, to his surprise, found it to be nothing more nor less than the advertising sheet of the New York *Herald*.

"A fellow of my own craft," was his instantaneous conclusion. But a moment's consideration assured him that this could not be, as no detective worthy the name would place so little value upon the understanding of those about him as to sit for a half-hour with his eyes upon a sheet of paper totally devoid of news, no matter what his purpose might be, or how great was his interest in the conversation to which he was secretly listening. No; this gentleman was doubtless what he seemed to be, a mere stranger, with something of a serious and engrossing nature upon his mind, or else he was an amateur, who for some reason was acting the part of a detective without either the skill or experience of one.

Whichever theory might be true, this gentleman was a person who at this time and in this place was well worth watching: that is, if a man had any reason for interesting himself in the pursuit of possible clues to the mystery of Mrs. Clemmens' murder. But Mr. Byrd felt that he no longer possessed a professional right to such interest; so, leaving behind him this fine-looking gentleman, together with all the inevitable conjectures which the latter's peculiar manner had irresistibly awakened, he proceeded to regain his room and enter upon that contemplation of the picture he had just made, which was naturally demanded by his regard for one of the persons there depicted.

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It was a vigorous sketch, and the slow blush crept up and dyed Mr. Byrd's forehead as he gazed at it and realized the perfection of the likeness he had drawn of Miss Dare. Yes, that was her form, her face, her expression, her very self. She it was and no other who had been the heroine of the strange scene enacted that day in the Syracuse depot; a scene to which, by means of this impromptu sketch, he had now become as nearly a witness as any one could hope for who had not been actually upon the spot. Strange! And he had been so anxious to know what had altered the mind of this lady and sent her back to Sibley before her journey was half completed—had pondered so long and vainly upon the whys and wherefores of an action whose motive he had never expected to understand, but which he now saw suggested in a scene that seriously whetted, if it did not thoroughly satisfy, his curiosity.

The moment he had chosen to portray was that in which the eyes of the two met and their first instinctive recoil took place. Turning his attention from the face of the lady and bestowing it upon that of the man, he perceived there the horror and shrinking which he had imprinted so successfully upon hers. That the expression was true, though the countenance was not, he had no doubt. The man, whatever his name, nature, calling, or history, recoiled from a meeting with Imogene Dare as passionately as she did from one with him. Both had started from home with a simultaneous intention of seeking the other, and yet, at the first recognition of this

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fact, both had started and drawn back as if death rather than life had confronted them in each other's faces. What did it mean? What secret of a deep and deadly nature could lie between these two, that a scene of such evident import could take place between them? He dared not think; he could do nothing but gaze upon the figure of the man he had portrayed, and wonder if he would be able to identify the original in case he ever met him. The face was more or less a failure, of course, but the form, the cut of the clothes, the manner of carriage, and the general aspect of strong and puissant manhood which distinguished the whole figure, could not be so far from correct but that, with a hint from surrounding circumstances, he would know the man himself when he saw him. At all events, he meant to imprint the possible portrait upon his mind in case—— in case what? Pausing he asked himself this question with stern determination, and could find no answer.

"I will burn the sketch at once, and think of it and her no more," he muttered, half-rising.

But he did not do it. Some remembrance crossed his mind of what the young fellow downstairs had said about retaining it as a *souvenir*, and he ended in folding it up and putting it away somewhat carefully in his memorandum-book, with a vow that he would leave Sibley and its troublous mystery at the first moment of release that he could possibly obtain. The pang which this decision cost him convinced him that it was indeed high time he did so.

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VII.

MISS FIRMAN.

I confess with all humility that at times the line of demarcation between truth and fiction is rendered so indefinite and indistinct, that I cannot always determine, with unerring certainty, whether an event really happened to me, or whether I only dreamed it.—LONGFELLOW.

MR. BYRD, upon waking next morning, found himself disturbed by a great perplexity. Were the words then ringing in his ears, real words, which he had overheard spoken outside of his door some time during the past night, or were they merely the empty utterances of a more than usually vivid dream?

He could not tell. He could remember the very tone of voice in which he fancied them to have been spoken—a tone which he had no difficulty in recognizing as that of the landlord of the hotel; could even recall the faint sounds of bustle which accompanied them, as though the person using them had been showing another person through the hall; but beyond that, all was indistinct and dream-like.

The words were these:

"Glad to see you back, sir. This murder following so close upon your visit must have been a great surprise. A sad occurrence, that, sir, and a very mysterious one. Hope you have some information to give."

"If it is a remembrance and such words were uttered

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outside of my door last night," argued the young detective to himself, "the guest who called them forth can be no other than the tall and florid gentleman whom I encountered in the bar-room. But is it a remembrance, or only a chimera of my own overwrought brain struggling with a subject it will not let drop? As Shakespeare says, 'That is the question!'"

Fortunately, it was not one which it behooved him to decide. So, for the twentieth time, he put the subject by and resolved to think of it no more.

But perplexities of this kind are not so easily dismissed, and more than once during his hurried and solitary breakfast, did he ask himself whether, in case the words were real, he had not found in the landlord of this very hotel the one witness for which the coroner was so diligently seeking.

A surprise awaited him after breakfast, in the sudden appearance at his room door of the very gentleman last alluded to.

"Ha, Byrd," said he, with cheerful vivacity: "here is a line from the superintendent which may prove interesting to you."

And with a complacent smile, Dr. Tredwell handed over a letter which had been brought to him by the detective who had that morning arrived from New York.

With a dim sense of foreboding which he would have found difficult to explain, Mr. Byrd opened the note and read the following words:

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DEAR SIR,—I send with this a man fully competent to conduct a case of any ordinary difficulty. I acknowledge it is for our interest that you employ him to the exclusion of the person mentioned in your letter. But if you or that person think that he can render you any real assistance by his interference, he is at liberty to act in his capacity of detective in as far as he can do so without divulging too widely the secret of his connection with the force. —— ——.

"The superintendent need not be concerned," said Mr. Byrd, returning the note with a constrained bow. "I shall not interfere in this matter."

"You will miss a good thing, then," remarked the coroner, shortly, looking keenly at the young man.

"I cannot help it," observed the other, with a quick sigh of impatience or regret. "I should have to see my duty very clearly and possess the very strongest reasons for interfering before I presumed to offer either advice or assistance after a letter of this kind."

"And who knows but what such reasons may yet present themselves?" ventured the coroner. Then seeing the young man shake his head, made haste to add in the business-like tone of one preparing to take his leave, "At all events the matter stands open for the present; and if during the course of to-day's inquiry you see fit to change your mind, it will be easy enough for you to notify me." And without waiting for any further remonstrance, he gave a quick nod and passed hastily out.

The state of mind in which he left Mr. Byrd was any thing but enviable. Not that the young man's former determination to let this matter alone had been in any

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wise shaken by the unexpected concession on the part of the superintendent, but that the final hint concerning the inquest had aroused his old interest to quite a formidable degree, and, what was worse, had reawakened certain feelings which since last night it had been his most earnest endeavor to subdue. He felt like a man pursued by an implacable fate, and dimly wondered whether he would be allowed to escape before it was too late to save himself from lasting uneasiness, if not lifelong regret.

A final stroke of business for Mr. Ferris kept him at the court-house most of the morning; but his duty in that direction being at an end, he no longer found any excuse for neglecting the task imposed upon him by the coroner. He accordingly proceeded to the cottage where the inquest was being held, and finding each and every available room there packed to its uttermost by interested spectators, took up his stand on the outside of a curtained window, where with but a slight craning of his neck he could catch a very satisfactory view of the different witnesses as they appeared before the jury. The day was warm and he was by no means uncomfortable, though he could have wished that the advantages of his position had occasioned less envy in the breasts of the impatient crowd that was slowly gathering at his back; or, rather, that their sense of these advantages might have been expressed in some more pleasing way than by the various pushes he received from the more or less adventurous spirits who endeavored to raise themselves over his shoulder or insinuate themselves under his arms.

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The room into which he looked was the sitting-room, and it was, so far as he could judge in the first casual glance he threw into it, occupied entirely by strangers. This was a relief. Since it had become his duty to attend this inquiry, he wished to do so with a free mind, unhindered by the watchfulness of those who knew his interest in the affair, or by the presence of persons around whom his own imagination had involuntarily woven a network of suspicion that made his observation of them at once significant and painful.

The proceedings were at a standstill when he first came upon the scene.

A witness had just stepped aside, who, from the impatient shrugs of many persons present, had evidently added little if any thing to the testimony already given. Taking advantage of the moment, Mr. Byrd leaned forward and addressed a burly man who sat directly under him.

"What have they been doing all the morning?" he asked. "Any thing important?"

"No," was the surly reply. "A score of folks have had their say, but not one of them has told any thing worth listening to. Nobody has seen any thing, nobody knows any thing. The murderer might have risen up through the floor to deal his blow, and having given it, sunk back again with the same supernatural claptrap, for all these stupid people seem to know about him."

The man had a loud voice, and as he made no attempt to modulate it, his words were heard on all sides. Natu-

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rally many heads were turned toward him, and more than one person looked at him with an amused smile. Indeed, of all the various individuals in his immediate vicinity, only one forbore to take any notice of his remark. This was a heavy, lymphatic, and somewhat abstracted-looking fellow of nondescript appearance, who stood stiff and straight as an exclamation point against the jamb of the door-way that led into the front hall.

"But have no facts been obtained, no conclusions reached, that would serve to awaken suspicion or put justice on the right track?" pursued Mr. Byrd, lowering his voice in intimation for the other to do the same.

But that other was of an obstinate tendency, and his reply rose full and loud.

"No, unless it can be considered proved that it is only folly to try and find out who commits a crime in these days. Nothing else has come to light, as far as I can see, and that much we all knew before."

A remark of this kind was not calculated to allay the slight inclination to mirth which his former observation had raised; but the coroner rapping with his gavel on the table at this moment, every other consideration was lost in the natural curiosity which every one felt as to who the next witness would be.

But the coroner had something to say before he called for further testimony.

"Gentlemen," he remarked, in a clear and commanding tone that at once secured attention and awakened inter-

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est, "we have spent the morning in examining the persons who live in this street, with a view to ascertaining, if possible, who was in conversation with Mrs. Clemmens at the time the tramp went up to her door."

Was it a coincidence, or was there something in the words themselves that called forth the stir that at this moment took place among the people assembled directly before Mr. Byrd? It was of the slightest character, and was merely momentary in its duration; nevertheless, it attracted his attention, especially as it seemed to have its origin in a portion of the room shut off from his observation by the corner of the wall already alluded to.

The coroner proceeded without pause.

"The result, as you know, has not been satisfactory. No one seems to be able to tell us who it was that visited Mrs. Clemmens on that day. I now propose to open another examination of a totally different character, which I hope may be more conclusive in its results. Miss Firman, are you prepared to give your testimony?"

Immediately a tall, gaunt, but pleasant-faced woman arose from the dim recesses of the parlor. She was dressed with decency, if not taste, and took her stand before the jury with a lady-like yet perfectly assured air that promised well for the correctness and discretion of her answers. The coroner at once addressed her.

"Your full name, madam?"

"Emily Letitia Firman, sir."

"Emily!" ejaculated Mr. Byrd, to himself, with a

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throb of sudden interest. "That is the name of the murdered woman's correspondent."

"Your birthplace," pursued the coroner, "and the place of your present residence?"

"I was born in Danbury, Connecticut," was the reply, "and I am living in Utica, where I support my aged mother by dress-making."

"How are you related to Mrs. Clemmens, the lady who was found murdered here two days ago?"

"I am her second cousin; her grandmother and my mother were sisters."

"Upon what terms have you always lived, and what can you tell us of her other relatives and connections?"

"We have always been friends, and I can tell you all that is generally known of the two or three remaining persons of her blood and kindred. They are, first, my mother and myself, who, as I have before said, live in Utica, where I am connected with the dress-making establishment of Madame Trebelle; and, secondly, a nephew of hers, the son of a favorite brother, whom she has always supported, and to whom she has frequently avowed her intention of leaving her accumulated savings."

"The name of this gentleman and his place of residence?"

"His name is Mansell—Craik Mansell—and he lives in Buffalo, where he has a situation of some trust in the large paper manufactory of Harrison, Goodman, & Chamberlin."

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Buffalo! Mr. Byrd gave an involuntary start, and became, if possible, doubly attentive.

The coroner's questions went on.

"Do you know this young man?"

"Yes, sir. He has been several times to our house in the course of the last five years."

"What can you tell us of his nature and disposition, as well as of his regard for the woman who proposed to benefit him so materially by her will?"

"Well, sir," returned Miss Firman, "it is hard to read the nature and feelings of any man who has much character, and Craik Mansell has a good deal of character. But I have always thought him a very honest and capable young man, who might do us credit some day, if he were allowed to have his own way and not be interfered with too much. As for his feelings toward his aunt, they were doubtless those of gratitude, though I have never heard him express himself in any very affectionate terms toward her, owing, no doubt, to a natural reticence of disposition which has been observable in him from childhood."

"You have, however, no reason to believe he cherished any feelings of animosity toward his benefactress?" continued the coroner, somewhat carelessly, "or possessed any inordinate desire after the money she was expecting to leave him at her death?"

"No, sir. Both having minds of their own, they frequently disagreed, especially on business matters; but there was never any bitterness between them, as far as I

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know, and I never heard him say any thing about his expectations one way or the other. He is a man of much natural force, of strong, if not violent, traits of character; but he has too keen a sense of his own dignity to intimate the existence of desires so discreditable to him."

There was something in this reply and the impartial aspect of the lady delivering it that was worthy of notice, perhaps. And such it would have undoubtedly received from Mr. Byrd, at least, if the words she had used in characterizing this person had not struck him so deeply that he forgot to note any thing further.

"A man of great natural force—of strong, if not violent traits of character," he kept repeating to himself. "The description, as I live, of the person whose picture I attempted to draw last night."

And, ignoring every thing else, he waited with almost sickening expectation for the question that would link this nephew of Mrs. Clemmens either to the tragedy itself, or to that person still in the background, of whose secret connection with a man of this type, he had obtained so curious and accidental a knowledge.

But it did not come. With a quiet abandonment of the by no means exhausted topic, which convinced Mr. Byrd that the coroner had plans and suspicions to which the foregoing questions had given no clue, Dr. Tredwell leaned slowly forward, and, after surveying the witness with a glance of cautious inquiry, asked in a way to concentrate the attention of all present:

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"You say that you knew the Widow Clemmens well; that you have always been on friendly terms with her, and are acquainted with her affairs. Does that mean you have been made a confidante of her troubles, her responsibilities, and her cares?"

"Yes, sir; that is, in as far as she ever made a confidant of any one. Mrs. Clemmens was not of a complaining disposition, neither was she by nature very communicative. Only at rare times did she make mention of herself or her troubles: but when she did, it was invariably to me, sir—or so she used to say; and she was not a woman to deceive you in such matters."

"Very well, then, you are in a position to tell us something of her history, and why it is she kept herself so close after she came to this town?"

But Miss Firman uttered a vigorous disclaimer to this. "No, sir," said she, "I am not. Mrs. Clemmens' history was simple enough, but her reasons for living as she did have never been explained. She was not naturally a quiet woman, and, when a girl, was remarkable for her spirits and fondness for company."

"Has she had any great sorrow since you knew her—any serious loss or disappointment that may have soured her disposition, and turned her, as it were, against the world?"

"Perhaps; she felt the death of her husband very much—indeed, has never been quite the same since she lost him."

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"And when was that, if you please?"

"Full fifteen years ago, sir; just before she came to this town."

"Did you know Mr. Clemmens?"

"No, sir; none of us knew him. They were married in some small village out West, where he died—well, I think she wrote—a month if not less after their marriage. She was inconsolable for a time, and, though she consented to come East, refused to take up her abode with any of her relatives, and so settled in this place, where she has remained ever since."

The manner of the coroner suddenly changed to one of great impressiveness.

"Miss Firman," he now asked, "did it ever strike you that the hermit life she led was due to any fear or apprehension which she may have secretly entertained?"

"Sir?"

The question was peculiar and no one wondered at the start which the good woman gave. But what mainly struck Mr. Byrd, and gave to the moment a seeming importance, was the fact that she was not alone in her surprise or even her expression of it; that the indefinable stir he had before observed had again taken place in the crowd before him, and that this time there was no doubt about its having been occasioned by the movements of a person whose elbow he could just perceive projecting beyond the door-way that led into the hall.

But there was no time for speculation as to whom this

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person might be. The coroner's questions were every moment growing more rapid, and Miss Firman's answers more interesting.

"I asked," here the coroner was heard to say, "whether, in your intercourse with Mrs. Clemmens, you have ever had reason to suppose she was the victim of any secret or personal apprehension that might have caused her to seclude herself as she did? Or let me put it in another way. Can you tell me whether you know of any other person besides this nephew of hers who is likely to be benefited by Mrs. Clemmens' death?"

"Oh, sir," was the hasty and somewhat excited reply, "you mean young Mr. Hildreth!"

The way in which this was said, together with the slight flush of satisfaction or surprise which rose to the coroner's brow, naturally awoke the slumbering excitement of the crowd and made a small sensation. A low murmur ran through the rooms, amid which Mr. Byrd thought he heard a suppressed but bitter exclamation. He could not be sure of it, however, and had just made up his mind that his ears had deceived him, when his attention was attracted by a shifting in the position of the sturdy, thick-set man who had been leaning against the opposite wall, but who now crossed and took his stand beside the jamb, on the other side of which sat the unknown individual toward whom so many inquiring glances had hitherto been directed.

The quietness with which this change was made, and

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the slight, almost imperceptible, alteration in the manner of the person making it, brought a sudden enlightenment to Mr. Byrd, and he at once made up his mind that this dull, abstracted-looking nonentity leaning with such apparent unconcern against the wall, was the new detective who had been sent up that morning from New York. His curiosity in regard to the identity of the individual round the corner was not lessened by this.

Meantime the coroner had answered the hasty exclamation of the witness, by disclaiming the existence of any special meaning of his own, and had furthermore pressed the question as to who this Mr. Hildreth was.

She immediately answered : "A gentleman of Toledo, sir ; a young man who could only come into his property by the death of Mrs. Clemmens."

"How ? You have not spoken of any such person as connected with her."

"No," was her steady response ; "nor was he so connected by any tie of family or friendship. Indeed, I do not know as they were ever acquainted, or, as for that matter, ever saw each other's faces. The fact to which I allude was simply the result of a will, sir, made by Mr. Hildreth's grandfather."

"A will ? Explain yourself. I do not understand."

"Well, sir, I do not know much about the law, and may make a dozen mistakes in telling you what you wish to know ; but what I understand about the matter is this : Mr. Hildreth, the grandfather of the gentleman of whom

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I have just spoken, having a large property, which he wanted to leave in bulk to his grandchildren,—their father being a very dissipated and reckless man,—made his will in such a way as to prevent its distribution among his heirs till after the death of two persons whom he mentioned by name. Of these two persons one was the son of his head clerk, a young boy, who sickened and died shortly after Mr. Hildreth himself, and the other my cousin, the poor murdered woman, who was then a little girl visiting the family. I do not know how she came to be chosen by him for this purpose, unless it was that she was particularly round and ruddy as a child, and looked as if she might live for many years."

"And the Hildreths? What of them during these years?"

"Well, I cannot exactly say, as I never had any acquaintance with them myself. But I know that the father, whose dissipated habits were the cause of this peculiar will tying up the property, died some little time ago; also one or two of his children, but beyond that I know little, except that the remaining heirs are a young gentleman and one or two young girls, all of the worldliest and most fashionable description."

The coroner, who had followed all this with the greatest interest, now asked if she knew the first name of the young gentleman.

"Yes," said she, "I do. It is Gouverneur."

The coroner gave a satisfied nod, and remarked

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casually, "It is not a common name," and then, leaning forward, selected a paper from among several that lay on the table before him. "Miss Firman," he inquired, retaining this paper in his hand, "do you know when it was that Mrs. Clemmens first became acquainted with the fact of her name having been made use of in the elder Mr. Hildreth's will?"

"Oh, years ago; when she first came of age, I believe."

"Was it an occasion of regret to her? Did she ever express herself as sorry for the position in which she stood toward this family?"

"Yes, sir; she did."

The coroner's face assumed a yet greater gravity, and his manner became more and more impressive.

"Can you go a step farther and say that she ever acknowledged herself to have cherished apprehensions of her personal safety, during these years of weary waiting on the part of the naturally impatient heirs?"

A distressed look crossed the amiable spinster's face, and she looked around at the jury with an expression almost deprecatory in its nature.

"I scarcely know what answer to give," she hesitatingly declared. "It is a good deal to say that she was apprehensive; but I cannot help remembering that she once told me her peace of mind had left her since she knew there were persons in the world to whom her death would be a matter of rejoicing. 'It makes me feel as if I were

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keeping people out of their rights,' she remarked at the same time. 'And, though it is not my fault, I should not be surprised if some day I had to suffer for it.'"

"Was there ever any communication made to Mrs. Clemmens by persons cognizant of the relation in which she stood to these Hildreths?—or any facts or gossip detailed to her concerning them, that would seem to give color to her fears and supply her with any actual grounds for her apprehensions?"

"No; only such tales as came to her of their expensive ways of living and somewhat headlong rush into all fashionable freaks and follies."

"And Gouverneur Hildreth? Any special gossip in regard to him?"

"No!"

There are some noes that are equivalent to affirmations. This was one of them. Naturally the coroner pressed the question.

"I must request you to think again," he persisted. Then, with a change of voice: "Are you sure you have never heard any thing specially derogatory to this young man, or that Mrs. Clemmens had not?"

"I have friends in Toledo who speak of him as the fastest man about town, if that could be called derogatory. As for Mrs. Clemmens, she may have heard as much, and she may have heard more, I cannot say. I know she always frowned when his father's name was mentioned."

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"Miss Firman," proceeded the coroner, "in the long years in which you have been more or less separated from Mrs. Clemmens, you have, doubtless, kept up a continued if not frequent correspondence with her?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you think, from the commencement and general tone of this letter, which I found lying half finished on her desk, that it was written and intended for yourself?"

Taking the letter from his outstretched hand, she fumbled nervously for her glasses, put them on, and then glanced hurriedly at the sheet, saying as she did so:

"There can be no doubt of it. She had no other friend whom she would have been likely to address as 'Dear Emily.'"

"Gentlemen of the Jury, you have a right to hear the words written by the deceased but a few hours, if not a few minutes, previous to the brutal assault that has led to the present inquiry. Miss Firman, as the letter was intended for yourself, will you be kind enough to read it aloud, after which you will hand it over to the jury."

With a gloomy shake of her head, and a certain trembling in her voice, that was due, perhaps, as much to the sadness of her task as to any foreboding of the real nature of the words she had to read, she proceeded to comply:

"DEAR EMILY:—I don't know why I sit down to write to you to-day. I have plenty to do, and morning is no time for indulging

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